



CHAPTER ONE



ELLUVIAN OF DANARRE DID NOT LIKE THRONE rooms.



For much of his life, throne rooms and audience chambers had been a grueling exercise in humiliation; humiliation was always the outcome when one had no power. His presence in a throne room was meant to emphasize that utter lack of power. He was called. He came. He stood—or knelt—at the foot of the platform that led to the raised throne.

There he had remained, while the disappointment of his lord made itself known.

There were significant differences between this throne room, this audience chamber, and the throne room of his youth. An act of war had given him a freedom he had never before possessed.

And the actor in that action occupied the current throne as a force of nature, uneasily caged by masks of civility and mundane governance. Elluvian had been announced; he had been given permission—or an order—to approach the Impe-



rial Presence. His steps across the runner that covered worked stone were as loud as his breathing.

Before him sat the Eternal Emperor, Dariandaros of the Ebon Flight. Neither name had been used by any of the Emperor's subjects for centuries. Elluvian, however, remembered. The only freedom he had ever known had occurred because of war. At the end of the third war, the Dragon Emperor had demanded oaths of allegiance from each and every Barrani adult who had survived it and intended to live within the boundaries of the Empire.

Elluvian had offered his willingly. He had offered it without reservation. Had the Emperor demanded Elluvian swear a blood oath, a binding oath, he would have done so without hesitation. The Emperor did not demand his True Name. Anything else, he could live with. Nonbinding oaths were just words.

He knelt.

“Rise,” the Emperor said. The undercurrents of his voice filled the vaulted ceilings above with a distinctly draconic rumble. Elluvian obeyed, meeting the Emperor's gaze for the first time; the Dragon's eyes were orange, but the orange was tinged with gold.

No discussion between Emperor and subject was private. The Imperial guard and the Imperial aides were omnipresent; an Imperial secretary or three were positioned by the throne to take notes where notes were necessary.

“Approach the throne.”

Elluvian was aware that of all the Barrani—each forced to offer an oath of allegiance to the Emperor directly—only a handful were allowed to approach the throne. It was not considered, by most of his kin, an honor. Were any of those





disapproving kin to be present, they would have obeyed regardless. Just as Elluvian did.

The Imperial guards stepped back.

“You look peaked, old friend,” the Emperor said, when the guards were standing as far from the Emperor as they were willing to go.

“You did not summon me here to discuss my health.”

“Ah, no. But I have been informed that I lack certain social graces, and it seems incumbent on me to practice.”

Elluvian raised a brow. His eyes were blue; Barrani blue denoted many things. At the moment, he was annoyed. Annoyed and tired.

“Very well. The Halls of Law seem to be having some minor difficulty.” When Elluvian failed to reply, the Emperor continued. “In particular, and of interest to you, the difficulty involves the Wolves.” Of course it did. The Halls of Law were divided into three distinct divisions: the Hawks, the Swords, and the Wolves. The only division of relevance to Elluvian was the Wolves.

Elluvian exhaled. “Again.”

“Indeed.” The Emperor’s eyes remained orange; the orange, however, did not darken toward red, the color of Dragon anger.

Elluvian bowed his head for one long moment. His eyes, he knew, were now the blue of anger and frustration. In a life considered, by the youthful Barrani and Dragon kin, long, failure was not the worst thing to happen to him. But consistent failure remained humiliating—and no Barrani wished their failures dissected by Dragons. He struggled to contain emotion, to submerge it.

In this, too, he failed.

“I have never understood why you wish to create this division of *mortal* Wolves. We have power structures developed





over a longer stretch of time, and we have not descended to barbarism or savagery. Those who have power rule those who do not.”

“That is what the animals do. Those with power rule those with less. We are not animals.”

Elluvian’s mood was dark enough, the sting of failure dragging it down in a spiral that had no good end. Humans, who comprised the vast majority of mortals within the Empire, were one step up from animals, with their unchanging, fixed eye colors, their ability to propagate, their short, inconsequential lives.

“I do not understand the Empire you are attempting to build. I have never understood it, and the centuries I have spent observing it have not surrendered answers.” The admission of ignorance was costly.

For a man who professed not to want to rule by power, his form of communication was questionable. He commanded, and those who had survived the wars and sworn personal loyalty to the Emperor—most Barrani, given the sparsity of Dragons by that time—obeyed.

Elluvian had been summoned. The summons was, in theory, an invitation, but Elluvian was not naive. The oath of service had weight and meaning to both the Emperor who had demanded it and the man who had offered that vow.

Mortals were not a threat to either the Barrani or the Dragons, but many of the Imperial systems of governance—the Emperor’s word—were most concerned with those very mortals. The Emperor had created the Halls of Law, with Swords and Hawks to police the mortals who vastly outnumbered those who rose above time and age. He had also created the Wolves.

“No,” the Emperor replied, his eyes no more orange than





they had been when Elluvian had approached the throne at his command.

“Why did you want to create a division of men and women as assassins?”

“As executioners, Elluvian.” A warning, there. “I am Emperor. My word is law. My judgment is therefore also law. They do not operate in secret; they are part of the Halls of Law.”

“I do not understand your law, as you call it.”

“No,” the Emperor replied again, gracing Elluvian with a rare smile.

“You tasked me—notably not mortal—to find those suitable to serve as your Wolves. I have done this for decades. For longer.”

“Yes.”

“I have long believed that you have no sense of humor whatsoever.”

“I do not find one useful or pragmatic.”

“But clearly, you must—if a very black one. Why did you devolve this duty to me? Why do you continue to do so? I have clearly failed and failed again.” There seemed to be no end to the probable failures; they stretched out into eternity in a grim, bleak act of humiliation.

“You are one of the few Barrani I have met in my long existence that I am willing—barely, and cautiously—to trust.”

“Then let me be your Wolf; you need no other.”

“Perhaps the word ‘cautious’ does not mean the same thing between our peoples. Am I using the Barrani incorrectly?”

Elluvian’s snort did not contain smoke, as the Emperor’s often did. “We do not, and have never, seen eye to eye in any discussion that involves your Halls of Law or the mortals it is meant to both employ and protect. I feel that you are merely changing the paradigm of power, of who has power, among



the mortals. I cannot see this change affecting the rest of us at all.

“Should you merely send me—or someone like me—”

“There is no one like you among your kin.”

Elluvian did not wince. “If you send me, I will kill *at your order*. I understand that you consider these mortals part of your hoard; I will not harm your hoard, except as you command. But I would be vastly more efficient than your fledgling mortal Wolves. When you—or one of your kin—sneezes, mortals die. That will not happen to me. If you wish my death, the outcome is not in question—but it would take real effort on your part.”

“All of this is true.”

“You have always been both humorless and pragmatic.”

That dredged a brief grimace from the Emperor. “Not one of my kin would consider my ambitions here to be pragmatic.”

“A fair assessment. I withdraw my comment. But surely within this plan of yours, there is room for some pragmatism?”

The Emperor had bowed his head—not to Elluvian, but rather, to thought. It was a thought that Elluvian did not fully understand, although he had once been told that he was capable of it, with time and effort. “This will be their world, this Empire of mine.”

Elluvian had his doubts.

“They will labor and build the lives that they will live; there is no other way.”

“Then let *them* choose.”

“I have not forced mortals to become a Wolf; no more have I forced them to become Swords or Hawks. They have a choice, and the choice will not be coerced. If they decline, they are free to walk out of the Halls of Law.

“But choosing who is offered the duties of a Wolf, as you have learned, is...complex. Wolves will be asked to kill, yes.



To kill at my command, yes—but to kill. Such a death does not bypass the judicial system—I *am* the judicial system. My word *is* law.

“It cannot have escaped your notice that among your kin there are those who enjoy the exercise of power.”

Elluvian nodded.

“There are, among your kin, those who enjoy, if not killing, then the slow death of their enemies. Ah, no, their victims.”

Silence.

“There will surely always be such proclivities among the mortals as well. It is imperative that such people not become Wolves, or the entire project will be a failure.”

“As it has been.”

“It has not all been failure,” the Emperor replied.

“If every passing day does not result in failure, failure is the end state. The latest difficulty is a telling example.”

“Yet before yesterday, the Wolves were exactly what they should be.”

“Clearly, the difficulty was greater than a simple *yesterday*.”

The Emperor nodded. “Failure does not generally please me,” he finally said. “We have built the Wolves, and they have served their function.”

“Until yesterday.”

“Or forty years ago. Or seventy. Or just over a hundred. One day, no matter how disastrous, does not destroy the years in between.” The Emperor raised a hand as Elluvian opened his mouth. “I will not release you from this duty.”

“I do not even fully understand this duty. It has been *centuries*, your majesty, and I am possessed of no better understanding than I was on the first day you made this my duty.”

“And you believe this is why you have failed? You believe that a different person could create Wolves that would never fail, never falter?”





Silence.

“You are wrong. And among the Barrani I have met, you are one of the few I believe might eventually understand what I wish this Empire to become.”

“The Wolves are individuals; they are not politicians. They are not powers. What lesson of value do you expect me to learn?”

The Emperor shook his head.

“You desire me to continue to recruit your Wolves.”

“It is what I desire, yes. It is also what I command.”

Elluvian bowed.

“Even for you, Helmat, this is in poor taste.”

Helmat Marlin, the Lord of Wolves, looked up from his paperwork to see the Barrani man lounging against the frame of what had once been an office door. The large splinters and chunks of wood that had constituted that door had been mostly cleared. The door had not, however, been replaced. Given the Wolflord’s mood, replacement would not take long.

It was not the lack of door—or its attendant frame—that was in poor taste. Helmat didn’t require a door to keep his various underlings away when privacy was mandatory. No, it was the head—absent the rest of a body—that occupied a prominent position on the desk at which he was working.

The Wolflord, as he was colloquially called by the various people who served in the Halls of Law, was a large man. He was possessed of one striking, almost defining visible scar, and a host of lesser scars; the former cut a line across his face, broken by the thrust of his jaw. It had paled to near-white with age.

“If you’d prefer, you can be the one to file the paperwork and meet with the Emperor to explain the difficulties of the past few days.”





Elluvian motioned to the desk. "It's my duty to find replacements for the two Wolves we've lost. Seeing the head of one of them on display in your office is not likely to encourage anyone to join."

Helmat shrugged. "It's enchanted. It doesn't smell."

"The blood does."

"Is that metaphorical?"

"Only if you have a mortal sense of smell. At the least, get your door replaced. I do not want to have to remove splinters every time I pass through what remains of it."

Helmat snorted. "You're Barrani," he said, as if that explained everything.

"What happened?"

Helmat had never been particularly good with words. He glanced, once, at Elluvian, but did not hold his gaze. "I didn't die. He did." The words were accompanied by a grimace more suited to a discussion of mosquitoes rather than people.

"I assume Renzo was attempting to ensure that things went the other way."

"I didn't ask."

"The door?"

"Was closed." *Closed*, in the Wolflord's office, had a different weight, a different meaning.

"Was he on the inside or the outside of that closed door?"

"Inside. En—is this necessary?"

"He was my student, just as you were. It pains me to see his head used as a paperweight."

"Does it?"

Elluvian smiled. It was a Barrani expression; sharp, cold. "What do you think?"

"I think one day you'll tell me why you ever agreed to serve the Eternal Emperor. How is Rosen?"





“I do not believe she will be engaged in ground hunts in the near—or far—future.”

Helmat did not curse; he seldom did when Elluvian’s appraisal matched his own. “We’re down a Wolf.” Renzo was clearly no longer considered a Wolf.

They were down two, but Elluvian did not correct Helmat. In his current mood it would be highly unprofitable.

“Who do you have for me?”

Elluvian had, three times in the past centuries, attempted to change the recruitment procedures of the Wolves. He had failed each of those times. Elluvian did not technically or legally command the Wolves, but he found them. Scouted them. Often trained them. Helmat Marlin, current Lord of Wolves, had final say; not all of those Elluvian brought into the office had been accepted into the pack.

But all of them had had, in Elluvian’s opinion, the raw ability to become Wolves and to survive it.

“One possible candidate.”

“Bring them in.”

This was, of course, easier said than done. Helmat was a Wolf of several decades; he understood what *possible* meant in this context.

Elluvian did not generally seek Wolves from the comfortable strata of human society. There were always exceptions; the current Wolflord had come from an older—for mortals—family, and his father was what passed for nobility. Had Elluvian been aware of his family and parentage when he had first approached the younger Helmat, he would never have offered him the job. And that would have been a mistake. He could see that clearly now—but decades had passed, and he had seen Helmat’s full measure in the interim.

The Emperor wanted soldiers.





The Wolves, however, were not soldiers. The Emperor's nomenclature preference aside, the Wolves in general were considered assassins by much of the populace.

In the view of the Barrani, the differences between the two, soldier and assassin, were slight and would be considered negligible. One killed on command. The other also killed on command. The difference would be in the small details: the soldiers congregated; the assassins did not. Where an army might be met with the forces of another army, the assassin was free to come and go as competence and strategic planning allowed.

Mortals seldom considered the two to be the same. Helmat, in spite of his experience and knowledge, did not. But Helmat appeared to understand what the Emperor desired of the Wolves—an understanding that continued to elude Elluvian.

The bare bones of it, however, were clear.

Find someone who might be molded into a soldier who could—and did—kill on command. Ah, no, not soldier—executioner. The Eternal Emperor had those: men who saw that death sentences were carried out, both cleanly and quickly. The Emperor did not call the Wolves his assassins; he called them his executioners. His mobile executioners.

There was no shortage of mortals who could, and did, kill. No shortage of Barrani who could, and did, either. But the Emperor had decided, for reasons that made sense to none of the Immortals of Elluvian's acquaintance, that the general formation of the power structure that Immortals understood was not allowed to occur within his Empire naturally.

In the Emperor's Empire, power was not to be the sole measure of worth. There was right, there was wrong, and laws laid out which action belonged in which category. They seemed arbitrary to Elluvian, an echo of the systems around which the Dragons and the Barrani built their societies. Right and





wrong simply meant: angers the Emperor or does not anger the Emperor—the person in power.

The Emperor, however, denied that this was the intent.

Elluvian was angry. He had felt low-level irritation—a mixture of resignation and anger—since he had entered the Imperial presence; it had grown steadily as he had reached the offices the Wolves occupied in the Halls of Law.

To see the head of Renzo displayed on the desk of the Wolf-lord had been something of a surprise, and not a pleasant one. Displaying the dead was not something the Barrani themselves were above—but in general, the display was more tasteful, less immediately raw. There were better ways to make a point.

Renzo's failure was not unexpected. If Helmat was Wolf-lord, he was not an open book; he could be both jovial and deadly as the occasion demanded, and his ability to deal with emotional fragility was almost nonexistent. No, what frustrated Elluvian was Renzo's decision. Observed pragmatically, Renzo had nothing at all to gain by Helmat's death. He would not become Wolf-lord.

Those who served as Wolves required two things: loyalty to the Emperor and his Wolves, and a complete lack of attachments outside of that. No children, no family. Where secondary attachments existed, blackmail and extortion also existed. Some men and women could accept threats to family as the consequence of their duty. Most, however, could not. In the end, if forced to endure it by that sense of duty, something in them broke.

Elluvian wondered what had broken Renzo—assuming that anything had.

He was dead. No answers would, therefore, be forthcoming, which was the second reason that Elluvian was angry. He could not gather that information in any efficient way;





he must investigate as if he were a Hawk, which did not suit him in any fashion. Helmat was unlikely to seek the Hawks or their aid; the death was an internal matter.

Rosen's injuries had all but ensured she would never hunt at the Emperor's pleasure again; she was willing to work in the office and willing to train those who could. That left the ranks all but unmanned. Mellianne was, in Elluvian's opinion, skilled but not yet fully come into the wisdom that might allow her to survive particularly difficult encounters. Jaren was the only functional Wolf because Helmat did not hunt.

The Wolflord never did.

This had not always been the case, but trial and error had made clear to Elluvian that the presence of the Wolflord in the office was a necessity. Hunts were, by their very nature, long and often complex affairs; it was not simply a matter of assigning a death and a "reasonable" completion time.

Mellianne was not yet ready, and even were she, she disliked Jaren. She disliked Elluvian as well, but he expected that; affection of any kind was barely part of her functionality at this point. She was, however, good at what she did, and it did not seem to change her markedly. If she hated or despised people as deeply as she sometimes professed, she could nonetheless *do something* about the worst of them. That was the lever that could be pushed: she was no longer helpless.

But her contempt for the helpless was a counterpressure that he had not fully been able to dislodge. Power, and the desire for power, were the province of the living. Even the beasts sought power and supremacy. The balance between feeling powerful and feeling powerless was a gray area. The path from powerless to powerful defined a mortal. Elluvian did not understand the inner workings of most such journeys.

His experience, much of it bitter, had taught him that it was the journey itself that created an Imperial Wolf. Those



who stepped on the wrong path, traveled the wrong byway, ended up as a head on the desk of the Lord of Wolves. He had not lied; he found the presence of the head there distasteful. It was, in its entirety, an accusation of failure.

Jaren was older now; younger than Helmat, but older than Mellianne and Rosen. Rosen's injuries, Rosen's lack of suitability, were a fact of life. But she had been an excellent Wolf. The life expectancy of the Wolves was short. Her injuries had probably extended hers into the foreseeable future. She would be bound to a desk. Jaren would train her to take on the tasks of organization and reporting, and Jaren would probably return to the hunt.

This, too, was not to Elluvian's liking. Jaren had once been his hawk. Helmat had been his merlin. Rosen had been his eagle. Hunting birds, all.

And perhaps because that was his personal metaphor, it was natural that they should fly, and natural that one or two, tasting the freedom of the sky and the imperative of that hunt, not return. Perhaps that was why the Emperor had called them Wolves and not birds of prey.

Elluvian could not understand why the name Hawks had been given to the division that was largely investigative; that would not have been his choice of name. Swords, though, he considered apt. It was, however, the tabard of the Hawks he now searched for as he walked through the streets of Elantra.

Ah, he thought. There.