

## CHAPTER ONE

Private Kaylin Neya studied the duty roster, and given how little she studied anything that wasn't somehow involved with a corpse, this said something.

The official roster was like a dart-board, except that people threw pencils at it instead. Sometimes they hit a bulls-eye anyway. Lined up in columns by day, and colour-coded for the more moronic – or hungover – by district, it told the various members of the branch of law enforcement known as the Hawks, where, exactly, they were meant to either find trouble or stay out of it. Kaylin could easily make out her name, although some clod with lousy aim had managed to make a giant hole in it.

If it was true that the roster could never make everyone happy, it was somehow *also* true that it could make everyone *unhappy*. Sergeant Marcus Kassan, in charge of assigning duties on a monthly basis, had a strong sense of fairness; if someone was going to suffer, everyone might as well keep them company.

As the Hawk's *only* Leontine officer – in fact, the only Leontine to *be* an officer of the Halls of Law, he presided over the men and women under his command with a hooded set of fangs in a face that was fur, large eyes, and peaked ears – in that order. He also boasted a set of claws that made daggers superfluous and did a good job against swords as well.

Kaylin had no pencil with which to puncture the paper, or she'd have thrown more at it than liberal curses.

Swearing at one's assignment wasn't unusual in the office; as far as office past-times went, it was one that most of the Hawks indulged in. Kaylin's partner, Corporal Severn Handred looked easily over her shoulder, but waited until she turned to raise a dark brow in her general direction. That brow was bisected by a slender, white line, a scar that didn't so much mar his face as hint at secret histories.

Secret, at least, to Kaylin; she hadn't seen him take that one.

"What will you be missing?" He asked, when her impressive spate of cursing -- in four official languages -- had died down enough that he could be heard without shouting. Severn rarely raised his voice.

"Game," she said curtly. "Ball," she added.

"Playing?"

She grimaced. "Betting." Which, for Kaylin, was synonymous with 'watching'.

"Figures. Who were you betting on?"

She shrugged. "Sharks."

"So you'll save some money."

This caused an entirely different spate of swearing, and she punctuated this by punching his shoulder, which he thoughtfully turned in her direction. "You'd be betting on the Tigers, I suppose?"

"Already have," he replied. "Our shift?" He glanced at the window. It told the time. Literally. Mages had been allowed to go mad when they'd been asked to encourage punctuality, and it showed. The urge to tell the window to shut the hell up came and went several times a day.

The fact that mages had been allowed to perform the spell or series of spells seemed almost a direct criticism of Kaylin, who wasn't exactly punctual on the best of days.

"Private Neya and Corporal Handred, report to the Quartermaster before active duty." Some sweet young voice had been used to capture the words. Kaylin seriously wanted to meet the person behind it. And was pretty sure the person behind it seriously didn't want to meet her.

"Quartermaster?" Severn said, with the barest hint of a sympathetic grimace.

Kaylin said, "Can I break the window first?"

"Won't help. He's probably responsible for having the glass replaced, and you're in enough trouble with him as is."

It was true. She had barely managed to crawl up the ladder from thing-scraped-off-the-bottom-of-a-shoe-after-a-dog-fight in the unspoken ranks the Quartermaster gave the Hawks; she was now merely in the person-I-can't-see category, which was a distinct improvement, although it usually meant she was the last to get kitted out. The Quartermaster was officious enough, however, to make last and late two entirely different domains -- if only, in Kaylin's case, by seconds.

"It was just a stupid dress," she muttered. "*One* dress, and I'm in the doghouse."

"I doubt it. You know how much he loves those dogs."

"Yeah. A lot more than he likes the rest of us."

"It was an *expensive* dress, Kaylin."

"I didn't choose it!"

"No. But you did give it back with a few bloodstains, a dozen knife tears, and about a pound less fabric."

"It's not like it could have been used by anyone else --"

"Not in that condition no. And," he added, lifting a hand, "I'm not the Quartermaster, I didn't have to haggle with the Seamstress' Guild, and I don't really care."

"Yeah, but his life doesn't depend on me, so he doesn't have to listen to me whine."

Severn chuckled. "No. Your career depends on him, however. Good job, Kaylin."

They walked down the long hall that lead to Marcus' desk, which just happened to be situated so that it crossed almost any indoor path a Hawk could take in the line of duty. He liked to keep an eye on things. Or a claw across the throat, as the Leontine saying went.

As the Hawks' Sergeant, assignments came from him, and reports -- which involved the paperwork he so hated -- went to him. Caitlin, his assistant, and for all purposes, his second in command, was the one who would actually *read* the submissions, and she wisely chose to and pass on only those that she felt were important. The rest, she fudged.

And since the Festival season was, as of two days past, officially over, most of those reports involved a lot of clean up, a lot of official fines -- which helped the coffers of the Halls of Law immensely -- and a lot of petty bickering, which would be referred to the unofficial courts in the various racial enclaves for mediation.

Ceding that bickering to the racial courts, rather than the Imperial Courts, took *more* paperwork. But the Emperor was short on time and very, very short on patience, so only cases of real import -- or those that involved the Elantran nobility -- ever went to him directly. Given that he was Immortal, being a dragon and all, this struck Kaylin as unfair.

"Lord Kaylin," Marcus said, as they approached his desk. The title, granted her by the Lord of the Barrani High Court, caused a round of snickers and an unfortunate echo in the office that set Kaylin's teeth on edge. The deep sarcasm that only a Leontine throat could produce didn't help much. "So good of you to join us."

She snapped him a salute -- which, given his rank didn't demand it, was only meant to annoy -- and stood at attention in front of his desk. Severn's short sigh, she ignored; he offered Marcus neither of these gestures.

"There's been a slight change in your beat today."

The official roster changed at the blink of an eye. A Leontine eye, with its golden iris. "You're to go to Elani street," he told them.

"What, mage central?"

"Or Charlatan central, if you prefer," Marcus snapped back. Elani street was both. There was the real stuff, if you weren't naïve and you knew what to look for, and then there was love potion number 9, and tell your fortune, and meet the right mate, all of which stores -- usually with much finer names -- saw a steady stream of traffic, day in and day out.

Kaylin was always torn between contempt for the people who had such blind dreams and contempt for the people who could exploit them so callously. Elani street was not her favourite street, mostly because she couldn't decide which of the two she wanted to strangle more.

She flipped an invisible coin. It landed, after a moment in the mental ether, on the side of people who made money, rather than people who lost it.

"Who's fleecing people this time?" Kaylin muttered. "It's only two days past Festival -- you'd think people would be tired enough to give it a rest. Or," she added, darkly, "in jail."

"Many are both," Marcus replied, and something in his tone made her give up her sullen and almost perfect stance to lean slightly into the desk. Slightly was safe; he still hadn't cleared half the paperwork the Festival produced annually, and knocking any of the less than meticulous piles over was -- well, the furrows in the desk didn't get there by magic.

"What's happened?"

"There's been a disturbance," he replied. "I believe you know the shop. Evanton's. You may have given him some business over the years."

She knew the shop; she had had her knives enchanted there so that they left their sheaths without a sound. Teela had been the Hawk who had both introduced her to Evanton and also made clear to Evanton that anything he offered *for money* had better damn well work. Given that Teela was one of a dozen or so Barrani -- also all Hawks -- who had made their pledge of allegiance to the Imperial Halls of Law, her word tended to carry weight. After all, she was, like the dragon Emperor and the rest of her kind, immortal -- and the Barrani loved nothing better than a grudge, at least judging by the way they held onto the damn things so tightly. Startlingly beautiful to the eye, they were cold as ice to the ear, and their tall, slender bodies radiated that I-can-kill-you-before-you-can-blink confidence that was, in fact, no act.

Evanton, to his credit, had been neither offended nor frightened. In fact,

his first words had been, "yes, yes, I know the drill, Officer." And his second, "You're on the young side for a Hawk. So take my advice, for what it's worth: You should pay more attention to the company you keep. People will judge you by it, mark my words."

He generally had a lot of words he wanted marked.

Which had caused Teela to grimace. And Tain, her beat partner, to laugh.

As for the enchantment, he approved of it. "Most people who come here want something to make them look prettier," he said, with obvious contempt. "Or younger. Or smarter. This, *this*, is practical."

She had never asked Evanton if he had ever belonged to the Imperial Order of Mages; there wasn't much point. If he had, he'd managed to get out the unusual way -- he wasn't in a coffin. Although to Kaylin's youthful eye, he looked as if he should have been. His hair was the colour of blinding light off still water, and his skin was like wrinkled leather; he was almost skeletal, and his work -- or so he said -- demanded so much attention he was continuously bent over in a stoop. She had been certain, the first time she saw him, that he would break if she forced him to straighten up.

But still... she liked him. So she frowned. "What kind of a disturbance?"

"That, I think, is what you're there to ascertain." He paused. "Are you waiting for something?"

"No, sir."

"Good. Get lost."

"Yes, sir."

"Corporal?"

Severn nodded.

"Make sure that she understands that 'get lost' in this case isn't literal."

"Yes, sir."

#

"What I want to know," Private Kaylin Neya said, not quite stomping her feet as she marched down the streets, "is why no one calls *you* Lord Severin."

The Corporal -- which rank still annoyed Kaylin, and yes, she knew it was petty -- shrugged. "Because it doesn't bother *me*," he replied.

"It didn't bother me when the Barrani called me Lord Kaylin," she said sourly.

He laughed. He kept an easy pace with her march, given the difference

in the length of their strides, and her mood -- which could charitably be described as 'not very good' -- seemed to cheer him immensely.

"What's so funny?"

"It bothered you enough to cause you to point out that no one called Teela Lord."

She waved a hand dismissively. "It wasn't the Barrani," she insisted. "But when Marcus started --"

"The entire office, you mean?"

"The entire office follows Marcus' lead, except when he's chewing through his desk." Which was only partly a figurative description of an angry Leontine Officer. Leontine fur, when it stood on end, was impressive; Leontine jaws, massive, boasted teeth that were easily capable of rendering most throats not quite useful for things like breathing -- but most of the danger they could offer came from their massive, and usually sheathed, claws.

Marcus' desk was a testament to how often he lost his temper.

"If you give it a few days," Severn told her, "it'll pass."

She snorted. "Sanabalis started it."

"Lord Sanabalis."

"That's not what I call him."

"It is, however, what everyone *else* calls him, and what you'd like to call him at the moment would be ... ill advised. You're his student, he has graciously agreed to continue to tutor you, and you both know that your career depends on whether or not he decides to actually *pass* you." He didn't add that in this case career and life were the same thing. He didn't need to. Kaylin had a magic that not even the most august of the Imperial scholars understood, and if it had been a weak magic, it wouldn't have mattered -- much. But it was strong enough to withstand the full breath of a dragon in his true form. Strong enough to make a hole in a wall that was wider across than Severn. Strong enough to heal the dying.

And the Emperor was in possession of all these facts, and more. Kaylin's glance strayed a moment to her arms; the length of her sleeves all but hid the dark marks that were tattooed there, in whirls and strokes, as if she were parchment, and they were the scattered telling of a story that was ancient before history began.

Her powers and these marks had arrived almost at the same time, in the winter world of the fiefs, where only the desperate and the criminals lived. Funny, that the fiefs should lay so precisely at the heart of the city.

"Kaylin."

She looked up, and realized that Severn had been speaking. Dragged her eyes from sleeves that weren't all that interesting anyway, and nodded.

"Lord Sanabalis might be unusual for a Dragon, but he *is* a dragon." He paused a moment, and as Kaylin realized she was losing him and pulled up short, he added, "he meant it as a gesture of respect, Kaylin."

"I don't need that kind of respect. And anyway, no one *else* means it that way."

"Well, no. But they're Hawks. You expected different?"

She started walking again. "What are the odds?"

"Which betting pool?"

"Mine."

"Four days," he said cheerfully, "before you lose your temper and try to break something over someone's head."

"Any bets as to whose?"

"Some."

"Name names."

He laughed. "I've got money riding on it."

"Figures." She almost paused at the stall of a baker who was known to be friendly to the Hawks or the Swords. Almost. The coin in her pocket would probably last her another three days if she didn't bother with food. And less than the afternoon if she did; if the baker was friendly, she wasn't stupid.

"If you're betting on the Sharks," Severn said, stopping by her side, "it's no big surprise you're always so broke. Good morning, Mrs. Whitmore. We'd like a half-dozen of the buns."

Hunger versus pride wasn't much of a struggle; she let Severn buy breakfast, because that's what it was. She'd been keeping company with the midwives the past two nights and it showed. The circles under her eyes accentuated her mood. But it was a good sort of bad -- no one had died; no mothers, and no babies. And she had spent time helping to lick the fur of a sole Leontine cub clean.

She still had hair in her mouth. But she was aware of the singular honour offered her by the mother: the willingness to let a stranger near the helpless, mewling cub. It was a gesture not only of trust, but of respect, and it was also a request that Leontine women seldom made.

The mother had watched as Kaylin's entirely inadequate human tongue

had, in a ritual way, licked some of the birthing fluid from the cubling's closed, delicately veined lids. Kaylin's stomach was not up to the task of more, but more wasn't required; she handled the infant with care, marvelling at the fine, fine hair that covered him. It was a pale grey, with a spattering of white streaks -- these would fade into the Leontine gold she best knew with time. But the birth colours were considered important to the Leontine. And these were not bad colours.

"I will name him Roshan," his mother said, and then added, "Roshan Kaylarr."

If she had been human, this indomitable and ferocious Leontine woman, Kaylin would have asked what the father thought of the name; in the case of the Leontine males, this was pointless. They loved their kitlings -- but they knew when to stay out of the way.

They had wives, plural, and the wives could fight like, well, cats when the need arose -- but the pridlea was also a unit unto itself, and where husbands were concerned, they formed a wall of solidarity when it came to protecting their own.

"Kaylin?" Severn said, and she hastily swallowed a mouthful of pastry that thankfully tasted nothing like the salty skin of newborn cub. Shook her head. He backed off, but with a slight smile.

"Where are we?"

"Almost there. Pay attention?"

"I was."

He nodded with the ease of long practice. "Pay attention to where we actually are, hmmm?"

"Trouble?"

"No."

"Then what's the problem?"

"You're going to trip over your own feet, and stone isn't the best cushion." He paused, and then said quietly, "and I have something for you."

She grimaced. "The bracer?"

"It was on my breakfast table in the morning. I thought you'd been with the midwives, and I kept it for you." He took it out of the satchel he carried by his side; it gleamed gold and sparkled with the caught light of sapphire, ruby and diamond. It was her cage.

And it was, in its fashion, her haven. This, this cold, gleaming artifact, could contain the magic that Sanabalis, the heartless bastard, was trying to



teach her to control. It was the only thing that could, and without it -- without its existence -- she would probably be dead by Imperial order.

It had come from the personal hoard of the Emperor, and it was ancient, although it looked as if it had been newly made. It took no dents or scratches, and no blood remained across its golden surface for long; its gems didn't break or scratch, either.

"Put it on," he said.

She nodded, her fingers keying the sequence that would open it. Sliding it over her wrist, she thought of making some feeble protest -- but she was with Severn, not Marcus, and Severn understood.

"You think I'll need it?" She asked softly, as it clicked shut.

"I don't know," he said at last, but after a pause that was evasive. "You know you're not supposed to take it off." As she opened her mouth, he added, "by the Hawklord's orders."

She bit back the words for a moment, and when they came, they came more smoothly. "You know I can't help the midwives if I wear it."

"I know."

"I can't heal --"

"I know. I told you, I thought you might have been with the midwives when I saw it this morning."

The other property of the bracer that would have been the envy of the stupid because it looked so very expensive, was that it was impossible *to* lose. She could take it off if need be, drop it in the nearest trash heap, and it would find its way back to its keeper -- that keeper *not* being Kaylin. For seven years, the keeper had been the Hawklord.

And for a month now, it had been Severn. He never asked why it came to his hand -- which was good, because no one, as far as Kaylin could tell, had an explanation -- and he never asked, except obliquely, why it wasn't on *hers*. He simply gathered it and brought it back to her. And waited.

As a Keeper, he was a lot less onerous than the Hawklord.

"Severn --"

"It's Elani street," he replied with a shrug, "and if you hunt long enough, you'll find magic here."

"I know where to find --" But she stopped, catching her words before she tripped over them with her tongue. "I hate magic."

He stopped walking, turned suddenly, and looked down at her from an uncomfortable height. His hands caught both of her shoulders, and slid up

them, trailing the sides of her neck to cup her face, and she met his eyes, brown and simple, dark with a past that she was part of, and a past that she didn't know at all.

"Don't," he told her quietly. "Don't hate it. It's part of what you are, now, and nothing will change that. It's a gift."

She thought of the ways in which she had killed in a blind fury; thought of the stone walls that had parted like curtains of dust when the magic overwhelmed her. "A gift," she said bitterly.

He said, "You have fur on your tongue." In almost perfect Leontine.

And a baby's name -- did race really matter? -- like an echo on the same tongue, waiting to be said in affection and wonder, even if she were never again there to hear it.

He let his hands fall slowly away from her face as if they had belonged there, as if they were drawn there by gravity.

"Severn --"

He touched her open mouth with a single finger. But he didn't smile, and he didn't say anything else.

#

Elani Street opened up before them like any other merchant street in the district. If you didn't know the city, you might have mistaken it *for* any other merchant street. It was not in the high rent district -- Kaylin's patrols were somehow always designed to keep her away from the rich and prosperous -- but it was not in the low rent district either; it hovered somewhere in the centre. Clearly the buildings were old, and as much wood as stone had gone into their making; but they were well kept, and if paint flaked from signboards and windows had thinned with time, they were solid and functional.

The waterfront was well away, and the merchant authority didn't technically govern the men and women who worked here for some complicated legalistic reason that had a lot to do with history and nothing to do with the *law*, so the Hawks and the Swords were the sole force that policed the area. And everyone was happy that way. Except for the merchants' guild, which sent its annual weasel report in an attempt to bring Elani under its jurisdiction.

Once or twice things had gotten ugly between the Merchant's Guild and the Elani streeters, and blood had been shed across more than just this part of town. This was practical history, to Kaylin, so she remembered it better than the codicils on top of codicils that kept the Merchant's Guild at bay.

They had – the Guild – even tried to set up trade sanctions against this small part of town, and while everyone in theory agreed with it, in practice, they'd come anyway, because there *wasn't* any actual evidence that they'd been here. I mean, you didn't exactly bear a brand saying 'fortunes have been read across my palm, look here' when you left. The sale of Love potions may have dropped a tad during that embargo, however.

No, the rents weren't high here, but the take was high *enough* that the vendors could usually fend off the more powerful guild with effective political sleight of hand. Or so Teela said; if she admired it, it had to be underhanded. She was, after all, Barrani.

Severn's expression was so carefully neutral, Kaylin laughed. He raised a brow.

"You don't like Elani street?"

"Not much, no. You?"

She shrugged. "It's a street."

He stopped in front of a placard that was leaning haphazardly against a grimy window. "Love potions?" He said. The sneer was entirely in his tone. "Meet your perfect mate? Find out what your future holds?"

As she'd said more or less the same thing - well, more and more heated -- she shrugged again. "It's a living."

"So is theft."

"Yeah, but people come here to empty their pockets. There's no knife at their throat."

"Dreams are their own knife, Kaylin. Dreams, what-ifs, desire. We all have to have hope."

"This isn't hope," she replied quietly. "It's just another way of lying to yourself."

"Almost everything is, in the end." He glanced at the board again, and then continued to walk down the street. He walked slowly enough that she could catch up to him; on patrol he usually did. But there was distance in his expression, some thought she couldn't read -- not that he'd ever been transparent.

Still, the street itself was quiet; the festival season had passed over and around it, and the merchants who had, enterprising hucksters all, taken stalls near the Ablayne had returned home to the nest to find it, as it so often was after festival celebrations -- and the cost of those -- empty.

Evanton was not above taking a stall -- or so he said -- but his age prevented him from doing so so close to water; he said it made his bones

ache. Kaylin expected that it was his jaw that ached, because he had some idea of what customer service was supposed to be, and fixing a smile across lines that were worn in perpetual frown taxed his strength.

Still, she smiled when she saw his store. Touching the hilts of her daggers for both luck and memory, she walked up the three flat steps that led to his door, and frowned slightly.

"Is it late?"

"You just had breakfast. You answer." But Severn's frown echoed hers; the curtains were drawn over the door's window and also across the shop's wider front. Gold leaf had flecked in places, and glass was scratched atop those letters -- some thief attempting to remove what was on the other side had no doubt had too much to drink that night.

She knocked. Waited a minute, counting slowly, before she knocked again; Evanton never moved quickly, and his temper soured greatly if the visitor was too stupid to realize this.

But before she could be *really* annoying, the curtains flipped back, and she saw a wizened face peering through glass. He didn't look much older than he had the first time she'd met him -- but then again, she doubted that was possible. The curtains fell back into place, black drape that was almost grey with sun. No stars on it, no moons, no fancy -- and fake -- arcane symbols.

The door opened slowly; she heard keys twisting a rusty lock, followed by creaking hinges.

"You really should get some help around here," she muttered.

"Good help," he said coolly, "is hard to find in this city."

"You've tried?"

He grimaced. "Don't force me to be rude, girl. You're wearing the Hawk."

She smiled. It wasn't the forced smile of an officer of the law, either; she had often visited his dusty parlour, with its long counter, its rows of shelves -- a city, no doubt, for spiders -- its odd books stacked here and there like so much garbage. If it was an odd place, it *felt* like someone's home, and she was welcome in it.

"I don't believe we've met," Evanton added pointedly, looking up at Severn. As Evanton, bent, was about Kaylin's height, he had to look up.

"No, sir," Severn said, in a much politer -- and cooler -- voice. "But I am aware of your establishment."

"Fame gets me every time," the old man replied. "Who are you?"

"He's Severn," Kaylin answered quickly. "Corporal Handred, is also -- as you can see -- a Hawk."

"Aye, I can see that," Evanton said. "I would have called him a Wolf, if you'd asked me."

Severn raised a brow. It went half as high as Kaylin's. "He was a Wolf --" she began, but stopped as Severn stepped neatly, and heavily, on her foot. "What do you know about the Wolves?"

"Meaning what dealings have I had with them?"

"Meaning that."

Evanton snorted. "You haven't spent enough time with those Barrani, girl."

"What?"

"That's no way to get an answer."

"I could threaten to break your arms if you want."

He laughed his dry, low chuckle. "Aye, but they're more subtle than that. I'm of use to them. It's important in this business to be of use to people."

Severn said, quietly, "We're here on official business."

"Dressed like that, you'd have to be. Although the uniform suits you."

"You sent a message to the Hawks."

Evanton shrugged. "I know my own business," he said at last, "And I know Hawk business when I see it. I prefer to keep them entirely separate, you understand, but we can't always get what we want. You'll want to follow me," he added.

Kaylin was already behind him, because she always was in his store; he could bite your head off for going anywhere without him, and usually at length.

He led them behind his tall, sturdy counter; its sides were made of solid wood that had the patina of time and disregard, not craft; it was impossible to see most of the flat, it was covered by so many things. Papers, bits of cloth, needles, thread. It looked more like it belonged in a bar than a store, but then again, most of the things in the store looked like they belonged somewhere else; the only thing they had in common was dust and cobwebs, and the occasional glint of something that might be gold, or steel, or captive light -- a hint of magic.

Wedged between two hulking shelves that looked suspiciously unstable was a very narrow door. Evanton took out a key ring that Kaylin could

have put her whole arm through without trying very hard, chose one of three keys that dangled forlornly from its thin, tarnished metal, and unlocked the door. Like everything else in the store, it creaked.

He opened it slowly -- he opened everything that way -- and after a moment, nodded to himself and motioned for them to follow. Kaylin started forward, and Severn, with long years of practice, managed to slide between she and Evanton so smoothly she didn't even step on the back of his feet. And not for lack of trying.

They entered a hall that was, like everything else in the building, narrow; they could walk single file, and if anyone had tried to pull a sword here, it would have lodged in the wall or the roof if they actually had to *use* it. Given Evanton, this was possibly deliberate; it was hard to say, where the old man was concerned.

But at the end of the hall was another door, and judging by the jangle of keys, it, too, was locked. "Here," he said quietly. "Is the heart of my store. Let me tell you again: touch nothing. Look at nothing for too long unless I instruct you otherwise. Take nothing."

Kaylin bridled slightly, but Severn merely nodded. "How difficult will that be, old man?"

"Maybe you are a Hawk after all," Evanton replied, eyeing Severn with barely veiled curiosity. "And the answer to that question is, I don't know. I have no trouble." He paused and added, "but that wasn't always the case. And I didn't have myself as a guide, when I first came here."

"Who did you have?" Kaylin asked, tilting her head to one side.

He raised a white brow.

"Sorry, Evanton."

"Good girl. Oh, and Kaylin? I allow you in because of the great respect I have always felt for the Officers of the Halls of Law."

"But --" She stopped moving for a moment, and then brought her free hand up to her cheek to touch the skin across which lay a tattoo of a simple herb: Nightshade, by name. Deadly Nightshade, she thought to herself.

If it had been *only* a tattoo, it would never cause her trouble. It felt like skin to her, and the Hawks had become so used to it, she could almost forget it existed.

But this mark was – of course – magical, and it had been placed on her cheek by Lord Nightshade, a Barrani Lord who was outcaste to his people, and oh, wanted by every division in the Halls of Law for criminal activities beyond the river that divided the city itself.

Lord Nightshade had marked her, and the mark meant something to the Barrani; it meant something to the Dragons. To the other mortal races, it was generally less offensive than most tattoos. But clearly, it meant something to Evanton, purveyor of junk and the odd useful magics. He understood that it linked her, in ways that not even Kaylin fully understood, to Lord Nightshade himself.

But if Evanton's eyes were narrowed, they were not suspicious. "Here," he told her quietly, "There's some safety from the mark you bear. He won't find you, if he's looking." He pushed the door open so slowly, Kaylin could swear she could feel the hours pass. "Is he?"

"Is he what?"

"Looking."

She shrugged, uneasy. "He knows where to find me," she said at last.

"Not perhaps a good thing, in your case. But enough. You are clearly yourself."

"You can tell that how?"

"You couldn't have crossed my threshold if you were under his thrall."

She nodded. Believing him. Wanting to know *why* she couldn't have.

Severn spoke instead. "You sent a message to the Halls?"

"Ah. No, actually, I didn't."

"But you expected this visit."

"Of course. Forgive the lack of hospitality, but I don't drink, and I can't stand tea."

And he held the door slightly ajar, motioning them in. Watching them both more carefully than he had ever watched Kaylin before. She wasn't certain how she knew this, because he looked the same -- eyes and skin crinkled in lines around his lips, the narrow width of his face. He wasn't smiling, but he almost never did.

She meant to say something, but the words escaped her because from the width of the hall and the door she had expected the room to be tiny. And it was the size -- and the height -- of the Aerie in the Halls, where the winged Aerians who served the Hawklord could reach for, and almost touch, the sky.

#

Sunlight streamed down from above, as if through coloured glass; the air moved Kaylin's hair across her cheeks, suggesting breeze and open space. As a fiefling, she had had no great love of open spaces, but daylight had

always suggested safety. There was a hint of that safety here, and it surprised her -- magic always made her skin crawl.

"Yes," Evanton said, as the door clicked shut at her back. She turned slowly to face him and saw that he had changed. His clothing was different, for one, and he seemed to stand slightly taller; the stoop in his shoulders, the bend, the perpetual droop, of his neck, had disappeared. He was not young, would never be young, but age had majesty here that it had never had before.

"Yes?"

"It is a magic, of a type, Kaylin Neya. If you stand here for long enough, and you listen carefully, you might hear the sound of your name on the wind." He paused, and then tendered her something shocking: A perfect, formal bow. "Lord Kaylin," he said quietly, "Of the High Court."

"Don't you start too," she began, but he waved her to silence.

"In this place, names have import, and there are rumours, girl."

"Never bet on a rumour."

His expression shifted and twisted, and for a moment she could see the man she had first met in this changed one. "Why not? You do." He lifted an arm; blue cloth clung to it in a drape that reminded her of Barrani High Court clothing. It was not so fine in line, and it hung a little long, and perhaps a little heavily, on his scrawny frame -- but it suggested ... gravity. Experience.

Maybe even nobility, and *no one* sent Kaylin to talk to the nobles. Or the people who -- far worse -- wanted to be nobles and hadn't quite made it yet, in their own minds.

"I bet small change," she began. Severn snorted.

"Small change," Severn told Evanton, unphased by the change in the man, "is all Kaylin ever *has*."

"So you bet everything you have, time and again? You really should choose different companions, girl. But," he added, staring at Severn again, "I don't disapprove of this one."

"You didn't disapprove of Teela or Tain, that I recall."

"It hardly matters, where the Barrani are concerned. And Teela is a slightly unusual case. I've known her for some time," he added, almost gently. "She was the first customer I had in this store, when I finally opened it."

"When you finally opened it?"



"Ah, yes. It took me some time to find my way back. From this place," he added, looking beyond Kaylin into memory. She knew the look. "And she was waiting, with, I might add, her usual patience." Which would of course be none at all.

"How long had she waited?"

"Quite a while, from all accounts. It was well before she joined the Hawks," he added, "And she cut a formidable figure."

Thinking about the drug dealers on the banks of the Ablayne -- the ones who had been unfortunate enough to sell Lethe -- Kaylin said, "she's pretty damn formidable now."

"In a fashion. She was waiting for me, and she was not with Tain. She did have a greatsword, however, a fine piece of work. It predated the Empire," he added. "but I do not believe it was a named weapon."

"Why are you showing us this?"

"A very good question. You always ask too many questions, girl; they try what little patience I've managed to preserve." But he said it without rancour. "This is not unlike the High Halls of the Barrani. It is, however, older, I think, than the Halls, and one of the few such ancient places within the city that are not governed by either Barrani or the Dragon Emperor himself.

"Although when I was called to answer for my stewardship of this place, I will say the Dragon Emperor was a tad ... testy. I'd advise you to stay on his good side when you do meet him.

"You mean the side without the teeth, right?"

Evanton chuckled. "That side, yes, although the tail can be quite deadly."

She didn't ask him how he knew this. His words had caught up with her thoughts. "What do you mean when I meet him?"

His frown was momentary. "Never mind, girl. All in good -- or bad -- time. He's watching you, but even his reach is not so long that he can see you here. He's almost certainly aware that you *are* here, however."

"What do you mean?"

"He has my shop watched."

"Oh." She paused, and took a step forward into the room that was, in her eyes, light and almost empty. But it wasn't entirely empty; there were -- as there were in his shop -- odd things, old but gleaming and untarnished, that lay on stone pedestals, on stone shelves, and in alcoves that lined the distant walls. Things that held candles -- candelabras? -- that were lined up in

perfect precision, unlit and therefore unblemished.

"Are they ever lit?"

"Never," Evanton replied. "And if they are to be lit, let it be during someone else's watch."

She nodded and kept walking, and after a while, she said, "This is circular, this room?"

"A large circle, but yes." Evanton's eyes were gleaming and dark as he answered. His nod was more a nod of approval than Kaylin had ever seen from him. She took encouragement from it, and continued to watch the room with the eyes -- the trained eyes -- of a hawk.

Saw a small pond, saw a fire burning in a brazier; felt the wind's voice above her head and saw the leaves turn at its passing. Saw, in the distance, a rock garden in which no water trickled.

She said, "elemental."

And Evanton nodded again.

"Severn?"

"I concur. But it is unusual."

"And the books, Evanton?"

"Good girl," he said softly. "Those, do not touch. You may approach them, but do not touch them."

"I doubt I'd be able to read them."

"It is not in the reading that they present the greatest threat, and Kaylin, if you spoke no words at all, if you were entirely deprived of language, these books would still speak to you."

"Magic," she said, with disdain.

"Indeed, and older magic than the magic that is the current fashion. Fashion," he added, "may be frowned on by the old, but I believe that the trend is not a bad one."

She closed her eyes. Listened to the voice of the wind as it rustled and whispered its murky syllables. Heard, for a moment, a name that was not quite hers as she looked up, lids still blocking all vision, to feel its touch across her cheeks.

The mark of Nightshade began to tingle. It was not entirely comfortable. Without thinking, she lifted a hand to her face to touch the mark.

"The mark you bear affords you some protection. He must value you, Kaylin," Evanton said. He was closer than she realized; she should have heard his shuffling step, but she had heard only the wind. And felt, for a

moment, the glimmering dream of flight.

His voice dispelled the wind's, sent it scattering, left her bound -- as she would always be bound -- to ground. And because he simply waited, she began to walk again.

To the pond, where small shelves and altars sat across moss beds. Books lay there, and again, candles, unlit, by the dozen. There were small boxes, and a mirror -- the first she'd seen since she'd entered this room.

"The mirror --"

"Do *not* touch it."

"Wasn't going to," she said, although her hand stopped in mid-air. "But does it work?"

"Work?"

"Is it functional? If I wanted to send a message, could I?"

"Not," he replied, "to anyone you would care to speak to." It was an evasion. She accepted it. At the moment, the investigation was not about mirrors or messages, but it was the first truly modern thing she'd encountered.

Yet even as she thought it, she looked at the mirror, and thought again. Its surface was tarnished and cloudy, and its frame, gold and silver, poorly tended. Unlike the rest of the small, jewelled boxes, the reliquaries -- she recognized them for that now -- this had been left alone.

"Do they all have mirrors?"

"All?"

"The elemental gardens."

"Very good question, Kaylin. The answer is no. None of them do."

"But this one --"

"Was brought here. It does not belong in this room."

"But you haven't moved it."

"No," he replied. "And until the hawks deem it wise, I will not return it to its place. But do not touch it. The hand that held it last left some impression, but it will not, I think, be the equal of yours."

"You think of everything."

"I? Hardly. Had I, you would not be here now."

"Good point. Maybe." It was hard to leave the mirror, but she did, because the surface of the pond was everything the surface of the mirror was not: clean, smooth, reflective. The breeze that blew above did not touch it

at all; she wondered if a pebble would ripple its surface.

"No," Evanton replied, as if he were reading her mind -- which she'd gotten used to in the last few weeks, but still didn't much care for. "It would not. The earth and the water barely meet here. The pond is not wide," he added, "but it runs very, very deep."

She nodded. "These footprints," she said, although she had barely grazed ground with her eyes, "aren't yours."

"No."

"You know whose they are?"

"I have some suspicion."

Severn knelt with care at Kaylin's side and examined the moss. He had seen what she had seen, of course. "There are at least two sets," he told them both. "The larger set belongs to a person of heavier build than the smaller; I would say human, and probably male, from the size."

Evanton's answer was lost.

Kaylin was gazing at the surface of the pond. Although the water was clear, there was a darkness in the heart of it that seemed endless. Deep, he had said, and she now believed it; you could throw a body down here and it would simply vanish. The idea of taking a swim had less than no appeal.

But the water's surface caught and held light, the light from the ceiling above, the one that Aerians would so love, it was that tall.

She could almost see them fly across it, reflected for a moment in passage, and felt again the yearning to fly and be free. To join them.

It was illusion, of course. There was no such thing as freedom. There was only --

Reflection. Movement.

Not hers, and not Severn's; Evanton stood far enough back that he cast no reflection.

"Kaylin?" Severn said, his voice close to her ear.

But Kaylin was gazing now into the eyes -- the wide eyes -- of a child's bruised face. A girl, her hair long and stringy in the way that unwashed children's hair could often be, her skin pale with winter, although winter was well away. She wore clothing that was too large for her, and threadbare, and undyed. She wore nothing at all on her feet, for Kaylin could see her toes, dirt in the nails.

She came back to the eyes.

The girl whispered a single word.

*Kaylin.*

#