

CHAPTER 1

To say that Private Kaylin Neya was out of her element was to master the art of understatement. Fish out of water had nothing on the groundhawk whose entire life had been lived within the boundaries of Elantra—either on the city streets or in the fiefs at its heart.

This had become obvious the moment she entered the forest, walking between Severn and Teela and surrounded—literally—by Barrani. Or as she walked through forest, at any rate, because this far across the known map, it was *all* forest. Never an aficionado of fine art, she'd nonetheless seen paintings, and the occasional diorama of ancient forests, and she had known what to expect: tall, majestic trees, shade-dappled forest floors and shafts of brilliant, solid sunlight illuminating strategic patches of charming undergrowth, with the occasional frail animal thrown in for good measure. In the paintings, there were no Barrani, no dragons, and no angry

Leontines; there were no drug dealers, no muggers, no frauds, and no rapists. The artists evoked a sense of peaceful idyll.

Hah.

Painters should have been Court diplomats—men and women who'd mastered the art of telling pretentious lies with more or less straight faces. For one, they left out the bugs. On some level, Kaylin didn't blame them—if she'd had the choice, she'd've left them out, too. Unfortunately, she didn't. The insects didn't appear to bother the Barrani. She was glad—in an entirely petty way—that they occasionally bit Severn, because it made their choice of dinner snacks racial, rather than purely personal. He didn't appear to take offense as much.

Then again, he had other things on his mind, chief among them, not tripping over inconveniently placed tree roots and landing on his face. His left eye had, over the course of two days, developed a purple-black tinge. He'd taken one wound to his upper left thigh, and two broad gashes across his left rib cage, one of which had exposed bone. He'd allowed her to heal the wounds by a few days' worth, no more.

This was a greater liberty than any of the injured Barrani allowed her, and she was tired enough not to push the point. The Barrani version of gratitude for the gift of healing involved knives—or worse—in dark alleys.

Avoiding Barrani, however, was not an option.

The Lord of the West March and what remained of his soldiers formed up at the front—and the rear—of the delegation. To either side, what was left of the party that had set out from the High Halls walked in single file. Kaylin wasn't given the option of choosing her position in that delegation: she was wearing a very fine, obviously magical, green dress, and the dress demanded respect, even if the wearer didn't.

Travel, some idiot in her office had said, *is fun*.

Kaylin, surrounded by somber, tense—and deeply blue-

eyed Barrani—had a few words to say about *that*. Teela made clear she could say them with her mouth shut. So Kaylin, navigating forest, footpaths, and a plague of blood-drinking, buzzing insects, began to make a list. It was, in her mind, titled Things Not to Do if You Want to Have Fun During Your Involuntary Leave of (Probably Unpaid) Absence.

First on the list: avoid making deals for crucial information with a fieflord. Even if the Halls of Law were desperate for that information. The particular fieflord in question, Lord Nightshade, didn't seem to have any trouble navigating the forest, and the insects avoided him. He wore a tiara with an emerald at its peak, and robes that looked ridiculously fine in comparison to the practical Barrani armor that almost everyone else was wearing. She added a corollary to the first point: do not agree to attend a religious rite in the West March without first ascertaining that the fieflord in question did not also plan to attend.

Second on the list: do not travel with the Barrani High Court. It had seemed both convenient and smart to accept their offer of transportation; after all, the Barrani knew where they were going. Kaylin didn't. Her knowledge of Elantran streets was second to none—or close—but the West March wasn't *in* Elantra. At the time, because she'd had no idea how to *reach* the West March, getting there on her own had seemed impossible.

Impossible couldn't be worse than this. She slapped her arm and squashed an insect. The chill in the air, as she smeared insect body across the sleeve of her incredibly important ceremonial dress, could have frozen moving water.

If the imaginary person for whom the list was being created had had no choice in either of the first two, she emphatically underlined point three: if you see a strange dress in a closet that only appeared *after* you'd entered the room of your

inn, *ignore it*. Under no circumstances was such a dress to be worn. Unless you were Barrani, and maybe not even then. Yes, the dress was a lovely shade of green. Yes, it was comfortable. Yes, it was suitable for the Barrani High Court—and it didn't require the help of two strong people to put on. It was even practical; the skirts were wide enough that Kaylin could run—at full stride—while wearing it.

Unfortunately, the Barrani didn't respect or revere it because it was practical. They revered it because it was the manifestation of the will of the heart of the green. Some poor sucker, shoehorned into the dress, was meant to serve in a primary role in the recitation of the regalia—the very rite that a smart person would have gone out of their way to avoid attending if they were paying attention to point one.

Fourth on the list—although technically, it might be better placed between points two and three: avoid Barrani inns. The Barrani version of an inn was known as a Hallionne. Or the Hallionne, in plural. As inns went they were creepy, in part because they were alive and sentient—and mind-reading. Best not to forget the mind-reading part. They reminded Kaylin of nothing so much as the Towers or Castles in the fiefs, and no one with two brain cells to rub together voluntarily lived in either. She felt a twinge of guilt at this because she counted Tara, the Tower of Tiamaris, as a friend. But it had been a long two days—it was a very minor twinge.

Because the Hallionne were sentient, they were able to do things that normal inns couldn't—like, say, choose the rooms in which their guests stayed. Want a different room? Too damn bad. You could stay in the room the Hallionne chose for you—or you could sleep under the trees, where the forest version of Ferals would eat your liver for a midnight snack. The Hallionne also had a pretty broad idea of physical shape and changed it apparently at whim.

The small dragon perched on her shoulder tilted his head, and after a pause, squawked in her ear.

Point five, which might also be point zero: do not take large, strange eggs home with you. They hatched into delicate, small dragons. Not that the actual dragons of Kaylin's acquaintance thought so—but honestly, the little guy had miniature dragon breath. Except he didn't spew flame; he spewed... clouds. That could melt steel without heating it first. That could kill Ferals. That could bypass the usual magical wards placed on doors.

Squawk.

Or maybe point five should be: do not have a dragon for a roommate. Because dragons for roommates attracted assassins the way Kaylin was currently attracting insects—and if you were planning on killing a dragon, you'd need enough magical conflagration to destroy a city block.

Or two.

And that much magic had certainly been enough to destroy the only home Kaylin had ever truly owned. Or rented. On the other hand, if your life goal was to live in the Palace, dragon roommates who just happened to be the only living female of the species were definitely the way to go.

The small dragon squawked again.

"All right, all right. Scratch that. Unhatched eggs are good." Especially since the act of hatching seemed responsible for the fact that Kaylin—and Bellusdeo, the maligned dragon roommate in question—were still alive. That was not the usual outcome when an Arcane bomb exploded in your face.

He squawked.

"They're bad?"

"Lord Kaylin," Severn said. She glanced at him. "Is there some difficulty?" His words were both High Barrani and stiff as boards. They reminded her, immediately, that she was sur-

rounded by Barrani Lords who were just as stiff, but probably less friendly. You could get some warmth out of most boards by burning them; at this point, Kaylin wasn't so certain the same could be said of the High Court, or at least its present members.

Only Nightshade looked amused.

Amusing Nightshade was not high on her list of things to do, although it didn't quite make the list of things not to do she was composing.

Let's see. Six? Six: if a Hallionne offered to let you stay in his special, safe space, and the space looked like a haunted graveyard, *don't do it*.

She was aware, as she stubbed her toe for the thousandth time, that she was being more than a little unfair. But the imitation graveyard had been a bedroom, of sorts. In the heart of the Hallionne, his brothers slept.

Small and squawky dragon sidekick had breathed on their tombstones, which had caused them to wake. The waking had been disturbing. The brothers themselves, disturbing as well but in a different way—they'd adopted the forms of Barrani Lords, but the minute they'd opened their collective mouths it was clear they had very, very little in common with the Hallionne's most frequent guests.

Seven: if the Hallionne offers to let you take the portal paths through the outlands to the West March, say no. Loudly. Leontine optional. In theory, the portal paths were risky. Theory and practice aligned, but not in the ways she'd been told to expect.

In theory, the outlands existed as a kind of potential space. They were gray and formless in their natural state. An entire group—such as, say, the group that set out from the High Halls what felt like months ago—could pass through the arch of the portal intent on reaching the same destination, but only two people were guaranteed to do so.

One of them was Kaylin Neya, wearer of the dress that deserved respect.

The other was Lord Nightshade, wearer of the emerald tiara. Like Kaylin's dress, the tiara was given to someone chosen to participate directly in the recitation of the regalia. Unlike Kaylin, Nightshade seemed to approve.

She'd been surprised to enter the outlands to find the bowers of normal, if tall, trees. So had the Consort. The Consort. Kaylin wanted to add an eighth item to her growing list: *don't piss off the Consort*. But in this case, she couldn't. Kaylin understood why the Consort was angry. She also understood that given the same possible outcomes, Kaylin would stand by the choice she'd made.

She glanced at the Consort as she thought it; the Consort was dressed in white armor, a gift from the Lord of the West March. She carried a naked blade, and her hair was swept off the back of her neck. She was, on the other hand, the only Barrani to confine her hair. As if aware of Kaylin's attention, the Consort glanced at her. Her eyes were blue. They were not as dark a blue as almost everyone else's.

Teela's were certainly darker.

"Honestly, kitling," the Barrani Hawk said, frowning. "I can *hear* you thinking."

On most days, the Barrani who worked in the Halls of Law looked both arrogant and bored. At thirteen years of age, Kaylin had found the arrogance irritating. The boredom, she understood. Today, she missed it.

"Teela—"

"If I hear one more word about the insects, I swear I will bite you myself." She spoke in quiet Elantran for the first time in two days.

The rush of gratitude Kaylin felt at the sound of her mother tongue should have embarrassed her. Clearly, from Teela's ex-

pression, it embarrassed one of them. “Do *not*,” Teela continued in the same Elantran, her brows furrowing, “start to worry about me.”

“But—”

“I mean it.”

“Can I talk about something else instead?”

“I’m certain to regret it,” was Teela’s brusque reply.

As it wasn’t a no, Kaylin said, “Why do so many Barrani try to divest themselves of their names?”

“Do they?”

“Illien in Barren. The walking dead in Nightshade.”

“Two small examples do not constitute a multitude.”

“Well, no. But I think that’s what Iberrienne was trying to do.”

Teela shook her head. “I think you’re wrong.”

Kaylin wasn’t so certain. Eighth on her list, then: do not speak the True Name of a Barrani Lord who you don’t intend to kill immediately afterward. She hadn’t planned it. But she had seen Ynpharion’s True Name, and she had seen the substantial shadows it both cast and fed. The shadow had taken the form of his name, and the shape. It was as if he had two names, identical in form, but entirely different in substance.

She didn’t understand how. But she was certain that the shadow name—for want of anything else to call it—had given the Barrani Lord the ability to transform himself into the Ferals that hunted in the less safe parts of the West March and its environs. It was as a Feral that he had first approached Kaylin.

It was as a Feral that he would have killed her, too. But her dragon sidekick had conferred a type of invisibility on her. Or on himself. That invisibility had given her the time to observe, and the time to plan—even if the plan was half-assed and desperate.

She knew the True Names of both Lord Nightshade and

the Lord of the West March. She understood that in theory, this gave her power over them. But she now understood that theory was its usual pathetic mess. Neither Nightshade nor the Lord of the West March had ever fought against her knowledge. They accepted the threat she might one day pose. They did not feel threatened by her *now*.

They had, she understood, gifted her with the knowledge of their names.

But Lord Ynpharion had not. She'd spoken his name, strengthening its existence, in an attempt to burn away the shadows that clung to it. She'd succeeded. But there had been no way to ask his permission because before she had invoked his name, he wouldn't have given it. He fought her.

He fought, and he lost. This was a new and painful experience for Kaylin, and it was not one she was anxious to repeat.

Ynpharion walked to one side of the Lord of the West March, in what should have been a position of honor. To the naked eye, he was as proud, as focused, as unflappable as any other Barrani present.

But Kaylin saw beneath that surface. She saw his self-loathing, his disgust, and his fury—most of it aimed squarely at her. The only reason he kept it to himself was his fear of exposure. Kaylin held his name.

No one but Ynpharion knew it. If he exposed the truth, it might justify murderous action—but it would justify, as well, eternal contempt. He had not lost volition to a Lord of the High Court; he was in thrall to a *mortal*. If the truth remained hidden, nothing would justify an attempt to harm the woman in the green dress; it would be—according to Teela—an act very close to treason. Kaylin, being that woman, was to serve as harmoniste for the recitation.

If Ynpharion attacked her now, his chance of success was slight. So were his chances of survival. Death would put an

end to the humiliation, but Ynpharion was not young. He knew that Kaylin, mortal, would survive a bare handful of years. He was not enslaved for the rest of eternity—just the pathetic span of the years remaining her.

A handful of years against the eternal contempt of the High Court. He had chosen, for the moment, to endure. But his rage was a constant battery.

She could have lived with the rage, the loathing, the disgust. It was the fear she found hard. He was afraid—of Kaylin. He was afraid of a mortal. The fear fed into his self-loathing. It was a downward spiral of ugliness.

She wasn't spared his descent.

Kaylin had no trouble finding hidden depths of self-loathing and disgust on bad days. She didn't really need to bear the brunt of Ynpharion's, as well. At the midpoint of day two she'd given serious consideration to walking him off the nearest cliff. Sadly, the forest path didn't seem to lead to a conveniently high cliff.

The only refuge Kaylin had found was in silent complaint. And, damn it, pain. The soft, supple shoes she'd taken from Hallionne Sylvanne were proof against normal wear, but they didn't provide much protection when foot connected at the toe with gnarled roots.

Teela caught her before she could fall. "Lord of the West March," she said, above Kaylin's head.

He turned, glanced at Kaylin, and nodded. "We will call a brief halt."

The two mortals were not the only people present to benefit from the break. Lord Evarrim joined them. He barely acknowledged Kaylin's existence. That was normal. He didn't spare a glance for the small dragon perched like a bad shawl around her neck, which wasn't. His lower jaw sported some

of the same bruising that Severn's eye did, but it was less obvious on the Barrani face.

On the other hand, he was Barrani; any obvious injury was unsettling.

Evarrim was no longer wearing the tiara that Kaylin had once considered so pretentious. Nor was he dressed in Court robes; he wore an unadorned chain shirt and plate greaves. "Cousin," he said.

Teela's eyes narrowed.

"Are you determined to remain for the recitation?"

Even the insects fell silent.

"I am determined, *cousin*, to escort the Consort and the harmoniste to the green."

Evarrim was apparently immune to the glacial cold of Teela's voice. It was impressive; most of the office—or at least the mortal parts—would have been under their desks or scurrying for a convenient just-remembered meeting. "And not the Teller? Interesting."

The Teller was Nightshade.

Kaylin's gaze bounced between the two Barrani. Teela's eyes were a shade darker; Evarrim's were as close to green as they'd been all day. The bastard was enjoying himself. "Your concern is noted," she finally replied. "It is irrelevant, but noted."

He rose. "Very well. The Consort and the Lord of the West March have expressed a similar concern; they are, of course, more guarded." He bowed, stiffly. He actually walked stiffly. But he walked away.

"Teela—"

"Don't even think it." Teela rose, as well. She didn't march into the forest, but she left Kaylin and Severn alone with their lunch, hovering ten yards away, sword in hand.

"What was that about?" Kaylin asked—quietly. Teela was

far enough away that whispers shouldn't carry, but they might; Barrani hearing was in all ways superior to human hearing.

He exhaled. "What did Teela tell you?"

Kaylin grimaced. "What makes you think she told me anything?"

"You're fidgeting."

Kaylin shot a guilty glance at Teela's back. "She hasn't told me much that we don't already know. We know the recitation involves True Words; it's like the story Sanabalis told the Leontines. We know that the story isn't chosen by the Lord of the West March, the Teller, or the lowly harmoniste; the heart of the green decides."

"Did she explain what the heart of the green *is*?" When Kaylin failed to answer, he asked, more pointedly, "Did you ask?"

Teela had been talking about the death of her mother. So no, Kaylin hadn't really asked.

She fainted. "It has something to do with the Hallionne. I'm not sure the Barrani understand it fully." She removed the small dragon's wing when he stretched and covered half her face. "The recitation of the regalia has an effect—a lasting effect—on those who listen to the telling. It's the biggest reason the Barrani make the pilgrimage to this insect-plagued, weed-covered, Feral-infested—" She stopped as Teela glanced over her shoulder, and lowered her voice again. "The Barrani who've passed the test of name in the High Halls are expected to travel to the West March and listen to the recitation.

"There, if they're lucky, they're empowered. Somehow. Don't give me that look. I wasn't making lists. I don't know how the effect is measured. But...the ceremony has an effect."

"On all participants?" He gave the dress a pointed look.

She frowned. "I'm not sure. I'd guess no. But on some."

Severn nodded.

“Some ambitious moron on the High Council came up with a great idea. It was during one of the Draco-Barrani wars.” She frowned. “I’m guessing not all adults are affected by the regalia in an obvious way. Maybe someone thought adults were less malleable. But anyway, one of the nameless High Lords suggested that if the regalia had subtle effects on the adults, it might have stronger, more useful effects on children. Those children would then be like a super-next generation, and they might make a difference in the wars.

“The High Lord of the time liked the idea.

“So twelve children were chosen. Teela was one of the twelve. Or maybe there were thirteen—they speak of twelve lost, and Teela’s not lost. The children were considered gifted; smarter, faster, that kind of thing. They all came from significant families.” She glanced past Teela, and caught a brief glimpse of Nightshade. “The children were brought to the West March.

“The denizens of the West March were *not* happy. Because they weren’t happy, they didn’t offer the visitors from the High Halls the hospitality of their homes; the children—and the Lords they traveled with—were placed in the Hallionne of the West March.”

“The Hallionne that’s considered unsafe by the rest of the Hallionne.”

Kaylin nodded. “It wasn’t considered unsafe at the time—but staying in the Hallionne was the equivalent of being told by family that they don’t have room for you and you should go to the nearest Inn.”

“The Barrani of the West March didn’t want the children exposed to the regalia?”

“No. But most of the Barrani of the West March aren’t Lords of the High Court, so they didn’t have a voice. They couldn’t

prevent the children from appearing at the recitation—but they tried anyway. They died.”

“During the recitation?”

Kaylin nodded, remembering the cadence of Teela’s voice. Teela, who never really talked about anything except drinking and work. One of those Barrani had been her mother. “The children listened to the recitation. It was—it was a complicated tale. I think Teela said that a harmoniste and a Teller had been chosen by the heart of the green, and both collapsed the moment it was done. It was considered auspicious; most of the recitations have neither. Just the Lord of the West March.”

“A harmoniste and Teller have been chosen for the upcoming recitation.”

“I’m the harmoniste. Believe that I noticed.”

“What happened?”

Kaylin shrugged. “The children changed. It wasn’t obvious during the telling; it became obvious after. They’d returned to the Hallionne before it became clear how dangerous they were. They didn’t apparently feel much loyalty toward the Barrani; I think most of the Lords responsible for their journey died in the Hallionne at their hands.”

“How did Teela survive unchanged?”

“That would be the question.” She hesitated again. “The Ferals that almost killed us—”

“Don’t call them Ferals around the Barrani; it annoys them.”

“They haven’t come up with a better name. Fine. The Not Ferals that almost killed us are related, somehow, to the lost children the Barrani said were dead. When we were fighting in the forest before we reached Hallionne Bertolle, one of our attackers called Teela by name.

“And she answered. She called him by the name he used to use before he—before. Nightshade recognized the name: Ter-rano.” She hesitated again. She glanced around the smallish

clearing; Nightshade wasn't visible. "Severn, I think Nightshade wanted me to attend the regalia because of the lost children."

"Was one of them his?"

Kaylin blinked.

The thought had honestly never occurred to her. Nightshade wasn't married. He had no consort. But when the children had been taken to the West March—the same West March she was approaching—Nightshade had been a Lord of the High Court, and not Outcaste. She literally had no idea what his life had been like before the fiefs. He might have had a consort, a wife, of his own. Barrani loyalty was always situational; if Nightshade was made Outcaste, what were the odds that a wife of any position would choose to accompany him into the dismal exile of the fiefs?

"I...I don't know. I have no idea if Nightshade has—or had—children." And she wasn't going to ask. But the thought was arresting and disturbing, and she tried, mostly successfully, to push it aside. "I don't think the lost children want Teela dead. I think they want her to—finally—join them. It's like they think she was left behind, or held back."

"And Evarrim is aware of this."

"Evarrim is a—"

Severn cleared his throat, and Kaylin took the hint. "The whole High Court is probably aware of it by now. Terrano wasn't exactly subtle. I'd guess most, if not all, of the High Court is worried."

"They don't trust Teela."

Kaylin rose. "They're Barrani; they don't trust anyone." The small dragon sneezed in her ear. "I think," she added, glaring at the small dragon, "we're moving again."

The forests of the West March, or its environs, weren't exactly light-filled to begin with. The trees were too tall. But

when evening began to set in, Kaylin missed the light. Moonlight was barely visible from where she was standing—and she'd chosen the spot because from here she could see at least one of the moons.

She stayed in range of Teela. She kept Severn more or less in line of sight. But what she wanted—what she missed about a city that was in theory vastly more crowded and consistently noisy—was a bit of privacy. There were no doors in the forest, and no small, enclosed space she could call her own.

But she didn't have that in Elantra anymore, either. The attempt to assassinate Bellusdeo had not only destroyed her flat, it had destroyed a large chunk of the building itself.

The small dragon snapped at something large and chitinous that was crawling up her arm; the damn bug didn't even crunch. "Do *not* breathe on it," she said when he opened his little jaws.

The small dragon snapped its jaws shut and whiffled.

"Kitling."

She looked up from a furious attempt to kill a buzzing, flying bloodsucker. The tone of Teela's voice made insect blood loss a triviality. She walked away from the only obvious—to mortal vision—moonlight, making a beeline for Teela.

Teela was not the only Barrani to draw weapon; the entire clearing had fallen silent.

Kaylin listened. She heard nothing.

Even the insects were quiet for one long, drawn breath. Severn unwound his weapon chain—and to her surprise, that made almost no noise, either.

The Consort lifted her chin. "From the north," she said. The Barrani turned.

In the forest, night was spreading across the ground.