

CHAPTER 1

The Consort was coming to dinner.

Hurried attempts to cancel that dinner—for obvious reasons—met with no resistance. Unfortunately, they met with no response whatsoever. Kaylin had, with Bellusdeo's help, attempted to use the Imperial messenger service to relay news of the cancelation, but to no avail. The Consort was not within the High Halls. Kaylin had no idea where, exactly, the Consort was; she had last seen evidence of her presence in the Hallionne near the West March.

And no one in the High Halls apparently felt up to receiving a message intended for the Consort herself. They were conspicuous in their absence; according to the messenger service, the High Halls were practically empty.

Kaylin had other avenues of approach and, when the messenger service failed, chose to use them. She, unlike most of the mortals or Barrani in the Empire, held the True Names of a number of significant Barrani lords. She started at the bottom.

Ynpharion.

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“Kaylin, dear, don’t play with your food.” Helen’s Avatar was not physically in the dining room, but she kept watch over the occupants of the house. The house was her body, after all.

“I’m not playing with it. I’m eating it slowly.”

“I’ve watched you eat slowly,” Mandoran said, “and that’s not eating. Food is meant to enter your mouth. Which is closed.” Before Kaylin could snap at him, he added, “Most of us don’t mind if your mouth is closed. You’ve done nothing but swear all morning. And afternoon. And it’s not even your day off.”

This was not true. Technically it wasn’t *supposed* to be a day off, but she had been given leave to take a few, where “leave” in this case meant Marcus’s very rumbly suggestion. Apparently the upper echelons—the Lord of Hawks at the very least—knew about the upcoming dinner, and everyone considered preparation for said dinner to be of vastly more import than catching petty criminals.

Kaylin didn’t agree.

She did, however, find it vastly more stressful.

She had been given permission to cancel the dinner. She had not, however, managed to reach the dinner’s most important attendee: the Consort. If the Consort showed up at her door on the appointed evening, she was going to be welcomed, and she was going to be fed.

Bellusdeo seemed entirely sanguine about the visit, which Kaylin tried not to resent. Her eyes were slightly orange tinted, but that could also be explained by the presence of close to an extra dozen Barrani beneath Helen’s roof. She had expected the visitors—Teela’s friends from a very distant childhood—to be vastly more difficult about Dragons in their living space, but the cohort seemed to view Bellusdeo largely through the lens of Mandoran. And when that had become reassuring Kaylin didn’t quite know.

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They were therefore not worried about Bellusdeo. They didn't feel she was the biggest danger they currently faced. Since this was more or less true, Kaylin didn't ask; it also seemed rude to ask when Bellusdeo was sitting in the same room. Bellusdeo, however, didn't seem inclined to give the cohort any privacy; if they wanted privacy, they could stay in their own rooms.

Mandoran no longer considered alleviating boredom by heading out into the city streets. He wasn't bored, at the moment. Although the cohort could fall silent without warning, Kaylin was certain that the inside of their heads was one long, continuous argument, the subject of which—or one of the subjects—was the Consort.

Who was coming to dinner.

Sedarias was in favor of the dinner. Annarion and Mandoran were not. It wasn't clear to Kaylin how the rest of the votes were falling, but it didn't matter. Even if they voted universally against the visit, none of them could tell the Consort what to do. Any attempt to do so would probably start the war they had only narrowly averted.

Kaylin, however, was actually angry with the Consort. She wanted an apology from that august personage before she was allowed in the house.

Helen was politic; she had no opinion on the matter one way or another. In those exact words. Multiple times.

The Barrani—with the exception of Teela, also on brief leave of absence and also living in rooms Helen had provided—didn't really consider Kaylin's anger sensible or relevant. Any anger they now felt was pointed at each other and their current disagreements, whatever they were.

Teela *was* angry with the Consort. She was angry with Kaylin. She was angry with Annarion. Since she didn't expect to get any relief from venting that annoyance, she was currently most angry with Tain. Kaylin had

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suggested—very quietly—that Tain at least head into the Halls of Law for a normal day at work; Tain failed to hear her. Given the superiority of Barrani hearing, Kaylin took the hint.

So: Tain was at the dining room table—a place he frequently avoided—across from Teela, and frankly, given the color of his eyes, he wasn't any happier than his partner.

Bellusdeo was angry with the Emperor, who had strongly suggested that she return to the Imperial Palace for the duration of the cohort's stay, and all but commanded that she at least skip dinner with the Consort. The “all but” was the only reason the Dragon could be mellow, relatively speaking, at meals. Mealtime in the dining room resembled mealtime in the mess hall.

In all, it was easier to deal with criminals than it was to deal with friends. At least for the next few days.

Severn did not appear to be angry with anyone. Which was why he wasn't *at* Kaylin's place, of course.

Kaylin's familiar, perched on her left shoulder, seemed to have recovered from his emergency—and disastrous—trip to the West March; Hope was positively perky and cheerful. This didn't improve Kaylin's mood any.

Ynpharion, I know you're there.

I am currently occupied.

You can talk to the Consort.

Oh?

You can pass on the message.

He radiated frustration through the bond that connected them—a bond he despised and would happily remove. Sadly, the only sure way to remove it was to kill Kaylin. Or himself. And Ynpharion certainly didn't consider his own life to be of so little value.

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You fail to understand, and I must assume that failure is deliberate. You may pester me—and do—at your leisure. You hold my name.

She hadn't noticed that Ynpharion failed to pester her in return.

You could prevent that if you had an ounce more will and determination. You do not. The Consort, however, is not as weak as you are, and she does not lack will. She will speak to me when she decides she must; she will allow me to pass on messages that are considered dire emergencies. But even then, she commands me. The discretion is not my own.

But I can't get a message to her any other way!

Ah. And you feel this is somehow some oversight?

She didn't. Not really. But she held on to faint hope.

Ynpharion wasn't big on any hope that wasn't his own or the Consort's. *She will not receive the message no matter how often you send it. No one will accept that message, either. Her orders are quite clear on that subject, and even were they not, the High Lord has made his will known. Anyone fool enough to accept the Imperial message is not long for the Court.*

You invited her to dinner. Live with the consequences. Ynpharion's tone made clear that he wanted Kaylin to go away.

I invited her to dinner, Kaylin said, grinding her teeth because she didn't need to open her mouth to speak to him, before she attempted to imprison my friends. My home is their home in the immediate future. It would be beyond awkward to have her here now, and I can't even guarantee that it would be safe.

You can.

No, actually, I can't. If you'd like to haul your butt here and speak to my house in person, you'd understand that. There's some risk, if things aren't handled very, very

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carefully. The cohort isn't like the rest of the Court. Maybe Hallionne Alsanis could host, but given what almost happened to him, I doubt it.

Then perhaps you could convince your friends to forego the Test of Name. Should they choose to do so, I am certain the Consort would be willing to alter her plans. If you cannot convince your friends to forego that test, how can you possibly expect that I, or anyone else, could convince the Consort to forego her one opportunity to meet the cohort and assess the threat they pose in person?

"If you don't stop making that face, we're going to assume Helen's food has been poisoned," Bellusdeo said. "If you honestly feel it will pose that much of a danger, just fail to open the door when she arrives."

The silence around the table was an entirely different silence.

"I have oft wondered," Sedarias said, breaking it, "what form Dragon hospitality might take."

"This is where I live, but it is not my home. I am therefore not free to refuse a guest entry. Were I, I believe I would."

"Liar," Mandoran said quite cheerfully.

"You clearly don't spend enough time with Kaylin when she's in this mood. Satisfying base curiosity is possibly—just possibly—not worth it. As for Dragon hospitality in general, it is, as you suspect, somewhat different. If someone shows up at the heart of my Aerie with no invitation, we do not consider that a visit. We consider it an attack." Her smile had teeth in it. "I'm sure you can imagine the rest."

"I'm not sure I can," Sedarias replied, although she was grinning.

"Dear," Helen's voice said, "I'm not certain the table—or the room—will survive draconic transformation."

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“Then let’s hope it’s not necessary.” Bellusdeo was almost golden-eyed as she pushed herself up from the table. “If it makes you feel any better,” she said to Kaylin, which was almost a guarantee that whatever followed wouldn’t, “the Arkon is *also* coming to dinner.”

To Kaylin’s surprise, the Imperial messenger service delivered a parcel to her door. In it were two things. The first, a very, very thick pile of papers. The second, a letter written in a bold but tidy hand that made clear that if she lost *this* version of important information, dire consequences would be forthcoming. Given that the letter came from Lord Diarmat, Kaylin was left to imagine what those consequences were.

But she *had* lost the previous packet about the Barrani High Court, somewhere between Evanton’s storefront on Elani street and the West March; she’d barely had time to panic about the loss, the threat of the Consort’s visit loomed so large.

Mandoran had made his way to the door just as Kaylin was intercepting the package, and stared at it with bright-eyed curiosity. Had it not, in fact, been in Helen’s hands, it would likely have been in his. The cohort didn’t understand the concept of privacy. No, that was unfair. Teela understood it pretty well.

“What is it?” Mandoran asked, looming over Kaylin’s left shoulder.

None of his business. But she could barely think that with a straight face; saying it was out of the question. “The Consort,” she said, “is coming to dinner. This is a Dragon’s concept of what I need to learn in order not to offend her.”

Mandoran eyed the stack dubiously. “Dragons are weird. Sedarias wants to know what’s actually in it.”

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“Exactly what I said.” Kaylin exhaled. “Diarmat seems to feel that if I don’t understand the political structure of the High Court, I’ll cause offense no matter what I do. And this? It’s the Dragon Court’s understanding of the current hierarchy. A sort of who’s who. Or maybe who’s trying to kill who.”

“You’re not going to be surprised when I say she wants to see it, are you?”

“I’m not sure she won’t consider it comedy.”

“Given her mood? Comedy would be appreciated by the rest of us.” He winced. “She’s not happy with the available clothing in the house.”

“Helen can probably help out with that—but the clothing she makes doesn’t tend to stick around beyond the front gates.”

“Unless we’re eating in the streets, that shouldn’t matter.” He winced again. “I have to head downstairs.”

“Someone other than you getting stuck in the walls?”

“Very funny.”

Only after Mandoran had headed downstairs, as he referred to the shifting complex of rooms and stairs that comprised Helen’s basement, did Terrano appear. Of the cohort, he was the most silent, the most withdrawn. Allaron, the cohort’s giant, and easily the tallest Barrani Kaylin had ever met, usually grabbed him by the shoulder and physically dragged him to wherever the rest of the group was seated. But Terrano couldn’t join their internal banter—or internal screaming arguments, which was what Kaylin suspected was more likely—and she knew when Terrano was actually with his friends because they were all forced to speak out loud if they wanted him to hear what they said.

“What is it really?” he asked.

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“It really is a document that’s supposed to help me navigate the political undercurrents of the High Court. Or at least that’s what I was told. I’ve only managed to look at the first few pages.”

“Is a Dragon really coming to dinner?”

“If the Consort is, yes.” She exhaled. “We have a Dragon for dinner on most nights.”

His expression made clear that he knew this. He was still far wavier of Bellusdeo than any of the rest of the cohort, and it was clear that he found their reaction to Kaylin’s housemate confusing. Or wrong.

“The *other* Dragon is called the Arkon. I don’t actually know why, so don’t ask; he has a perfectly reasonable name, but Bellusdeo is the only person I’ve heard use it. He’s old, he’s cranky and he’d prefer to be walled into his library; the only thing that can dig him out of it is a literal fireball. Or Bellusdeo.”

“Why is he coming?”

It was her turn to grimace. “Because the Dragon Court doesn’t trust my political competence. The Arkon chose to come because Bellusdeo and Lord Diarmat don’t get along all that well, and having Lord Diarmat be my supervisor—in my own home—would be a disaster. Worse than a disaster. For me,” she added, seeing Terrano’s expression. “He’s my etiquette teacher.”

Terrano laughed; the laughter was brief. “You don’t think that’s funny.”

“No. Then again, I’m the one taking the lessons.”

“Doesn’t seem to be much of a teacher.”

Considering the source, Kaylin almost found this insulting.

As if he could read her thoughts, Terrano shrugged. “I don’t have to worry about my manners. There is *no way* I’m coming to dinner if the Consort is here.”

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Kaylin decided to change the subject. “Mandoran just headed downstairs.”

“Someone stuck in a wall?”

“He didn’t seem to think it was that funny when I asked, which probably means yes. Or worse,” she added. Terrano brightened and drifted—literally—toward the closet that led to the basement.

“I’m worried about Terrano,” Helen told Kaylin when the door itself had closed.

“Worried for him or worried about what he’ll do?”

“He has no intention of harming the Consort. He’s less sanguine about the Arkon, but that’s because he assumes that the Arkon may attempt to harm him. Or his friends. It is not a concern of mine,” she added. “Terrano is...not happy.”

“None of the cohort is particularly happy.”

Helen nodded. Because a messenger had arrived at the door, she’d brought out her physical Avatar. “I’m not certain we’ll be able to keep him.” At Kaylin’s expression, she added, “Unless he means to harm any of my guests—you—I’m not equipped to be a prison. And even if I had that inclination, Terrano is unusual enough that I’m not up to that task, not for long. He spent most of his life attempting to escape a Hallionne. What he learned over the centuries in the many attempts, I cannot easily counter.

“His thoughts are generally opaque—but I think that’s deliberate. He’s not afraid that I’ll hear him. Or rather, he’s not afraid that I will use what I hear against him. His interaction with Alsanis was extremely unusual, and he thinks of me—in some fashion—as a Hallionne.”

“And you’re not.”

“I am neither as powerful nor as extensive as the Hallionne. I have more autonomy than the Hallionne, which

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gives me flexibility that is somewhat foreign to Terrano. But no, dear, I'm not worried about that. I do not believe he will intentionally damage me. Sedarias has disentangled herself, and will be joining you shortly."

Kaylin, stack of papers in hand, headed toward the dining room.

Sedarias arrived without the rest of the cohort, but was joined by Teela and Tain. Although she was casually dressed—for a Barrani noble—she looked forbiddingly martial; had she shown up in plate armor, Kaylin wasn't certain she'd look any less intimidating.

"Mandoran says you have a mirror here."

"Helen?"

"There is one room in which mirror access is permitted; mirrors do not exist in any of the living quarters."

Teela took a chair and flipped its back toward the table before sitting; she draped both arms across the top of the chair and slouched—elegantly. When she wasn't eating, this was her preferred posture. Tain took a chair and sat in it stiffly, back straight against the chair's frame. This, more than the color of his eyes, made clear that the two were still arguing.

Tain intended to join the cohort in the Test of Name.

Kaylin couldn't, Severn couldn't and Teela couldn't. Nor could Nightshade, Annarion's brother. They had faced the test; they had passed it. The Tower would not allow them to go through the process again.

But when Kaylin had somehow made it to the basement of the High Halls, when she had seen what lay in wait there—and seen, as well, those who were trapped for eternity by its shadows—Evarrim had been there. And Evarrim was demonstrably a Lord of the High Court. If the

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Tower itself didn't open a figurative door for the supplicants, there *was* another way down.

There had to be. The Consort and the High Lord had been there.

Kaylin wondered how much of this she should tell Teela.

"I think she knows, dear," Helen's now-disembodied voice said.

Teela shot Kaylin a glare of midnight blue. Since Kaylin hadn't said anything, she thought this a tad unfair. "Don't start," the Barrani Hawk said. She looked pointedly at the stack of paper in front of Kaylin.

"You *want* to see paperwork now? Marcus will have a heart attack."

"Marcus doesn't have a heart. Sergeants are required to have them surgically removed. Now, spread them out."

"There's probably nothing here you haven't seen," Kaylin said, although she obeyed Teela's command. There was a *lot* of paper, all of it in High Barrani, a language not known for its precision. Or for its brevity, at any rate. "And even if there is, it's going to take hours—at best—for you to *find* it."

"That," Sedarias interjected, "is why I'm here."

"And no one else?"

"No one else wanted to be in the same room as Teela's foul mood." Elantran still sounded strange, coming from Sedarias, but Sedarias, like the rest of the cohort, used it whenever Kaylin was in the room. It wasn't necessary—Kaylin had a more than passable command of Barrani—but Mandoran had pointed out that there were things one could say in a foreign tongue one wouldn't say in one's mother tongue.

"And you don't care?" Kaylin asked. The papers seem to be divided into Barrani lines or lineage, and the hierarchical lineage was complicated. Not all of the members of any

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particular family actually bore the same name—there were alliances and offshoots of the main branches scattered everywhere, and some of the offshoots had roots in more than one significant family. Ugh.

“My mood,” Sedarias said with a sweet smile that nonetheless appeared to drip venom, “is equal, at the moment, to Teela’s.”

“So no one wanted to be in the same room as your mood, either?”

“Got it in one. Hand me that. No, not *that* one, the other one. The small stack under your right hand.”

Kaylin’s eyes drifted to the top of that small stack; she’d been trying to keep the hierarchical lines together, in as much as that was possible. *Mellarionne* was written and underlined three times. The triple underlines seemed to denote important family. Kaylin now classified them as “first rank.” Something old and just beneath the High Lord in importance to the Barrani—or at least the Barrani Court. She was pretty certain that Sedarias was of the Mellarionne family line.

“She is, dear,” Helen said.

“You know,” Sedarias said with a raised, dark brow, “I begin to understand why Mandoran thinks giving Kaylin his name—or *our* names—would be both practical and convenient.”

“Oh?” Teela said, because Teela absolutely did not agree.

“Living with Helen is very much like living with the named. There’s nothing we think, unless we’re very, very careful—” and her tone implied most of the cohort found that impossible “—that she can’t have access to if she needs it. Helen pretty much fills that function.”

“Helen,” Teela pointed out, “is in one location; it is not hard to avoid her, if it becomes necessary.”

“And it would be hard to avoid us?”

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“The word *hard* implies that it would be possible. I am against it, as you well know.”

“She’s saying that out loud,” Sedarias pointed out as Kaylin passed the intel on Mellarionne across the table, “because she expects that her opinion or her desire carries more weight with you than any of ours.”

“You agree with Mandoran?”

“Of course not. But this is possibly the first time I’ve really considered that he may not be an utter fool in this regard.” She had slipped into Barrani.

“Is there anything in there you don’t know?”

“Probably most of it,” Sedarias replied. The answer surprised Kaylin. “We’ve been shut away in Alsanis for nine centuries, give or take a few decades. It’s only in the past few months that I’ve been able to cautiously reestablish connections. Most of my early connections are dead now. Some are nonresponsive. I *have* information; I have contacts. But as I’m sure you can imagine, things have changed.

“How much, how markedly, I won’t know until we are invited to Court. At this point, we won’t be invited to Court unless and until we pass the Test of Name.”

“You’re certain you’ll pass.”

“You have doubts?”

About Sedarias? No. Not really.

“This is Dragon intelligence, not Barrani intelligence, but some of the information was clearly gleaned *from* Barrani.” Sedarias was frowning. “My brother is An’Mellarionne.”

“You were considered the heir?”

“The most likely heir, yes. It is why I was sent to the green. My family was considered bold, at the time; some called us reckless. But it is clear that Mellarionne, at least, survived and thrived. Ah, yes, very bold.” She smiled. It

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was not a kind smile. “I see we survived an attempt to take the High Seat.”

Teela frowned. “The Imperial intelligence—”

“It wouldn’t have been Imperial intelligence then,” Kaylin pointed out. “The Empire didn’t exist.”

“We don’t know when this information was gathered. I highly doubt it was gathered at the time of the attempt.”

“You remember it?”

“Clearly.” Teela offered nothing else. Kaylin had the suspicion that Teela would offer nothing that was not in the dossier itself.

“Were you involved in it?”

“What does the document say?”

“You were not An’Danelle at the time.”

Teela stiffened. “That is not the styling of my court name, as you are well aware.”

“It is not a styling,” Sedarias said—to Kaylin, who would have edged her way out of the conversation, and the dining room, given half a chance. “It is a statement of fact.”

“And perhaps when *you* are An’Mellarionne, you can call my personal choices into question.” Ugh. Teela’s eyes were definitely a darker shade of blue now.

“And does your line accept the obliteration of *its name*?” Sedarias demanded. It had the sound of an old argument. It was a new argument to Kaylin, who didn’t know much about the hierarchy of the Barrani lords. She knew that being a Lord of the High Court meant that you had passed the Test of Name; she knew that the Court in the West March did not *require* that their lords take and pass that test.

The An’Teela, An’Mellarionne, An’Danelle—which she promised herself she would never, ever use—were new to her. But she could read between the lines. If someone was An’Mellarionne—and that someone wasn’t Sedarias—it meant they were the head of the family, the first among the

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Mellarionne kin. Teela was called Teela; sometimes she was called Corporal Danelle. Danelle was her family.

But she was called An'Teela at Court. Kaylin had half wondered what the "An" before her name had signified, but assumed it was a pretentious Barrani styling. And apparently she had been wrong.

No, it seemed to imply that Teela was the head of her line. A line name she did not use. Technically, then, she *was* An'Danelle. And working as an Imperial Hawk. Kaylin understood that every Barrani family of note had a ruler, a leader. It was not that different from mortal, or at least human, families.

But the rest? Had never been relevant. She had a queasy feeling it was *all* going to be relevant soon. And she remembered that the Hawks, or at least the Hawklord, never, ever sent her to site investigations that required diplomacy and tact. Or Diarmat's punishing school of proper etiquette.

Putting Teela's and Sedarias's anger aside, Kaylin took a look at the documents Sedarias hadn't yet demanded.

After perusing too many pages of High Barrani, she realized that she didn't know the families or lines from which most of the cohort came. That was going to have to change.

Sedarias was simple: she was Mellarionne. She wasn't the head of her line, and she intended to change that. She had killed her sister—also not the head of her line, but probably working in league with her brother, who was. Probably. Kaylin had been an only child. Had Kaylin been born Barrani, she'd probably never have longed for siblings.

Annarion... She frowned. She was certain she'd heard his family name at some point, and since that family was the

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contentious issue between Annarion and his brother, she should remember it. She didn't.

"Solanace," Helen said quietly. "I don't believe he would be discomfited if you knew, or if I reminded you."

"He's not," Sedarias said, although she didn't look up from her reading. "I think Teela has his family's section."

"I do."

"Who's An'Solanace? And are they at Court?"

There was a long silence. It was long enough to be uncomfortable, and no movement punctuated it, which often happened when the cohort discussed an issue *before* someone opened their mouth. No, this was the silence of held breath. She had asked the wrong question.

"It is not the wrong question," Helen said softly. "But, Kaylin, it is at the heart of the conflict between Lord Nightshade and his brother."

"I thought the conflict was that Nightshade abandoned his family—but it was *his family* that kind of threw Annarion away."

"It was the head of his family, yes," Helen agreed. She paused, and silence descended once again. This time, there was more expression in it.

"Maybe I shouldn't have asked."

"It is relevant. And if you read the documents concerning Solanace, you will understand why."

Kaylin held out a hand. Teela, who had the document section, failed to move.

It was, as usual, Mandoran who picked up the broken thread of what had been a very pragmatic conversation until Kaylin's question. Kaylin jumped. Until he spoke, she hadn't realized he'd entered the room. Terrano followed. In ones and twos, so did the rest of the cohort.

The dining room was now a war room, with paper rather than place settings. The color of Barrani eyes was blue.

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“Karellan was Annarion’s uncle. He was ambitious; he had considerable power of his own. But he was of the line Solanace, and in as much as any ambitious man, he served its interests. After all, weakening the line you hope to take over is not doing your future self any favors.” This last was said without apparent bitterness.

“Annarion’s father died—honorably—during the wars. That’s the story we’re told. Then again, all deaths are honorable among the Barrani.” Terrano snorted. Sedarias looked like she wanted to. Mandoran ignored both, with the ease of long practice. “Nightshade became An’Solanace. There’d be no argument between Annarion and his brother if Nightshade had remained An’Solanace. None. Annarion believed that his brother was the better man in every way. Reckless, yes, but always for a purpose. Annarion would have come home, and he would have been happy. Nightshade would have welcomed him home without hiding a dagger behind his back or a new supply of poison.”

Kaylin looked to Annarion, whose head was now bent just enough that she couldn’t easily meet his gaze.

“Karellan thought that Nightshade was his superior, as well. He was a better man than his father had been. He had earned one of the three. He was liked and respected. Solanace was Nightshade’s far more securely than it had ever been his father’s.”

Annarion had stiffened. Mandoran now turned to Teela. “You were there for the rest. We weren’t. And even now, all we’ve got is Annarion’s anger. Oh, and an earful of Nightshade’s, as well.”

“If it isn’t obvious,” Sedarias added before Teela could speak, “we were all shocked by Annarion’s anger. We understood that his view of his older brother was possibly

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not entirely realistic. Annarion has never been as angry, in our years of captivity, as he has been under your roof.”

“Because Nightshade is here.”

“Because Nightshade is here.”

“But...Nightshade became outcaste...”

Teela said, “Yes. He was obsessed with Annarion—with his lost brother. He joined the Arcanum. He left the Arcanum. He traveled. He entered the fiefs—not as fieflord—and returned. He wished to understand the nature of the Hallionne, and also the nature of the green. Some of his travels, some of his research, some of his defiance of the High Lord—the former High Lord—rankled.

“And during the time that he did his research, Karellan remained at home.”

“What, exactly, was the pretext made for casting him out?”

“That, sadly, is none of your business. He will not make it clear to even Annarion. Perhaps the Consort can answer your question—but, Kaylin, *do not* ask her at dinner.”

Kaylin was silent for a beat, but she wasn’t finished. “Fine. So: Annarion is the heir, right. The direct heir.”

“He is heir to Solanace, yes. But, Kaylin, he is considered the last of his line.”

“But you said his uncle—” Kaylin stopped.

“His uncle is Karellan. When Nightshade was made outcaste, Karellan approached the High Seat and prostrated himself and offered the High Lord of the time the penitence due him for the treachery of Calarnenne—this much was public. But in great sorrow, he offered the High Lord the *existence* of Solanace itself.”

Kaylin frowned.

Mandoran said—out loud, “I told you.”

Annarion lifted his head, his eyes blue and narrow. “He did not kill what remained of his family; I believe there

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were two ‘accidents,’ but the High Lord did not require the death of every member of our family. What he required was the loss of the family name. Karellan, my former uncle, is not An’Solanace. No one is. I am the last of the line who bears that name.

“If the former High Lord ruled the High Court, I would not survive the Test of Name. My uncle is the first of his name; he is Karellan Coravalle. But all of his lands are the ancestral lands of my line.”

“What happened to the rest of your line? The other cousins?”

“They relinquished the Solanace name, and joined my uncle. They are Coravalle dependents.” His eyes were almost indigo, but that color softened. “Some may have chosen that over death.

“But I did not relinquish my name. I am the last of my line. I *am* Solanace.”

And this, she thought, was why his anger at Nightshade was so intense. It wasn’t just his own life that he had abandoned in his search for some way to free his younger brother—it was all of their lives. Their history. She frowned. No, she thought, the history was immutable. It existed no matter what.

Teela cleared her throat and lifted her chin, and Annarion cast her a grateful glance. “Karellan has a place of minor import in the High Court. He supported the High Lord of the time in Nightshade’s removal, but his influence did not increase; it decreased. Although the gambit was understood by the High Court it was nonetheless distasteful; Solanace was an old lineage, and a worthy one. To enrich himself, Karellan destroyed it.”

“I don’t understand why he didn’t just keep the line?”

“Nightshade’s removal was political. Had he been hunted as outcaste—had he perished—Karellan would have taken

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the name. But Nightshade failed to die. If he did not suspect his eventual fate—and I believe he must have been informed of the High Lord’s decision before it was handed down publicly—he was nonetheless a power to be reckoned with, on a purely personal level. Those who went to prove themselves against him never returned.

“And eventually he became fieflord, and the High Court could not touch him. We understand the function of the Towers,” she added softly. “And we do not interfere with them.”

“But—but—”

“Yes?”

“He can’t leave the fief.”

“He can, obviously. Has he not visited his brother here?”

“So Karellan was afraid he’d come back.”

“So we believe. He wished to—what is the phrase now?—salt the earth? The name An’Solanace had been stripped from him by the High Lord and the High Court, and Karellan relinquished all claim to any such name so as not to be associated with his disgrace. There was, therefore, no Solanace to come home to, because there were none who remained of Solanace.

“But Annarion is Solanace. He has not, and will not, give over that name; he does not intend to be the last of his line.

“Karellan is not Nightshade’s equal, but underestimating him at this juncture could prove fatal—to Annarion. Karellan would never be foolish enough to attack Nightshade; he’s been bold enough to demand the return of *Meliannos*, Nightshade’s sword, but the sword was earned by Nightshade, and he holds it until his death.”

“Even if he’s outcaste?”

“What would you bet on your chances of retrieving it from him if he doesn’t want to return it?” Her question was Barrani; her grin was Hawkish. “But his sword is a

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bargaining point should he ever wish to return to Court. And you understand why, while he is Lord of Castle Nightshade, he will never surrender it.

“Annarion, however, as Solanace, has the legal right to make claims to the lands which went, wholesale, to Coravalle. And the High Lord that rules *now* would, I believe, have some sympathy. Coravalle supported the previous High Lord, but he did not support the current one, when it appeared there would be contention for the High Seat.”

“So...he tried to support the current Lord of the West March?”

“Ah, no. He chose to support a cousin who had a reasonable claim and the right lineage; it was not clear to any observers that either of the two sons of the High Lord would succeed him.”

“So how much of a threat is Karellan, then? Or Coravalle? Technically, couldn’t Solanace and Coravalle exist side by side if they hashed out the problems with the estate?”

Sedarias snorted, but said nothing out loud. Teela pinched the bridge of her nose.

“Understand that while the Barrani claim power, they seldom allow it to be put to the test in a public venue. In this case, public means, in Elantran, ‘where anyone else can observe it.’ Karellan is first of his name, but head of what remained of Solanace. He has a daughter, Reyenne; she is his most active agent. There are scattered cousins, lieges. I have not tested myself against Karellan or Reyenne. Nor have they tested themselves against me. Reyenne spent some time within the Arcanum, but did not choose to struggle her way up that hierarchy.”

Great. Another Arcanist. But Teela had spent some time in the Arcanum in her distant past, and Teela was her friend.

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Being an Arcanist, or being a student Arcanist, didn't mean you had to be monstrous. It was just the likely outcome.

“So Annarion is likely to come up against Karellan and Reyenne if he stakes his claim to his family lands.”

“Yes. But not only those two; against just two, I don't think he'd have too much difficulty.”

“You said we shouldn't underestimate Karellan.”

“Yes, I did. But, Kaylin, they will *all* underestimate *us*.” Her smile was feline—but the cat it most resembled was Leontine.