

CHAPTER 1

Morning was not Kaylin's friend.

Helen's Avatar stood in front of the open bedroom door, her expression as pinched as it ever got. Sentient buildings were in most ways a living marvel, but they definitely had their drawbacks.

"I'm not hungry," Kaylin told Helen as she dragged herself out of bed. "I need sleep more than I need food." She could see only one of her shoes. "Is there *anything* you can do about Nightshade and Annarion? I never thought I'd say this, but Dragons roaring at each other at the top of their lungs was more peaceful."

"I'm sorry, dear. I've done what I can to isolate the noise in the house, but Annarion's voice travels through most of my barriers."

"It's not just Annarion. I can hear every word Nightshade is saying."

"That would be because you bear his mark, dear. He can't control you through it while he's under my roof, but the connection is still active."

Kaylin reached up to touch her cheek. Nightshade's mark looked like a tattoo of a small flower, and she'd had it for

long enough she was barely aware of it, except in moments like these.

Helen looked down at her hands, which weren't really hands; Helen was a building. Her Avatar appeared to be human. It wasn't. Clearing her throat was also an affectation, and she did that, as well. "Regardless, breakfast is an important meal. You have work today. You need food." Helen's Avatar folded her arms. As far as Helen was concerned, this was a fight worth having, and as it happened, Helen won all these fights.

The winged lizard flapping around Kaylin's face in obvious annoyance made it hard to pull clothing over her head. Kaylin swatted halfheartedly at her familiar.

"That's what buttons are for, dear. If you unbuttoned—and folded—your clothing, getting dressed would be less chaotic."

Small and squawky settled on Kaylin's left shoulder with a little more claw than usual. "I used to daydream about having an older brother," she said as she spied the missing shoe under her bed. "If nothing else, this has cured me of that."

"I have a question."

Of course she did. "What?"

"Annarion is upset at his older brother."

"Clearly."

"He is not saying anything that you have not said, or thought, yourself. He dislikes the governance of the fief of Nightshade."

Dislike was *far* too mild a word.

"You hate it."

Kaylin exhaled. "I grew up there. Barely. I survived. But a lot of people—a lot of kids—didn't. When I see what Tiamaris has done with his own fief, it's very clear to me that life in Nightshade didn't have to be like that. Nightshade's the fief lord. He could have chosen to do what Tiamaris is

doing. The fief is his. So yes, I agree with every single word Annarion's been saying. Or shouting. Or screaming."

"But you feel pain on Nightshade's behalf."

Kaylin grimaced. "Nightshade spent *centuries* trying to rescue Annarion. I think he might have killed his father because his father chose to sacrifice Annarion to the green. The only person on earth Nightshade cares about that way is his younger brother. In some ways, his choices revolved around Annarion. He's outcaste because of those choices.

"Getting Annarion back should have been a good thing. And I think it is. But...Annarion's so disappointed, so hurt, it's caused almost nothing but pain." And that pain? It was killing Kaylin's ability to sleep. No one who had half a heart could sleep through the ruckus. "To both of them."

"And you don't want Lord Nightshade to be in pain."

"I think he *deserves* it, to be honest. But...not from Annarion."

"People have always been complicated."

"Even the immortal ones?"

"Especially the immortal ones."

No one with any intelligence wanted to get between two brothers while they were fighting. No one with any sense of self-preservation got between two Barrani when they were fighting. Kaylin hoped fervently that Lord Nightshade had returned to his own castle this morning.

Kaylin chewed on her thoughts while her familiar chewed on her hair as she walked down the foyer stairs toward the dining room. The dining room's fancy doors were open, there was food on the table, and she was—as usual—late. Annarion was seated beside Mandoran. If Nightshade was Annarion's brother by blood and lineage, Mandoran was a sibling by shared experience. Seated across from Mandoran

was Bellusdeo, her golden hair pulled back in a braid that was looped together on the back of her head. Given the slightly orange tinge to her eyes, it was clear she and Mandoran had already started their daily bickering.

Having a Dragon living in the same house as a Barrani who'd lost his family to the Draco-Barrani wars was never exactly peaceful.

Before she could enter the dining room, Annarion looked up from his untouched plate. "I want to know how you first met my brother."

No, mornings were definitely not her friend.

"I don't think," Helen said to Annarion as Kaylin made her way—silently—to her chair, "that Kaylin wishes to discuss your brother at breakfast."

Or ever.

"I told him you'd say that," Mandoran added, half-apologetically. Half was usually as much as he could muster.

"I'm surprised he didn't listen," Bellusdeo said, picking up a fork as if it were a fascinating, rarely seen utensil. "Usually you're the one who chooses to be selectively deaf." She smiled at Mandoran. "I've come to find it quaintly charming."

Mandoran's eyes shifted to a steady, deeper blue, the universal sign of Barrani fear or anger. And he certainly wasn't afraid. "As charming as a Dragon in mortal clothing?"

"Oh, infinitely more so. I assume once you've developed better command of your manners, I will be far less entertained. But I don't expect that to happen in the next decade. Or two."

Mandoran's natural dislike of Dragons as a race left Kaylin stranded with Annarion, who was still staring at her. No one could outstare Barrani.

"Why won't you speak about my brother?" he asked. The

question was softly spoken, but his tone made it more of a command than a request for information.

She considered and discarded a number of replies as she began to eat. She wasn't hungry, and even if she had been, Annarion's question would have killed her appetite. But she'd grown up on the edge of starvation, and she could always eat.

None of her possible replies were good. The truth was, she liked Annarion. He was—for a Barrani—honest, polite, self-contained.

“I don't suppose you could ask your brother.”

Mandoran took a break from his barbed “conversation” with Bellusdeo. “He's asked.”

“Nightshade didn't want to talk about it?”

“No, he talked about it.”

“Then what's the problem?”

“He was lying.”

Annarion glared at Mandoran, looking as if he wanted to argue. He turned back to Kaylin instead. “I want to know your side of the story.” Meaning, of course, that he agreed with Mandoran's assessment.

“I've got the usual mortal memory,” Kaylin replied evasively. “And I might lie, as well.”

Mandoran snorted again. “Your attempts at lies are so pathetic you should probably use a different word to describe them.”

Kaylin glared at Mandoran. Bellusdeo, however, said, “He has a point.”

Kaylin wasn't certain how she would have answered. She was saved by the appearance of the last of her housemates. Moran—Sergeant Carafel in the office—entered the dining room. Moran was almost never late for anything, even breakfast.

Clearly, she had some reason for being late now, and it

wasn't a pleasant one. Her wings—or what remained of her wings—were stiff and as high as they could get with their protective bindings. Her eyes were blue. Aerial eyes and Barrani eyes overlapped in only one color. Moran was either angry, worried or both.

Kaylin had risen before she realized she'd left her chair, which did nothing to improve Moran's mood. Moran did not appreciate any worry that was aimed in her direction. Ever.

"As you were, Private." She sat on the stool provided for her; Aerial wings and normal chair backs didn't get along well. To Helen, she added, "The mirror connection was smooth and solid."

It certainly hadn't started out that way. Helen had a strong dislike of mirrors, or rather, of the mirror network that powered their communication. Regular silvered glass didn't bother her in the slightest. "I made a few adjustments, dear. I'm terribly sorry that the faulty connections to date have caused so much difficulty for you."

"They haven't," Moran replied, her voice gentling, her eyes darkening.

Helen's Avatar smiled. "They have."

"The people on the other end of the connection have caused—or are trying to cause—the difficulty. It has nothing at all to do with you. If the connection had been faultless and solid, it would have given them more time to make things even less pleasant. I'm grateful for the respite." Her eyes had shifted to a more neutral gray by the time she reached the end of her reassurance. She looked across the table at Bellusdeo.

"Was it the Caste Court?" Kaylin asked. Helen frowned at her but said nothing.

Moran glared Kaylin into the silence Helen would have preferred, but then relented slightly. "It was two castelords and one Hawklord. Before you ask, none of them were par-

ticularly happy. And it is *caste* business. Aerian business. Is that clear?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good.” Moran then turned to Bellusdeo. “Are you accompanying us to the Halls today?”

Bellusdeo’s eyes were golden. “Of course.”

Moran then concentrated on breakfast. Annarion’s attention had fallen on the Aerian, as had Mandoran’s. Neither of the boys interacted much with her except at meals, and while Moran was polite, she wasn’t highly talkative.

“Helen,” Mandoran said, “what happened?”

“I don’t think she wishes to discuss that, dear.”

“That’s why I’m asking you.”

Even Annarion looked pained. “He’s gotten worse since he arrived in this city. He used to be capable of actual manners,” he said to the table at large.

“When they were necessary, yes. Here, no one needs them, and I hate to go through the effort when it won’t be appreciated in the slightest.”

Less than ten minutes later, Teela and Tain appeared in the dining room as if they’d been summoned. What was left of the breakfast conversation died as they were noticed.

“What, are we not welcome?” Teela asked as she sauntered in. She was wearing a sword. So was Tain.

“You are always welcome,” Helen told her. “Any friend of—”

“Yes, yes. Thank you, Helen.” Chairs appeared at the long dining table as if by magic. Well, actually, by magic. Teela turned one of the two so that its back almost touched the table’s edge. She sat, folding her arms across the top rail and resting her chin on her forearms. To Moran, she said, “What kind of trouble are you expecting?”

Moran glared at Mandoran. She knew the boys could communicate with Teela the same way they communicated with each other. They knew each other's True Names. All of the children that had been taken, centuries ago, to the West March did. Kaylin thought it a bit unfair that Moran immediately blamed Mandoran.

Mandoran apparently didn't. "What?" he asked, spreading his hands. "You asked the Dragon if she was heading into the Halls today. You know it gives Kaylin's sergeant hives the minute she crosses the threshold. You've never asked before. Obviously you're concerned that something requiring brute strength—or magical competence—might happen."

Moran was silent.

"There are perfectly competent Barrani here. I'll be damned if I let you depend on a *Dragon* for heroics. And Teela has to go to the Halls anyway."

The Dragon in question said, "I'm still going. And in case it's escaped your notice, Barrani can't fly."

"Some can."

"Not naturally."

Mandoran shrugged. "If we're going to get technical, you can't *legally* fly, either. Not without Imperial permission."

The word *permission* touched off a distinct orange in Belusdeo's eyes.

Teela glanced at Moran with some sympathy. "I hear," she said, her eyes almost green, the Barrani happy color, "that you have a lovely suite of personal rooms. I do hope they make up for the shared spaces."

Moran was silent for half a beat. "Yes," she finally said, "they do. They're very quiet and very peaceful." She surveyed the table with weary resignation. "I suppose I shouldn't have expected that the rest of the house would be the same—Kaylin lives here, after all."

Helen wouldn't tell Kaylin the content of Moran's mirror-based discussion. Normally, this wouldn't have bothered Kaylin; today, for reasons she felt were obvious, it did.

"They are not obvious to Moran, dear," Helen replied, although Kaylin hadn't spoken that part out loud. It didn't matter. Helen could read the thoughts of almost anyone who crossed her borders. This bothered some of the immortals; it didn't bother Kaylin. Helen was not judgmental about anything. "You understand that she is older, of a higher rank, and has handled far larger responsibilities than you currently officially have?"

"Yes."

"She did not come here to put you in danger."

"I know all that, Helen."

"She does not wish you to worry. And, Kaylin? While this *is* your home, Moran is a guest here. Her privacy and her concerns are important to me. Had she no privacy, this would not be a home to her; it would be a prison. An imposition. That is not what you wished for her when you invited her to stay."

"But Moran's worried about her physical safety!"

"Yes. But she is not in danger while she is here."

"She's not *staying* here, Helen. She's going to the Halls of Law."

"Yes. That is also her choice."

The small dragon squawked in Kaylin's ear. When she'd ignored enough of this, he started to chew on the stick that kept her hair out of her way. "Fine."

"Are you coming?" Mandoran shouted.

"Yes, yes, I'm coming." Kaylin was at the front door of the foyer before the implication of his question sank in. "Where do you think you're going?"

“Nightshade’s supposed to visit today. I’m going to the Halls with the rest of you.”

“Mandoran—”

“I don’t have trouble masking my presence. Annarion still does. But he’s going to spend another several hours shouting at his brother. Or being coldly disappointed in him. I’m not sure which one is worse. Being here while he’s doing either, however, sucks.” He grinned, his eyes almost green. “And it sounds like you’re going to be having far more fun today than I would if I stayed here. I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

Kaylin sent Teela a mute glance.

“Don’t labor under the misapprehension that I can tell Mandoran what to do.”

“She’s already tried,” Mandoran added cheerfully. “I’ve been using some of your favorite phrases in private.”

Given what Kaylin’s favorite phrases were, the private part was probably for the best. She offered Moran a very, very apologetic glance. “It’s not always like this,” she told the sergeant.

“No,” Moran replied, her eyes a steady blue. “It’s frequently worse.”

Stepping outside the open gates that formed the demarcation of Helen’s territory, she felt her skin begin to tingle. Kaylin had what she called an allergy to magic, at least when she was trying to be polite. It made her skin ache. The stronger the magic, the greater the ache; in the worst cases, she felt as if her skin had been sanded off the rest of her body.

She looked down at her arm; the marks that covered two-thirds of her body weren’t glowing through the long sleeves she always wore. When they did, they took on a particular

color—usually blue or gold, sometimes gray. It was never precisely a good sign.

Teela noticed her glance immediately, and her eyes lost their green, the Barrani happy shade.

Bellusdeo's eyes were orange. Mandoran had annoyed her enough—or had reminded her of how annoyed she should be. The Dragon glanced at Moran, who was silent, her eyes a blue that almost matched Teela's.

Mandoran's, on the other hand, remained green. "Once you get used to the smell," he said to no one in particular, "the city's not so bad." They had turned onto the more crowded streets; people multiplied, and carts, wagons and carriages began to demand room. Or at least their ill-tempered drivers did.

No one appeared to hear him.

"Kitling?" Teela said.

Kaylin nodded. "It's getting worse." And it was. Her arms now ached. Magic sensitivity wasn't exactly directional, but Kaylin looked up. The sky—absent a few patrolling Aerians—was crisp, clear and empty.

The small dragon jerked to a full sitting position. He opened his mouth on a very, very loud squawk.

Teela cursed, drawing her sword.

"Corporal?" Moran said quietly.

"We have visitors."

Kaylin reached out and grabbed Moran by the arm. In the Halls of Law, it would have been safer to cut off her own hand—and probably ultimately less painful. The marks on her arms flared; she could see the dim glow of their outlines through her sleeves. That cloth rubbing against her skin was hideously painful.

Moran didn't fight her. That's what she would remember

with wonder later. Moran let herself be drawn—instantly—into the tight circle of Kaylin’s arms. Kaylin barely had time to close her eyes as the world directly in front of them exploded.