

WFFM

CAST IN ETERNITY



01

Corporal Kaylin Neya was thinking about committing murder. She had been assigned her least favorite job: the public front desk of the Halls of Law. Her beat partner had once again been siphoned off to a different department. She tried not to resent either Severn or the Wolves, but it took way more effort than it should.

On paper, the front desk was a shared duty, which passed between the Hawks and the Swords, but Sergeant Keele was in charge of all front desk duties. She was pure Hawk.

If murder was committed in any district Kaylin patrolled, she'd be pulled from desk duty. Murder investigations trumped front desk work. The only downside was the Hawks weren't incompetent enough not to find the culprit, which would mean Kaylin would be out of a job she mostly loved and in jail. Or worse.

For the most part, front desk duty involved a lot of listening and taking notes; it seemed like busywork to her, and she'd been trained by a Leontine who *loathed* paperwork, and often destroyed his desks by clawing his way through the wood when he was forced to actually do any of it.

Kaylin, absent both claws and rank, had dutifully taken out the front desk's mandatory notepad. Records existed for a reason; the Records capture of these so-called citizen reports and queries—half of which were complaints—would be far, far more accurate than simple handwritten notes.

In theory the note-taking was supposed to give the people who came in with their various reports or concerns a sense of comfort; it meant the officer they were speaking with was actually paying attention. Kaylin had seen some of the notebooks others had left crammed in the front desk drawer. Attention. Hah. She wasn't much of a doodler to begin with, and understood on a visceral level that drawing weird caricatures of people who had serious—if completely unhinged—reports was not actually doing her job.

She therefore had a pad that contained written words that could be repeated in public in front of her when Mrs. Erickson approached the desk.

Kaylin's perpetual shoulder ornament had become almost invisible to the Hawks in Marcus's office, because she never left home without Hope. On most days, Hope seemed content to idle across her shoulders like a very inadequate shawl. He evinced no interest in the day-to-day functions of the Hawks.

Only on a few occasions did he deign to lift his translucent head to take a look around, and on even fewer did he consider whatever he saw interesting enough he felt it necessary to actually support more of his own weight by standing. Teela called him a *familiar*, but even her initial sense of caution had faded with time. Hope was Kaylin's—and like Kaylin, the older Barrani Hawk implied—was generally lazy unless the work involved was interesting or necessary. Necessary to Kaylin, that is.

For whatever reason, Hope lifted his head when Mrs. Erickson approached. To Kaylin's surprise, he then muttered



the equivalent of a mumbled complaint and pulled himself to his feet.

Mrs. Erickson was a constant—almost daily—presence. A silver-haired older woman with slightly bent shoulders and eyes that were clear as day in a wrinkled network of a face, she never came by empty-handed. If there was an actual Mr. Erickson, none of the officers in the Halls of Law had ever met him. Some were certain he didn't, or had never, existed.

Kaylin hadn't quite managed to work her way up to that kind of deep cynicism yet, although older Hawks told her it was only a matter of time. And while Mrs. Erickson could be difficult to deal with, it was mostly a patience deficit on the part of the Hawks. Mrs. Erickson had never approached the front desk brandishing a knife, a club, a fire iron, or, in one instance, a highly illegal magical device.

Nor had she approached the front desk demanding to see *someone in charge* while looking down her nose at the person who was manning the desk. She didn't consider the Halls of Law to be an extension of her personal fiefdom, and officers therefore her servants. As far as Kaylin could tell, the old lady truly valued the Halls of Law and the services it attempted to provide the citizens of Elantra.

Kaylin had grown up in the fiefs. Old ladies in the fiefs had a kind of grit, a kind of steel to the spine—they'd have to, to have survived for as long as they had, even the ones who appeared sweet in a place where sweetness was the exception, not the rule. It took strength to be sweet—it meant you didn't care if people thought you were a mark. Or a victim.

Kaylin had never been particularly sweet.

But she'd trusted it when she encountered it, or trusted it enough that she didn't immediately pull daggers and back off. Pulling daggers here, at the front desk, would be severely career limiting in any case, unless the visitor had run in heavily



armed and obviously intent on causing damage. Even then, it wasn't daggers officers were meant to employ, but the sticks and batons that were part of their beat uniform.

Neither of which would be necessary with Mrs. Erickson. She came armed with a basket, from which the scent of baking emanated. She never came empty-handed, and no one was fool enough to imply that the baking she brought was somehow poisoned.

Also: Kaylin's stomach spoke before she could.

Mrs. Erickson stopped two yards from the desk, her eyes widening at Kaylin. Or, more accurately, at the shoulder ornament. While the rest of the Hawks—and most Swords—had proven that familiarity breeds, if not contempt, then comfort, Mrs. Erickson was not a person Kaylin saw every day. She expected Mrs. Erickson to have words or questions, and was slightly surprised to hear what they were.

Mrs. Erickson smiled and set the basket on the desk. "You're here alone today?"

"My partner has meetings."

"Without you? How odd. But I'm glad you're here."

Kaylin found this mildly confusing because she had encountered Mrs. Erickson only once before, and as far as she knew, Severn always managed to avoid the damn front desk—which was annoying because she was certain he'd be *better* at it than she was.

Mrs. Erickson had baked soft buns with a hint of red at the edges—jam of some kind. She removed napkins from the top of the basket, and then placed two buns on them before offering them to Kaylin. "I should have made cookies instead—these are a bit crumbly and likely to cause a mess on the desk. I'm sorry, dear—I just wasn't thinking.

"But I was told that these would be welcome today."

And there it was. Mrs. Erickson had a ghost problem. Or



a several-ghosts problem. Although not all of her visits involved reports about the doings of said ghosts, most did in one fashion or another. Investigations had been done—this was Elantra, after all, and ghosts were not *quite* as ridiculous as they sounded on the surface. This wasn't to say that the Halls of Law believed in the existence of ghosts; rather, that there were many magical artifacts and echoes of older or ancient wars that somehow lingered, and the residue could cause confusion, panic, and, yes, a strong misidentification.

The Imperial Mages were sometimes interested in ghost reports, but couldn't be fussed to actually sort out which of these reports were the products of too much alcohol at the wrong time, and which were genuinely of interest. The scut work was therefore left to the grunts who manned the desk.

Mrs. Erickson's ghosts, however, had never become part of any case the Imperial Mages would find interesting. For one, they were remarkably mundane in both appearance and behavior; for two, their proclamations often involved the type of things that might annoy or disgust a well-bred Elantran old lady. Rats. An unexpected abundance of insects—cockroaches. Fruit flies.

Sometimes they involved the neighbor's dogs—which the Hawks discovered did not actually exist; there might have been other neighborhood dogs that were causing sleepless nights, but Mrs. Erickson's current neighbors didn't have giant, man-eating dogs. Sometimes the ghosts, however, had led to smuggling arrests, albeit in indirect and unexpected ways. No one expected ghosts to be able to suss out the value of the composition of *fabric*, of all things.

On the other hand, on the tiny chance that Mrs. Erickson was not being advised by one of the many ghosts that haunted her, Kaylin agreed with the reported recommendation. Whatever these were, they were *delicious*.



“You know my partner?” she said, hurriedly swallowing before she spoke. The whole “don’t talk with food in your mouth” was a lesson she hadn’t learned growing up. There had usually been an absence of food in that mouth.

“He’s the dark-haired young gentleman, isn’t he?”

Severn did have dark hair. So did Kaylin. Kaylin nodded, wondering if she should save the second pastry for later.

“He wears that very unusual belt; it’s striking and so bright. I think it’s lovely, if possibly slightly inappropriate for normal office wear. Oh, don’t mind me,” she added, slightly flustered. “My thoughts were elsewhere.”

Belt? Kaylin decided against saving the pastry and bit into it while she thought. So far, so good: no ghosts. Kaylin privately suspected that Mrs. Erickson was lonely. As far as anyone in the department knew, she lived alone, and if she had ever had children, none of them visited. Not that background checks of average citizens who were not in any way considered a threat were common—but Mrs. Erickson was, if slightly frustrating on busy, chaotic days, nonetheless well-liked.

Two years ago, the old woman had failed to enter the office. People had been slightly surprised at her absence, but thought little of it. But she failed to arrive the next day, and failed, again, on the third day. In a row.

Since Mrs. Erickson wasn’t young anymore, mild relief gave way to concern, and one of the Hawks finally went round to check up on her; her reports were filed with a clear address on them, and the address hadn’t changed in all the years she’d made her trek to the Halls of Law.

She had fallen down the stairs to the basement and had injured her leg. Not her hip, which Red said would have been far worse for a woman of her age, but her leg. It was sprained, not broken, and the Hawks had gone round to dredge up money to buy actual crutches, which they then took to her



home—along with a basket of various kinds of food, similar to the food that she generally brought with her.

But in the investigation, they learned that she was, and had been for decades, living alone in the small house. She had no pets—she said she liked both cats and dogs, but cats refused to stay in her home because it was haunted, and dogs required more physical energy than she had these days, where *these days* had been the case for as long as Kaylin had been with the Hawks.

People living alone for that long could find the isolation very difficult if they lacked either health or the energy to go out and socialize. Or the money. Going out and being social required money. Money for drinks, money for food, money to go see the open-air plays that were the only plays Kaylin had ever watched. There was very little that was free in the city. Kaylin wasn't certain what Mrs. Erickson did for money; she suspected it had something to do with sewing, knitting or similar activities, but hadn't actually asked. Mrs. Erickson was of a generation in which talk of money and money problems was considered socially very rude. Or so Kaylin had been told by one of the older Hawks who didn't mind manning this desk.

Kaylin was fine with lonely old women who brought baked bribes. It was better than people like Margot.

“You've noticed his belt, haven't you?” Mrs. Erickson asked.

Kaylin, mouth full, nodded. She was good at swallowing food in a hurry, which would be considered an essential life skill by most of the Hawks. “It's actually not a belt.”

“Well, no, I didn't think so, given how much it glows. It's magic, is it?”

The belt did not glow in Kaylin's vision. “I think it must be. But it's attached to two weapons on either end of the





chain, and it can be used—in an emergency—as a shield against magic.”

“Against magic?”

“Sometimes criminals are armed with magical devices. Illegal devices,” she added quickly. “A shield against magic can save lives.”

“I see. Well, I’m sure he’s an excellent partner, but I made note of him because of the...weapon.” She sat in the chair in front of the desk, not as if she owned it, but as if she was honored to be a guest. “But I’m glad you’re at the desk today, because I have a report to make, and it involves your partner.

“Some of my friends have noticed him, and I believe they’re concerned.”

Kaylin struggled not to ask obvious questions. As she reached for ink, she brushed crumbs off the desk. Mrs. Erickson offered a rare frown.

“You’ll get mice if you do that,” she told Kaylin, her lips slightly thinned—as if mice were worse than crime. Kaylin didn’t understand the visceral hatred some people had of mice. They were tiny vermin, and generally harmless; up close they were even kind of cute.

She mumbled an apology and promised to clean up later. Under the weight of Mrs. Erickson’s silence, later became now, which at least took her away from the desk in search of a broom and a dustpan.

Mrs. Erickson was waiting, with a much more usual-for-her expression, when Kaylin returned from her mission and the hilarity it caused. She cleaned up before she once again sat, pad in front of her, messy handwriting in the immediate future.

“I shouldn’t actually say they’re *friends*, as it feels quite presumptuous,” Mrs. Erickson then confessed. “These are not the ghosts trapped in my house.” Mrs. Erickson had tried to let those ghosts out, but nothing she had done had met with any





success. But the ghosts hadn't harmed her, and in one or two cases, they'd actually helped. Although Elantra was not the fiefs and crime wasn't a way of life, an elderly woman living alone in a house she actually owned had—for some elements of society—marked her as the perfect victim.

It was those elements that Kaylin was paid to discourage.

“These are new ghosts?”

Mrs. Erickson nodded. “Well, not new precisely—they seem to be free to roam the streets at will, but as I'm certain you're aware, most people can't see them.” She hesitated, and then asked a variant of the question Kaylin had expected to hear first.

“Are you aware that you appear to have a small ghost sitting on your shoulder?”

Kaylin realized, only belatedly, that Mrs. Erickson was talking about Hope. “Oh, he's not a ghost—everyone can see him. It takes more skill *not* to notice, especially when he's squawking.”

“I see.” She sounded as dubious as Mrs. Erickson ever managed to sound. “I'm sorry, I was just curious. Where was I? Oh, yes. The city ghosts. They seemed to take an interest in your partner.”

“Corporal Handred,” Kaylin said. “My partner is Corporal Handred. What kind of interest?”

“They drifted toward him, and followed him to see what he was doing. But that's not the point of concern—I mean, they aren't really bothering anyone, and they can hardly be credible spies if they can't report information to other people, can they?”

Kaylin agreed that no, they could not. Had the target of this particular report not been Severn, she wouldn't have given Mrs. Erickson's words much thought. But...Kaylin didn't see Severn's weapon chain as magical. She saw it as a belt, and sometimes



as a grossly inconvenient set of weapons. Severn only brought them into play when magic—and magical attacks—were almost certain to be involved.

Mrs. Erickson didn't come across as a liar. She didn't come across as sound of mind, either—but Kaylin was willing to give her the benefit of the doubt, probably because she seldom worked the front desk *and* she'd just been fed. If it was true that Mrs. Erickson saw Severn's weapon as brilliantly glowing, what did it mean?

"They wanted me to tell you—or perhaps to tell someone—that your young man might not be what he seems."

"What do you mean?"

"They're worried about him; they think the belt is a dangerous weapon that shouldn't be here."

Kaylin knew she should think before opening her mouth, but it was still a bit of a struggle if she didn't feel the consequences for failing would lead to immediate death or injury. "I'd like to speak to your friends."

"But you can't see them."

"No. And I can't speak with them—but you can. If you'd be willing, I'd like you to be an interpreter. A translator." She almost felt guilty when Mrs. Erickson's face lit up from within as she smiled. Mrs. Erickson often smiled, but her normal smile and this one were miles apart. Countries apart, metaphorically speaking.

"Now?" she asked, with almost naked eagerness, which did nothing for Kaylin's growing guilt.

"I can't leave the desk until the end of my shift—but when I'm done, I'll head over to your place. You're still on Orbonne Street? Number fourteen?"

"It's fourteen and a half. There is no fourteen." At Kaylin's expression, she added, "I don't know why houses are num-



bered the way they are. But I could wait until the end of your shift, if you want.”

“It gets pretty noisy in here, but if you’d rather not have Halls of Law visitors on your doorstep, you can. It’s entirely up to you.”

“My neighbors were a bit concerned the last time Hawks showed up at my door.”

But not concerned enough that they had checked up on an elderly woman, living alone, when they hadn’t seen her for a couple of days. Not concerned enough that they wouldn’t have ignored her injuries and her sudden disappearance. Kaylin knew nothing about the neighbors but instinctively disliked them.

“I’ll get you a better chair.”

“You want permission to do *what?*” Marcus growled as his claws drummed against his desk.

“I’m finished Sergeant Keele’s assignment, and I’d like to walk Mrs. Erickson home.” This was true; it was the stuff that she wanted to do before heading to that destination she left out.

“Mrs. Erickson has turned anyone who sits at the damn desk into driveling—”

“Sergeant,” Caitlin interrupted. “There’s an incoming mirror call.”

“It had better be important.”

“It’s the Hawklord. Private channel request.”

Marcus rose, Mrs. Erickson—and Kaylin’s pathetic request, as she was certain that was where the tirade had been going—forgotten. Hawklord mirror messages were generally taken in a room with an audience of exactly one: Marcus himself. Only after he’d vacated the office did Kaylin turn to Caitlin, the Hawks’ godlike secretary.



“Mrs. Erickson is a lonely woman,” that secretary said. Marcus’s disapproval was nowhere to be seen; Caitlin clearly approved.

“I know.”

“But she doesn’t generally require an escort to her home; the streets there are considered safe by our standards.” There was a tonal rise in the last few words although on the face of it, Caitlin hadn’t asked a question.

“She came in with an odd report. Yes, I know she always does that, but this one was less about lost shoes, lost puppies, and lost bits of sentimental jewelry.”

“You have crumbs on your clothing, dear.”

Kaylin reddened. “I want to actually do a tiny bit of investigating, and when I suggested it, she seemed really happy.”

Caitlin nodded. “Don’t get her involved in trouble.” The fact that Mrs. Erickson had come to the Halls of Law, and not the other way around, wasn’t lost on Caitlin.

“I know. I’ll try.” Kaylin turned on her heel, and then turned back. “She’s waiting for me, but—I need to ask an Imperial Mage a question or two as well.”

The gentle look of approval vanished from Caitlin’s face. “I mean it, Corporal. Don’t involve her in trouble she cannot handle.”

“That’s why I want to talk to an Imperial Mage. I’m not certain she’s not already in something that could be trouble she can’t handle.”

“I look forward to seeing your report.”

“It’ll be on Sergeant Keele’s desk by the end of the week.” Sergeant Keele didn’t like paperwork any more than Marcus did, but she understood the necessity of it and wanted it out of the way as soon as humanly possible. For the Hawks that was “end of week.”



Kaylin retrieved Mrs. Erickson from the waiting room adjacent to the front office. She noted, with a pang, that the basket the older woman was carrying was a lot lighter than it had been when she'd first set eyes on it. She knew this because she offered to carry it, and Mrs. Erickson agreed, thanking her.

Mrs. Erickson smiled. "I couldn't fit everything I baked into one small basket," she said. "And if you're walking me home, I have a few more goodies you could take with you to share with your friends."

Mrs. Erickson was dotty in the minds of most Hawks, but it was an affectionate term. It was certainly more affectionate than *psychotic* or *delusional*. Or drunk. While Hawks could, and did, get plastered while off duty, they generally tended to trust themselves not to allow drunken fury to lead to murder, attempted murder, or in one case, arson. At least, not for fellow Hawks or, in the latter case, the Halls of Law itself.

Home, however, wasn't going to be the first stop. Kaylin walked Mrs. Erickson out of the building; she paused to say hello to the on duty guards, and then quietly led the way.

Kaylin discovered that a twenty-minute stroll through the streets of her own city could take much, *much* longer than twenty minutes as she accompanied Mrs. Erickson. Clearly Mrs. Erickson was surrounded by the type of friendly strangers who knew her on sight. They might not know where she lived, and they might not be close enough to actually check up on her if she somehow failed to make an appearance—but she knew about them.

Or their children. Or their husbands or wives. Or their grandchildren. Or the trouble they were having with foreign merchants. She clearly remembered snatches of earlier conversations, and she clearly remembered small details—



like children's birthdays. Not only did she remember those, but she remembered which birthdays, which meant the age of those children.

Some of those people probably approached Mrs. Erickson because she was walking beside an obvious officer of the Halls of Law and they were concerned. But the conversations that unfolded in spite of Kaylin's presence, and the very natural way Mrs. Erickson engaged with them, either put them at ease or made them decide that Kaylin's role here was not a threat to the old woman.

No one, on the other hand, was as friendly with Kaylin as they were with the old woman whose mostly empty basket she was carrying. Mostly became empty; Mrs. Erickson clearly had reserved some of that baking for chance meetings with younger children. Their parents did not seem to be suspicious at all of the contents.

An hour and forty-five minutes later, having run the gauntlet of friendliness, Mrs. Erickson stopped walking without also readying conversation. "It's here," she told Kaylin. She frowned. "Sometimes they aren't here, though, and I didn't make any arrangements to meet with them."

"Do you ever make arrangements to meet with them?"

"Not often," Mrs. Erickson confessed. "It tends to make people uncomfortable if they see me, because they assume I'm talking to myself."

Since this was a reasonable assumption by any measure, Kaylin nodded.

"Sometimes I do it anyway, though. If I feel the need to visit the Halls of Law to make a report, it does help to have details."

It didn't really, but Kaylin kept this to herself.

"And you're here with me, so it's less likely to cause people concern if I'm speaking with you. Ah, there he is."



Kaylin stared at the spot in the street which Mrs. Erickson seemed to be indicating. She'd come to a stop near one of the public wells. Everyone Kaylin could see was carrying a couple of buckets, some on sticks suspended across their shoulders to balance weight, some by hand. Most weren't concerned with anything but their place in line or the companions who had come to the well to get water of their own.

She saw no people, none of the ghosts to which Mrs. Erickson so often referred.

Mrs. Erickson's smile was touched with a hint of sorrow, possibly at the thought that the invisible people with whom she interacted were dead. "And there she is—she tends to be more chatty. I'm not sure if they are—or were—married, but they really are a lovely couple."

Kaylin nodded, which seemed safest. But she was curious. She assumed—they all assumed—that Mrs. Erickson was delusional, but not in a way that caused harm to others. Given the delusions that did, they accepted hers. What if she wasn't? What if she was seeing things that others simply couldn't see?

She had seen Severn's weapon chain in a way that Kaylin had never seen it. Maybe she wasn't the first, but she was the first to mention it.

Kaylin, who had not taken a step forward when Mrs. Erickson had gone to greet her invisible friends, poked Hope, who had remained more or less standing on her shoulder. Hope lifted a translucent wing and smacked Kaylin's face with it to indicate his annoyance, but left it across her eyes.

Mrs. Erickson was not, as Kaylin and the rest of the Hawks had assumed, harmlessly delusional. Or if she was, Kaylin had just fallen into the well of the older woman's delusion.

She could clearly see, through Hope's wing, a young man and a young woman.

