

Chapter One

“*You* wake her up.”

Kaylin’s eyelids felt glued shut. She opened them anyway. Above her head, a tiny dragon appeared to be running in place.

“Why me? It’s not my decision that’s causing the difficulty!” That was definitely Mandoran. She didn’t immediately reach for the dagger under her pillow. She did, however, push herself into something that resembled a sitting position. Her familiar leapt up on her shoulder, where he squawked at the hair that then fell into his face.

“You were the one who said we should warn her.”
Annarion.

Kaylin knew that the two Barrani men could argue with their mouths shut. They knew each other’s True Names, and had their miniature version of telepathy. Grimly—morning was her best time of day only if you made a list and turned it upside down—she slid off her bed and toward a night robe, determined to remind them that they could argue *silently*.

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“If the two of you could shut up for five minutes, *I’ll* wake her up.” That was Tain. Kaylin froze and changed clothing direction; there was no way she was going back to sleep.

“I think she’s awake now,” Helen, her sentient house, said, with just a hint of disapproval.

“Good.”

Say that in five minutes, Kaylin thought, shoving her arms into her shirt. The buttons were on the inside, which was not where they were supposed to be. “Helen, can I have some light?”

Light immediately flooded the room. The familiar squawked his resentment. Kaylin was saving hers for possible future need, but she was now worried. “Is Teela here?”

“Not yet, dear.”

Tain didn’t drop by for a random social visit. Not without Teela.

“What’s happened?”

“It’s not an emergency,” was Helen’s gentle reply. “Or at least not yet.”

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“Don’t give me that look,” Tain said, before Kaylin could open her mouth.

“Why are you here?”

“Ask Mandoran.” Tain looked about as happy as Kaylin felt, which was unreasonable given that Barrani didn’t need sleep unless they were badly injured.

Kaylin, however, swiveled in Mandoran’s direction.

“Teela’s coming over,” he said.

“What happened?”

“Nothing yet.”

“Why is she coming over?”

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The two younger Barrani exchanged a glance. To Kaylin's surprise, it was Annarion who answered. "She's coming to ask Helen if she can move in for a while."

Kaylin turned to Tain.

"I haven't spoken to her yet," Teela's partner replied. His eyes were blue.

"I believe," Helen said, interrupting them before Kaylin could speak, "you can ask her yourself. She's almost at the front door."

"Don't look at me like that," Mandoran told Kaylin. "This has nothing to do with me. I voted against it."

"Against what?"

When Mandoran failed to answer, she passed the frown on to Annarion, who looked both defiant and uncomfortable. "I'm taking the Test of Name."

Tain's eyes darkened to a midnight blue, and if Kaylin hadn't been human, hers would have joined them. "You're *what*?"

"I'm going to the High Halls to take the Test of Name."

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Kaylin was not stupid, in spite of what many of her early teachers had believed. She could put two plus two together and end up with four. "If Teela is coming over to ask if she can stay for a while," Kaylin said out loud, "does that mean the *rest* of the cohort are coming to visit as well?"

"Not without your permission," Annarion replied, guilt shifting the corners of his eyes and mouth.

"Look, some of us think it's an *incredibly stupid* decision. But we know it's dangerous, and none of the rest of us have taken the Test, either. If he goes, we're not going to let him go on his own."

"Teela's taken the Test."

Mandoran exhaled. "Yes. We know. That's part of the problem. She can't come with us." He stared, quite

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deliberately, at his feet. Since this meant—to Kaylin—that he was trying not to look at anyone else, she frowned.

“She can’t go with you.”

“No. Not if she follows the customs and laws of the High Halls.”

Kaylin did look up then. “But Tain hasn’t taken the Test of Name.”

Silence.

Kaylin said, “Oh, no. *No*. I am *not* getting between the two of you while you’re arguing. You won’t kill each other, but the collateral damage will probably kill anyone who isn’t Barrani!”

“We are not arguing,” Tain replied. His voice was chilly, his eyes the same dark blue.

Annarion apparently also found his feet interesting.

Tain was not a Lord of the High Court. He was Teela’s partner, and Teela was. But the other Barrani Hawks were like Tain. A second class of citizen, a lesser class, in the eyes of most Barrani Lords. He’d never seemed to give a damn. But clearly, he did now.

She wondered who, among the cohort, had voted against Annarion taking the Test. Mandoran and Teela, certainly. But had any of the others?

“Yes,” she said, out loud. “The cohort can stay here as our guests. Given what happened with the two of you,” she added, looking at the Barrani who were still staring at their feet, “I want *some* of the city to remain standing.”

“They’ve been taking the same lessons we have,” Mandoran offered. “They learn what we learn.”

“Are they like you or like Annarion?”

“... We’re not sure yet.”

“Then they are *definitely* staying where Helen can keep an eye on them.”

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By the time Teela arrived at the front door, Tain, Annarion and Kaylin were standing in front of it. Mandoran hung back, but not with any real hope of avoiding a face full of blue-eyed, angry Teela, which is what greeted them when Helen opened the front door.

Her eyes shifted into indigo when she saw Tain. Tain didn't appear to notice, but he wasn't one of the cohort, and he'd lived in the real world—near Teela—for much longer than anyone else had.

“What are you doing here?” she demanded, with no grace whatsoever.

Tain didn't throw Mandoran to the wolves, which is clearly what Mandoran had been dreading. “I've heard that the cohort, as Kaylin calls them, is coming to stay.”

That wouldn't have been Kaylin's choice of opening words, but Kaylin was not Teela's partner.

“Please come in,” Helen said, before Teela could respond. “Kaylin hasn't eaten yet.”

No one had eaten yet. No one really felt like eating, either, as far as Kaylin could tell.

Teela and Tain quit what might have devolved into a staring contest as Helen ushered everyone into the dining room. They took their chairs as if chairs were weapons or armor. Teela even turned hers around so the back faced the table and she could fold her arms over it.

“Why,” she said again, “are you here?”

“I told you.”

“My friends are not your problem.”

“No.”

Teela's eyes narrowed; she turned to glare at Mandoran, who shrugged. Her words, however, continued to be aimed at Tain. “I don't want you to endanger yourself needlessly.”

“I'm not. I've always been far more cautious than you are.”

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This was arguably true, but Kaylin was not nearly suicidal enough to make the argument. She looked at breakfast as it appeared on her plate, and wondered if it would be safer if breakfast for everyone else—or at least the Barrani—could be finger foods for just one day. Teela was giving the cutlery the side-eye that suggested she might use it for something other than food.

“You are not taking the Test with them.”

“I haven’t taken the Test. I *can*.”

“You’ve never wanted to be a Lord of the High Court. And babysitting—”

“Hey!”

“—is not nearly a good enough reason to change your mind.”

“No. It’s not.”

“Tain—”

“The cohort are coming to Elantra. *Sedarias* is coming to Elantra. The High Court has maintained the polite fiction of joy at the rescue of the cohort.”

Teela said nothing.

“How long do you think that joy is going to last? Annarion is the bloodline heir. Karian is the bloodline heir. Mandoran is—god help his family—the bloodline heir. And *Sedarias* is the bloodline heir.”

Kaylin turned to Tain. “Wait, what do you mean?”

“Annarion is not the only person present who intends to take back what Nightshade lost. *Sedarias*, however, *would have* been the Lord of her line had she not been sent to the green. The others are technically heirs because of politics or deaths due to the wars.” He exhaled and turned to her.

“Is this really the time for a teachable moment?” Kaylin demanded. Tain continued to stare at her, which was his answer. “Fine. Their family lines—what are they, anyway?—have been ruled just fine since they were sent to

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the green. The Lords of those lines probably have no interest at all in being displaced.”

“I have no interest in reclaiming my family holdings,” Mandoran said.

“You said your family was gone!”

Mandoran shrugged. “As far as I’m concerned, they are.”

“The High Court would not agree,” Teela said, her voice dry as tinder.

Mandoran made clear what he thought the High Court could do with its disagreement.

“You are correct,” Tain continued, speaking to Kaylin as if there had been no interruption. “Those families have held power for centuries. The children of the green were a myth—a sorrowful myth, perhaps—one that could be safely used. Now they are a very real fact.

“Teela is Lord of her line. She has had centuries to establish her rule. She is secure enough in that rule to be a Hawk—an Imperial Hawk. But the alliances she’s built to maintain that power are going to shift.”

“There is no guarantee of that,” Teela said.

Tain didn’t bother to reply, but his expression made clear just how little he thought of her counterargument. And he took his life in his hands by continuing to address his words to Kaylin. “Teela will, therefore, be drawn into the drama of the Test of Name. As long as none of the cohort are Lords of the High Court, everything remains academic. If they are not Lords of that court, they cannot claim their inheritance. It’s *possible*,” he said, his emphasis bordering on sarcasm, “that the High Court could be talked into believing that Mandoran, Eddorian, and Karian have no interest in ruling. There is nothing in the Empire that could induce the High Court to believe that Sedarias does not.”

Sedarias was the name Kaylin heard most often, when Mandoran referred to the members of his cohort who still

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resided in the Hallionne Alsanis. Her opinion was either valuable or dangerous—but it was never dismissed out of hand.

“And this is dangerous to Teela because?”

“Because some of her allies will be directly—and badly—impacted should the cohort decide to reclaim what is technically theirs. If Sedarias remained in the green, she could finesse the situation; Sedarias was not Lord of the High Court. If Sedarias is coming to Elantra—”

“She’ll become a Lord.” If she passed the Test. “And she’ll attempt to secure her place as head of her family.” The family that had abandoned her.

“Yes. Teela is currently the cohort’s only toehold in the High Court; she is a Lord, she is the head of her line, and she carries one of the three weapons that were proof against Dragons. She’s already felt some of that pressure, and the—”

“Tain.”

Tain shut up. Kaylin could almost hear his jaws snap.

He didn’t give up. He retrenched. This time, however, he spoke to Teela. “What you will need, if they set foot outside the Hallionne, are allies at Court. You did not require those allies in that fashion before. I have never had a desire to be a Lord of the Court. It wasn’t worth the risk, given my own origins. It is worth that risk to me now.” He folded his arms.

Kaylin caught Mandoran by the sleeve before he could vacate his chair and sneak out of the room. *You brought him here*, she mouthed. *You can suffer with the rest of us.*

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Kaylin stared at the grim and silent Hawks. She was used to bickering and minor disagreements; she’d come to believe it came with the tabard. But this was different, and everyone in the breakfast room knew it. Someone had to

interrupt them. One glance at Annarion and Mandoran told her there was no help coming from that quarter.

She was enough of a coward that help was unlikely to come from her, either.

But there was a Dragon in the house, and that Dragon appeared, as if by magic, in the dining room doorway. Kaylin was almost positive that the magic was called Helen. Bellusdeo cleared her throat; Teela and Tain were probably aware of her presence, but were still glaring at each other across a suffocatingly quiet table. Since Bellusdeo was a Dragon, clearing her throat made a *lot* of noise.

It was Teela who turned toward her first, but Tain was quick to follow.

“Good morning,” Teela said, her eyes a martial blue that was only fractionally less dire than it had been when she was glaring at Tain. Although historically the Barrani and the Dragons had been enemies, Teela actually liked Bellusdeo.

The Dragon returned that affection. For Teela. She seemed to approve of Annarion, but Mandoran frequently caused her to exhale smoke. “Annarion and Lord Nightshade have only just stopped screaming at each other at the top of their Barrani lungs. I’d just as soon have a little bit of peace and quiet before things blow up again.”

“Lord Nightshade has merely accepted that he cannot change Annarion’s mind at this point. Do not think he has surrendered.” Teela seldom hesitated, but did now. When she started to speak again, she spoke to Helen.

“Mandoran has informed you—”

“That your friends are coming to visit? Yes, dear.” Helen could get away with calling Teela *dear*. Anyone else would have been picking up teeth. “And Kaylin has already offered you our hospitality at any time you wish to stay. I

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should, however, ask whether you would like to room with Tain.”

Kaylin cringed.

Teela said no at the same time as Tain said yes.

Bellusdeo’s grimace was exaggerated, but her eyes were gold.

“I would just as soon not involve him.”

“I’m involved.” Tain’s voice was curt. He was angry.

Helen rushed in to prevent silence from once again shrouding the table. “I will, of course, have rooms for you. You are allowed across my threshold without Kaylin’s express, explicit permission. She considers you—”

“Family. Yes. I know.”

“In the mortal sense, not the immortal one.” Kaylin knew mortal families that would have fit right in with the Barrani families of Teela’s acquaintance, but failed to point this out.

“In the Kaylin sense,” Teela said.

“That is the only one with which I am concerned,” Helen replied. “You are welcome here.”

Bellusdeo took a seat at the table on the other side of Mandoran. The smile she gave him was almost feline. “How many other guests will I be sharing a roof with?”

Teela’s answering grin was humorless. “Ten new guests, unless I can convince Annarion to change his bloody mind.”

“You are not going to convince me to change my mind,” Annarion said, finally joining a conversation that both he and Mandoran had managed to steer clear of.

Teela turned to stare at him, and to Kaylin’s surprise, it was Annarion who looked away. Teela had clearly chosen to reply to the statement in the privacy of their name bond.

It was, strangely enough, Mandoran who broke the silence. “Annarion was the youngest,” he said, looking at the table. “Nightshade was the eldest. Not the firstborn, but the eldest survivor of the war. He went to the Tower, and he

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returned.” He flinched. “I’m telling her. It’s not like she can’t find out.”

“Find out what?”

“Annarion had a sister. She was the middle surviving child. When it came her time, she went to the Tower to take the Test of Name.” He inhaled. Paused. Kaylin thought he was done.

He was. Teela, however, took up the slack his silence left. “She was the daughter of an ambitious family. Those who fail the Test, with one possible exception, have never returned. Annarion assumed—as we all did at the time—that she had died. He grieved privately; it is not the way of my people to otherwise discuss the failure of their own kin. I therefore know very little about her. If the rest of my cohort has become something other, something larger, than Barrani, they are nonetheless Barrani in thought. Had she died, nothing would change.”

This time, Annarion bowed his head. And Kaylin understood, in that moment, that Annarion *knew*. He knew the fate of those who failed that test.

Teela, seeing her expression, said, “Yes. Now he knows. Those who fail do not simply die; they remain where they fell. They will remain there until the creature at the base of the High Halls is destroyed.”

Her words almost a whisper, Kaylin said, “He intends to free the trapped.”

“The damned, yes. He intends to destroy the Shadow at the base of the Tower. He intends to free the dead. To be fair, he intends to free his sister.”

“...So, the reason—the real reason—he was so angry at Nightshade...” Kaylin lapsed into uncomfortable silence.

“No. You are not Barrani. The reason he is angry with his brother has been stated truthfully, and often. His brother

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chose to reject duty and honor by abandoning his
bloodline.”

“He was *made* outcaste, Teela. He didn’t choose it.”

Teela just shook her head and made that *you’ll understand when you’re older* face that Kaylin hated. “Annarion does like you, and I understand why.” She held up a hand. “I never had any qualms about leaving him in your hands. Or rather, I never worried about what you might do to, or with, him. All of my worry went in the other direction. Annarion is not a fool. Or rather, he understands why the Test exists. He understands that were the Shadow beneath the High Halls to escape, it would be a disaster that would make the previous attack on the High Halls pale to insignificance.”

“But?”

“But, yes. My cohort was sent to the green. It was sent to *be* transformed. The experiment was not successful in the eyes of the High Court of the time—but it is being argued now that it was a success.”

“By your cohort?”

“Yes. No one likes to feel that they are a failure,” Teela added, with a rueful smile. “Shadow does not hold the same terror for Annarion or Mandoran that it does for you or the rest of my kin.”

“They think they can destroy that Shadow.”

“They think they have a chance.”

“And if they don’t succeed? If, somehow, that Shadow can subvert them?” She turned to Annarion who was still studying his plate as if it fascinated him. “If the Shadow takes *your* name, you can do things—you can *all* do things—that no other Barrani can. The Shadow’s released at least one person we know of into the High Court.” She did not mention who, and no one asked. “But if it has you and your cohort as its agents...”

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Teela nodded, grim now. “Exactly.”

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Kaylin was technically a Lord of the High Court because she’d inadvertently taken the Test of Name—a test that she couldn’t really fail, except by dying, as she hadn’t *had* a name at the time. She’d seen what lay at the base of the Tower. It was a Shadow, and in its folds, it held the names of those who had failed. It held the substance of who they had been in life. Kaylin didn’t exactly believe in ghosts, but didn’t have a better word to describe it.

It had shaken her.

It had enraged her.

It had, as so many, many things did, brought her face-to-face with her own insignificance, and her helplessness. There was nothing she could do to disperse that particular Shadow, and nothing she could do to free the trapped.

The creature at the base of the High Halls was the *reason* the High Halls had been erected in the middle of what was otherwise a Dragon-ruled empire. But death wasn’t the worst of it, for the Barrani. He could *also* control those he chose to allow to leave the Tower, because he had their names. He knew them.

For years, for centuries, probably for millennia, the Barrani had been feeding their children—or themselves—to that Shadow. And Kaylin even understood why. What the Shadow could not take, what the Shadow could not mislead or distract, it could not alter. Those Barrani had a base immunity to the effects of Shadow.

That base immunity was necessary. She knew what would happen to the city, *her* city, if the creature was no longer imprisoned. The Dragons might be safe. No one else.

After a long pause, in which Kaylin’s drink practically congealed in her hands, she said, “So...they’re all coming here.”

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“Yes. Sedarias now feels that some exploratory testing is required.” Teela’s eyes were marginally less blue; Bellusdeo’s presence had shifted some of the tension out of the lines of her face.

More silence.

“We are aware of the danger—to others—if one of the cohort is subverted or controlled. Annarion was calling out to the Shadows without ever being aware that he was doing so. If he could be made to do so deliberately, the Shadow beneath the High Halls wouldn’t need to be unleashed.

“*If* this happens, the rest of the cohort could exert influence and possibly counter the control with controls of our own.”

“But to do that some of the cohort would have to remain at a distance.”

Teela nodded. She lifted a long-fingered, pale hand to her brow and massaged her right temple. “At the moment, the argument has devolved into who those people will be, and how much distance is distant enough. For obvious reasons, my friends will stay here if you permit it.”

Now, the disadvantage of having a Dragon join the conversation was made clear. Kaylin fidgeted but chose to speak. “While Bellusdeo is living here, the Emperor keeps a close watch on Helen. There’s no way he’s not going to know if a cohort of Western Barrani descend on my house.”

“That is the other concern.”

“She could just move out for the duration,” Mandoran suggested. “*I’m* seriously considering it.” He winced. “I can safely live elsewhere. And if Tain’s going to be staying here, I could stay in his old place.”

“Dear,” Helen began.

“Don’t ‘dear’ me. My entire life in the past week and a half has been nothing but argument, screaming argument, icy silence, and general condescension.”

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“I laughed at your bad joke yesterday,” Kaylin pointed out.

“Fair enough. I’d shelve that under general condescension myself, but I’m not mortal and don’t always understand how you think. I’m not that fond of the Dragon,” he continued. “But I’d just as soon not fight an angry Emperor for no reason whatsoever.” For Mandoran, this was progress. It implied that there were actual reasons *not* to fight Dragons. When he’d first arrived that would have been unthinkable.

Bellusdeo exhaled a stream of smoke. Her eyes were now orange, but Kaylin suspected that was due to the mention of the Emperor, and not Mandoran’s commentary. “I am not moving out.”

“I’ve had some time to get used to you,” Mandoran continued, dropping the third person ‘Dragon.’ “You’ve had some time to get used to me. Annarion—well, he’s Annarion. He practically considers you a friend. Not everyone is going to see you the same way.”

Kaylin now understood why Teela was massaging her temple. “You haven’t been defending Bellusdeo to your cohort, have you?”

“Don’t make me lose whatever appetite I have. Of course not.” Food appeared in front of Mandoran. He touched none of it. Kaylin, however, started eating, purely by instinct.

“He doesn’t consider it defending her,” Teela added. She gave the food in front of her the side-eye. There were many things Teela’s childhood had lacked, but food wasn’t one of them. She could ignore it. “The truth, however, is that we like Bellusdeo.”

“Speak for yourself.”

“Fine. I like Bellusdeo and Mandoran tolerates her. I understand what the wars cost her. She in turn understands what the wars cost me. Neither of us chose the wars. Neither

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of us were consulted by those who did.” Teela shrugged. “You saw what Mandoran was like when he first arrived.”

“You think the others will be like him?”

“No. Most of them have better manners. But the substance will be similar. They understand what we see in her. They also understand that the feeling is personal, emotional. They are likely to form their own opinions, but the forming might be, ah, fractious.”

Helen did not appear to be concerned. Since it would be Helen who would keep the consequences of ‘fractious’ to a minimum, Kaylin didn’t share Teela’s anxiety. Well, she did, but not about that.

“None of your cohort went to the Tower in the High Halls.”

“No.”

“None,” Mandoran added, “except Teela. But she did it later. And before you think she’s being selfless or anything, she’s not. Not entirely. She had problems readjusting to life in the Court, and she spent a lot of what remained of her so-called childhood under observation. She was tested constantly; the High Court knew what had happened to the others, and they were waiting to see that power manifest in Teela.

“She wasn’t exactly a *pariah*, but she was only accepted because her father was a very powerful man. Only those who were certain to survive crossing him made demands of her. You’ve always said the Barrani are arrogant.”

“When they’re breathing, yes.”

“Well, there were a lot of people who felt certain they’d survive. Time moves slowly for Immortals. But it does move. Teela hasn’t been considered an abomination or a subhuman liability for centuries.”

“...And if the cohort arrives in force...”

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“She’s too stubborn to abandon us, and we’re too stubborn to push her out.”

Since they knew each other’s True Names, Kaylin doubted that was even possible, but said nothing.

“You are not being fair,” Helen told him. She often spoke to Mandoran as if he were not quite out of childhood. “That is a natural part of her concern, of course, but you are not presenting it well.” To Kaylin, in the face of Teela’s silence, she said, “Teela is considering the political costs because she intends to preserve her cohort.”

“I think we’re capable of preserving ourselves.”

“Yes. So, too, is Lord Nightshade. Teela, however, does not desire that you all be made outcaste. As outcastes, you would naturally be denied the Tower—and the High Halls. As outcastes, no Barrani would be required to lift a finger should outsiders, such as the Dragon Court, be called upon to end your existence. If, over the next few centuries, you prove yourselves to be considerable powers, you will be, as Nightshade is, grudgingly accepted. But the cost of waging that war could be profound.

“And of course, if you are made outcaste, there’s a possibility that Teela will join you. It is not a guarantee. If she was willing to publicly disavow you, she would, given her history in the Court, be excluded from your fate.”

Kaylin had a few thoughts, then. Some of them could even be said in public—as long as public involved the Hawks, which was where she had learned most of the ruder words. “Someone has already made the motion.”

Mandoran’s smile, as he lifted his head, was bitter. “How did you guess?”

“Relatives of Annarion’s?”

“And the already outcaste Nightshade, yes.”

“When?”

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Mandoran shrugged. “Does it matter?” He made a face at Teela. “She was going to find out anyway.” Teela clearly made her reply in the silence of their name bond; Mandoran couldn’t be bothered. “She’s a *Lord* of the High Court, Teela. She has access to the Consort. She’s *seen* the Lake of Life. She’s considered the Consort’s emergency replacement. If she wanted to, she could find this out by taking a walk in the Consort’s garden!”

Teela relented. “Yes, *if* she wanted. How much of Kaylin’s desire strikes you as political? It wouldn’t occur to her to ask. She’s accepted at Court because she is so firmly outside of the power structure she does nothing to shake it. Start down this road, and she won’t even last the few measly decades allotted her.

“The rest of us *have* forever. We *can* wait. Kaylin has forty or fifty *years*.” Teela stood, her eyes a shade that wasn’t quite blue but was definitely as far from green as it could get. “I’m not asking for any of you to put your lives on hold indefinitely. I’m *asking* that you *wait*. A handful of decades isn’t going to change your lives.”

Mandoran glared at Teela. Clearly he’d heard it all before.

“You understand,” Kaylin began, but Teela lifted a hand.

“I understand everything in exhaustive detail. I have had enough notice to form a skeletal defense against the worst of the politics.”

“Sedarias thinks you’d be more successful getting information than Teela has been,” Mandoran told Kaylin. “Because of your position as emergency mother to the Barrani.”

There was a flash of blinding light that made the dining room vanish because Kaylin hadn’t had time to close her eyes.

“Corporal,” Helen said, in a more steely voice.

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Teela immediately said, “My apologies, Helen. The spell was not materially harmful.”

“No, I understand that. I know Barrani don’t require sleep, but in my long experience, they require some moments of privacy and peace. Come. I have rooms waiting for you.”

Teela’s shoulder’s sagged. “Affection,” she told Kaylin’s house, “is a curse and a terrible, terrible weakness.”

“So thought the people who built me,” Helen replied serenely. “I do not believe they were correct.”

“No?”

“There are reasons I am less than fully functional. I chose to destroy some parts of myself to preserve the parts I value. It was painful, and there are lingering regrets on the bad days. On the good days, I am grateful that I was sentient enough to be able to make that choice. Come,” she said again.

Teela quietly followed the Avatar of Kaylin’s house.

“And eat, Kaylin,” Helen’s disembodied voice added.