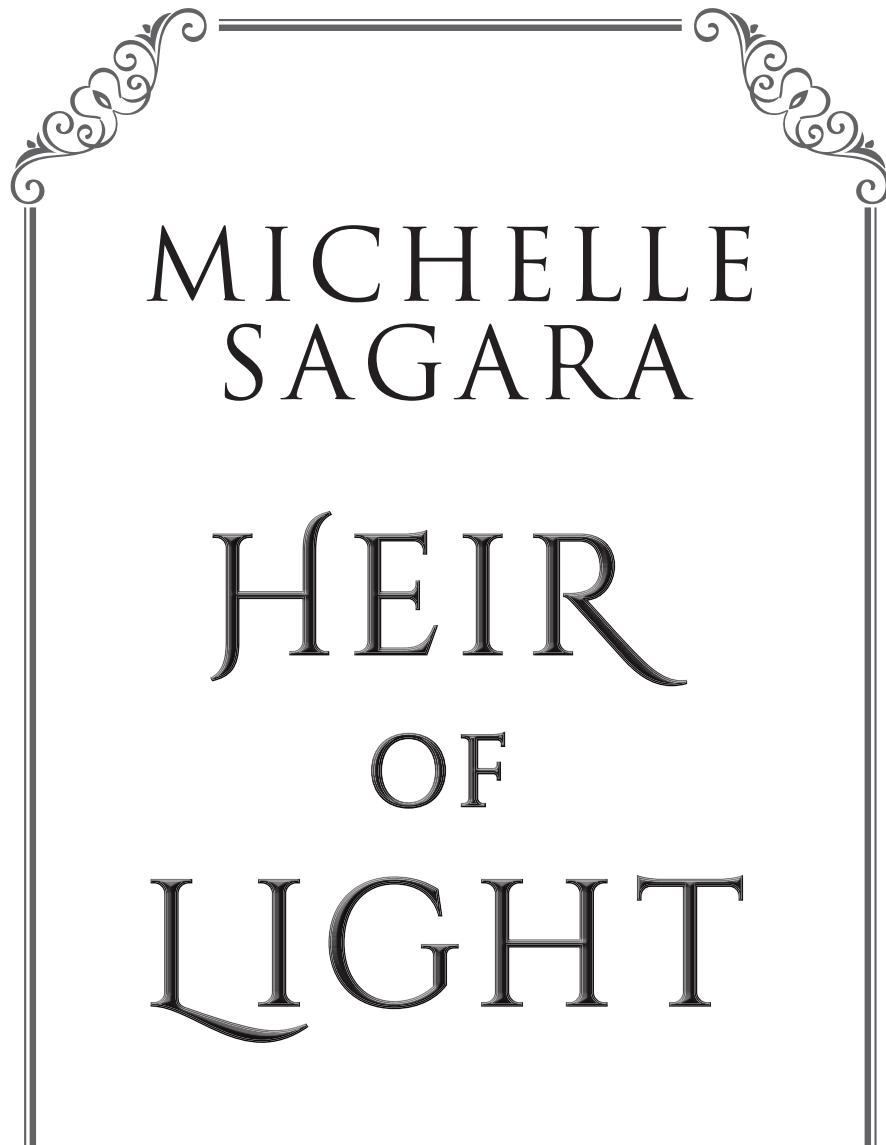


HEIR  
OF  
LIGHT





MICHELLE  
SAGARA

HEIR  
OF  
LIGHT

 MIRA



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Heir of Light

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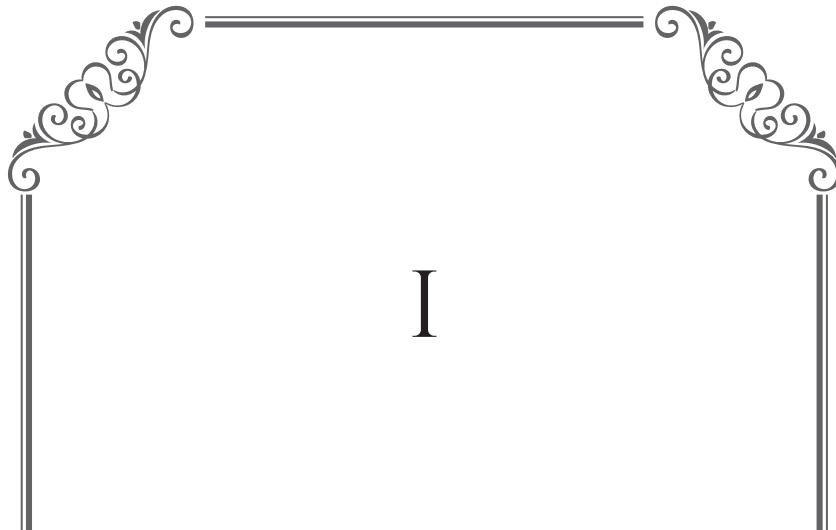
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The Academia required students. Apparently, it also required vast quantities of paperwork, much of which appeared to be stacked in teetering piles on the chancellor's desk. The chancellor in question eyed those piles with narrowed eyes. Lannagaros had a large desk, although it was almost buried at the moment beneath bureaucratic detritus.

"I do not suggest burning them," the voice of the Academia said, tone dry as good tinder. "Some of those papers are student applications."

"I am aware of that." It was not the student applications that the chancellor wanted to reduce to ash. Students were the life's blood of the Academia; their presence gave Killianas, the sentience behind the Academia's many buildings, strength.

An influx of students, however, required teachers. Professors. Experts in their fields of knowledge.

Lannagaros's choice—at the start of his tenure as chancellor—had been limited. Barrani scholars came, of course; the Barrani had famously long lives and memories, and if most had not attended the Academia in its golden years, they had heard of it many, many times.

Lannagaros was currently inquiring into two possible Dragon scholars—both of whom had chosen the long sleep some centuries past. It was Imperial custom—and law—that those who slept remain undisturbed in their chosen slumber; Dragons did not always wake gracefully, and if they were startled into their new surroundings, could be quite proactively defensive. He had requested permission to disturb, or attempt to disturb, that slumber. The Emperor had yet to make his decision.

Lannagaros had accepted a handful of mortal scholars with far less pickiness than he had similar Barrani professors; he felt that their presence would prove a comfort to those mortals among the student body, given the number of mortals who comprised it.

This had not, in at least one case, proven true.

But now, on his desk, he had over three dozen applications and requests for professorial positions, all from humans. Some of the names he recognized; some, he did not. Of the nearly forty requests, only two had family names that were not immediately familiar to a lord of the Dragon Court, and he set those aside for further investigation.

His sigh had smoke in it.

The interest of so many people of note in the human caste court was not a coincidence. None of these scholars had shown any previous interest in the Academia. Some of these scholars were Imperial mages. He had a natural suspicion of the Arcanum, but many of the current Barrani professors had been trained and schooled in higher magical arts in that very place.

Some of their Arcanum confederates had carelessly experimented in a fashion that could have become literally world-threatening.

“Their studies within the Academia could be more easily curbed. The Arcanum was never hosted within a sentient building,” Killianas said.



“The Barrani tend to avoid sentient buildings, where at all feasible.” The chancellor’s very toothy grin was possibly petty; the High Halls from which the caste court ruled the Barrani was now subject to a similar sentience, which had been trapped for almost a millennium in its effort to contain a dangerous Shadow imprisoned at its heart. The Barrani who wished to be lords of the High Court had no choice but to subject themselves to the inspection and knowledge of the new High Halls.

Killianas agreed. “Mortals would not avoid them in the same fashion.”

“They would, if they were wise.”

Killianas cleared his throat.

“Ah, present company excepted, of course,” the chancellor added. “You have more knowledge of the students than I. Would any of these possible applicants be a reasonable choice?”

“I have less knowledge of the world outside of the Academia than you, and would defer to your knowledge and wisdom. I can, however, protect the students.”

“You can protect them from some things—but demonstrably that protection has been flawed; you are not yet what you once were, and you lack power. That power will grow as the student body does, but professors and scholars will be required before then.” He exhaled smoke.

“Do be careful not to singe the applications,” Killianas said.

As Lannagaros had only made that mistake once, he found the reminder unnecessary. “Will Robin be safe?”

It was Robin who was their current concern.

Robin was the legal head of a family that had power and position in the overly populated—in the chancellor’s decided opinion—human caste court. Gardianno. Robin’s mother, father and siblings had perished over a decade ago, and the investigation into what were clearly murders had been halted by the human caste court, much to the annoyance of the Emperor.

If the Emperor was to be so annoyed, why had he bothered to create the laws of exemption and the racial caste courts at all?

“That is unfair,” Killianas told the chancellor. “You are aware that he did so to bypass possible war with the Barrani. It was not safe to battle so close to *Ravellon*.”

“The Barrani caste court does seem a practical necessity. Of what use are the other caste courts?”

A hint of dark amusement colored Killianas’s tone. “I believe he meant the laws to apply to *all* citizens of the Empire. What was granted to the Barrani therefore could not be withheld from the other, less powerful races. It was not thought that the mortal caste courts could present a credible threat; I am certain any surveillance or security concerns are focused on the Barrani.”

Laws of exemption applied when victims and perpetrators involved in a crime belonged to a single race. The racial caste courts could decide—and execute—punishments in accordance with their customs. But any member of that race could apply to the Imperial Court—and the Halls of Law—for a full investigation, overruling the caste court’s findings. Thus had the laws of exemption been written by the Eternal Emperor. No such requests had ever been received from the Barrani; those who might throw themselves on the justice of the Imperial Courts wound up dead.

If Robin chose to do so, he could request a full Imperial investigation of his family’s murders, which would be in the hands of the Halls of Law and their Hawks. If he chose not to do so, the case would remain eternally closed. The human caste court had already resolved the case to their satisfaction; they had no desire to see it reinvestigated.

There was only one person, one victim, who had the power to launch that new investigation, and he was a student at the Academia.

Thus the influx of new professors, or at least their applications.

It was clear to Lannagaros that the murder of Robin’s family—which Robin himself had barely survived—had been



carried out by Robin's uncle. But a crime of that magnitude could not have been orchestrated alone. The chancellor had no doubt that were Robin's uncle, Grannick Gardianno, to be blamed for the crime in its entirety, the humans might keep their distance. Grannick, the legal holder of the Gardianno seat, was comatose. Lannagaros privately thought he would remain that way.

Grannick Gardianno had a son who was of age. That son, Seldon Gardianno, in the absence of Robin, would assume his uncle's seat on the caste court. Robin, however, was no longer absent. The Gardianno seat was Robin's by rules of inheritance.

But Robin was vital to the Academia. Although he was legally the heir to Gardianno, he had spent the majority of his life in the streets of the warrens; he knew very little—if anything at all—about the power structure of the human caste court and its many, many lords. If Lannagaros had believed the Barrani caste court was needlessly overpopulated, he repented. The human caste court was worse. The Imperial security forces had little information to offer. In the Records of those forces, one might be forgiven for assuming that the human caste court numbered no more than a dozen.

"I believe one or two of the applications you have on your desk involve etiquette and manners," Killianas said. Two sets of papers rose until they were level with the chancellor's eyes. "It is true that few of the humans studying in the Academia would naturally choose to take such classes, but I believe Robin will require them."

"Robin hasn't decided that he wants to become Lord Gardianno."

"Robin has little choice. It is not the title or the seat that is of relevance; those are merely political frippery. It is the duty and responsibility of the Gardianno that must be fulfilled. Someone else could assume the political seat—but the property on which the manor is situated must remain in Robin's control."



It was not in Robin's control now, and they both knew it.

The chancellor rose. He knew the duty and the title were tightly entwined. Robin had very little knowledge about Grannick's family, and next to none about his cousin; a faint memory or two, no more.

The pressing concern—the requirement to accept and hire professors—was urgent, and entirely in the chancellor's hands. The reason the decision was difficult to make, though, was Robin. He could not blithely and carelessly hire people who meant to harm Robin. He could hire people who meant to *influence* the boy—that was the norm in any social interaction that involved the upper echelons of any hierarchy.

“We need more information,” the chancellor finally said. “I will head to the Imperial Palace and request that that information be made available to us.”

“Shall I inform An’Teela?”

The chancellor’s eyes darkened. “Is she here again?”

“Yes. She has not attempted to speak with Robin—but her presence is not required in order to do that. She can approach Robin through Serralyn or Valliant. Or Terrano.”

“Terrano isn’t a student.”

“No. He is far less easily contained than any of our students.”

When the chancellor exited his office, An’Teela and her partner in the Hawks, Tain, stood just outside the office doors. Both were corporals, and both wore the Hawks’ tabard.

The halls were seldom as quiet as they were now; stone tended to bounce voices along walls and high ceilings. But many of the students preferred to avoid the Law, especially when in Barrani hands.

Lannagaros was ill-pleased. “I believe I told you that any discussion of legal matters will have to wait until exam period is over.”



“You’ve been saying that for weeks, yes. Exams, however, are all but finished for the student body, and we would like to book an appointment to speak with Robin should you deem an appointment necessary. You are reluctant to allow us to speak with Robin without your direct supervision.” It was, of course, An’Teela who spoke.

Or Teela, as she was called while in Hawks’ uniform.

“You may book an appointment. Robin has one more exam and should be allowed a grace period of a week before he has to endure any further testing.”

“You don’t wish us to involve Robin at all.”

“I do not. As must be clear to you now, the Academia is not fully functional. Robin’s theoretical position in human society is at odds with his experience. He has not been political in his life; politics is a game of power, and he had—until extremely recently—none, even by human standards.”

“And you do not wish to give him the choice.” Teela’s eyes were a shade of blue that the chancellor considered unfortunate.

“He has chosen to be a student in the Academia. He has not chosen to become a political pawn in a tussle for power in the human caste court. I understand the laws of exemption. I know they are extremely unpopular in the Halls of Law. I do not wish to take the risk of exposing him to a paradigm with which he has no experience; I would not expect him to survive it.”

“His parents and his siblings were murdered,” Teela replied. “Were I Robin, I would want their murderers to be brought to justice.”

“Such as it is.”

“Such, indeed, as it is. If he chooses to do so, we can reopen the investigation into their deaths—and into the web of the human caste court, should that court be involved.”

The chancellor exhaled smoke.

“If we are investigating, he will be granted Imperial protection for the entire duration.” Teela’s eyes remained dark.

“I am a member of the Imperial Court. I am aware of just how efficient that protection is. Mortals are fragile.”

“Perhaps, given the size of the Dragon Court, you have forgotten just how political intrigue functions. I assure you, however, that I have not. If Robin does not wish to have the investigation reopened, we will abide by his decision. But you cannot imagine that he will be safer for it. The caste court, and his enemies on it, will already be in motion once word of his existence has escaped.”

“And I am certain it already has.”

So was the chancellor, given the sudden influx of willing experts who had applied to join the Academia.

Teela stepped forward, the softness of her tone belying its intensity. “If we investigate the caste court because of the murder of Robin’s family, the human caste court will be forced to be more subtle in their attempts at sabotage.”

Sabotage. A pretty word for murder.

“The moment it is clear that Robin has *requested* that investigation be done by the Halls of Law, subtlety will not be the concern of those who wish the investigation to remain closed.” The chancellor exhaled smoke.

“He is safer in the Academia than he would be almost anywhere else. And safety is not his only concern at the moment. We could take him to a far more secure location, but not without his consent.” She exhaled; were she a Dragon, there would have been smoke. “Serralyn is very attached to Robin. She will do what she can to ensure he survives any attempt on his life.”

“Valliant will stand by Serralyn, even if he does not consider Robin important in the same fashion she does. And Terrano is likely to protect him as well, if it comes to that.”

“Barrani do not consider mortals to be much of a threat. You might make clear to Serralyn that Robin is in danger—but if



the danger comes from humans, she is far less likely to take it as seriously as she might were his enemies Barrani.”

Teela’s smile showed teeth. “You assume that his enemies will only be human.”

The chancellor’s eyes narrowed—and darkened. He lifted his inner eye membranes to mute the brighter shade of red. This was not a conversation he wished to have while standing in the public halls.

“The Barrani are oft entangled in the worst of the human caste court schemes. Even here, when the Academia was slowly awakening, Barrani were involved.”

“It’s the Barrani you want.”

An’Teela was willing to put Robin at risk because she wanted legal permission to hunt down the Barrani. The chancellor’s eyes were not going to be any less red by the time this conversation was over.

“Were Robin not Gardianno, I would remain unconcerned. The human caste court is comprised of humans, and their tenure is brief by necessity. But where things ancient and sorcerous are involved, the Barrani are often found in the shadows.”

This time, when Lannagaros exhaled, there was fire.  
Neither Teela nor Tain even blinked.

“It’s like she’s trying to piss him off,” Terrano said as he lay sprawled on the bed. Robin’s bed. Raven had made him take his shoes off first.

“I don’t think that’s her main goal,” Serralyn replied. She sat, back to wall, on Raven’s bed—but she’d taken her shoes off when she entered the room.

“Look—I’m not political enough that Sedarias will allow me to visit the High Halls in her company, but even I would know better than to say what she said.” Terrano was an open book, and at the moment, he’d been turned to the page of disgust.

“She’s not wrong.”

Robin surrendered. He’d been attempting to study, but exams seemed the least of his current problems. It required more focus than his Barrani friends were going to allow. “What is she saying this time?”

“Oh, same thing as last time. And the time before. And the time before that. One exam stands between you and an official meeting—if the chancellor’s of a mind to grant it.”

“Are we betting?” Robin asked. He knew the discussion between the two Barrani friends was only being held in spoken words because of his presence. Teela’s part of the conversation, however, was coming from somewhere else.

Given Teela’s strong interest in reopening a closed investigation, Robin could guess where she was. Or at least who she was with. What she needed to open that investigation again was his stated *desire* that the investigation, closed at the request of the human caste court, be reopened.

His parents had been murdered. His older brother. His sister.

It was a lifetime ago for Robin. It was barely any time at all for the Barrani. Robin had almost been killed. He was an interested party; he was the only person who had the legal right to ask the Halls of Law to reopen an investigation closed at the request of the human caste court.

*Don’t you want their killers to be brought to justice?*

The question echoed in Teela’s absence. Robin had grown up in the warrens. His version of justice, his belief in it, had been shaped and formed there. The Hawks that came into the warrens were largely Barrani; no other Hawks were guaranteed to be safe. The denizens of the warrens eyed the Halls of Law with suspicion and, in many cases, contempt.

Law in the warrens was about power.

The Halls of Law didn’t have any. Barrani Hawks were avoided, but people didn’t find their presence *as* offensive. Barrani looked down on *any* human, not just the poorer ones.



Robin had no interest in human politics. He'd listened in on enough arguments about Barrani politics to believe that politics was a short plank over a large ocean. Sedarias, a close friend to Serralyn, Valliant, and Terrano, was political. If anything happened to anyone Barrani in the Academia, she was interested—and she assumed, as did her friends, that injury and death had something to do with Sedarias's attempt to establish herself as the ruler of her family line and its satellite families.

Robin couldn't personally see Terrano as political. But Sedarias was important to Terrano, and the Barrani visitor was willing to do whatever was necessary to ensure both her survival and her success.

Robin had no friends that were invested in his fate in the same way.

Not even his best friend, who was currently seated at her desk, examining keys. The Barrani had learned quickly that they could sit anywhere—floor, bed, Robin's desk—except in front of Raven's desk. Her desk was where she sat when she was examining her latest treasure. In this case, it was keys. A large key ring's worth. Robin turned away from the Barrani discussion and headed toward Raven.

"Where did you get those?" Robin asked.

"Found them."

"Found them where?" They weren't dusty or rusted. They didn't look like discards.

"The floor." She wasn't interested in conversing; she was interested in the keys. Raven had been beside Robin as he'd grown up. She'd never had any qualms about stealing. Robin always had, but he knew now that that was the vestigial outcome of an early life lived outside the warrens, where starvation wasn't an issue. They weren't in the warrens now; here, being caught stealing could become a serious problem.

"Which floor?"

She snorted. She was probably rolling her eyes. "Look at the *keys*," she told him, as if the keys were far more important

than trivial questions about how she'd come by them. She never participated in any of the more political discussions, deeming them irrelevant at best, annoying at worst. To Raven, Robin was *the Gardianno*. The political stuff was beside the point.

But to Raven, the duty of the Gardianno was extremely, fundamentally important. It was in the basement of the Gardianno manse that she had slept, for want of a better word; it was Robin's mother, the Gardianna, who had freed her and given her the command to protect Robin. He had been so young, he should have starved or died. Raven had made sure he didn't.

But she'd been just as small, just as helpless, as Robin had been; they'd survived by the skin of their teeth. Or so he'd once believed. He wondered if she would have continued on if she'd failed to keep him alive. Would she have returned to the place in which she'd been sleeping and listening for the forceful emergency command that had awakened her?

He knew she wasn't genuinely young, although visually she appeared to be the same age as Robin himself. But it was hard to believe she was old or even, as Giselle had implied, ancient, especially when she was focused on something that had caught her attention. Mostly, it was glass. But sometimes it was different. Today: keys.

She had a child's intense focus; when something caught her attention, it was the *only* thing that mattered.

He wasn't certain he believed she'd *found* the keys. Or rather, that she'd found them on the floor. She wasn't *good* at lying but had no qualms about trying. She also wasn't good with words, with the use of spoken language. She could understand any language—he envied her that—but she sometimes failed to understand the subtleties inherent in, say, Barrani speech.

She considered subtlety to be a waste of time. Then again, she considered offended people to be mildly inconvenient, no more. How people viewed her wasn't her problem, but theirs. Whoever they were.



Robin wished, on some days, he could be more like Raven. And on other days, keys.

Terrano wandered over, clearly done with the conversation that was, by his expression, still ongoing. “What are you looking at?” he asked.

“Keys,” Raven said promptly. Of the Barrani who called themselves the cohort, Terrano was the person with whom Raven was most comfortable.

“I can see that. Keys to where?”

Exasperated, she said, “I *don’t know yet*. I’m trying to find out.”

Terrano glanced at Robin and mouthed, *By looking at them?*

Robin shrugged. If anyone could do it, it was Raven. “She’s not normally interested in keys. She can pick locks way, way better than I ever could.”

Terrano shrugged, not impressed. He was extremely unusual, even for a Barrani; if he wanted to, he could just walk through locked doors. Or walls. “If you don’t want to talk to Teela, you’re going to have to leave your room soon. She’s arguing with the chancellor. Well, no, not *exactly* arguing. They’re being appallingly polite at each other, and both of them are getting more and more irritated with each sentence.” Terrano’s grin was infectious.

If Robin hadn’t been certain he was the subject of their not-quite-argument, he might have found it amusing, as well. Dragons and Barrani had a long history of war—and perfect memories. They didn’t generally get along.

But he *was* the subject, and he knew it.

“What do you want to do?” Terrano asked in a far more serious tone. “Serralyn and Valliant believe the decision should be yours.”

“Corporal Danelle says the decision is mine, as well.”

“Yes, but Serralyn *means it*. Teela just means the *correct* decision should be yours.”

“And you’re on Serralyn’s side?”

“More or less. It won’t harm us, so it doesn’t matter.” By *us*, he meant the cohort. “Listening to Teela might hurt a bit, because Sedarias is beginning to get annoyed.” He winced. “Scratch *beginning*. She’s annoyed.”

“At what?”

“We’re having a bit of trouble at court—our court, not yours—and she’d like us to concentrate on that. It’s much more likely to involve safety in the immediate future. Or lack thereof.” He turned to Raven. “Why keys?”

“Talk to Robin,” was the sullen reply. She shifted position in her chair so that her back was fully facing Terrano. Terrano laughed, shaking his head. Most people didn’t find this particular aspect of Raven amusing. They found it rude, at best. This hadn’t been a problem in the warrens.

It had become much more of a problem in the Academia.

“I can’t believe the Dragon thinks classroom presence is mandatory for her.” Terrano tried to get a better look at the keys. “You haven’t answered the question. So let me put it this way. We’re not asking because we want to pressure you—I mean, Serralyn and I. Teela doesn’t really think of it as pressure, either. If you were Barrani, there would only be one response.”

“Oh?”

“Make damn sure that you’ve got adequate protection, and demand that the investigation be reopened. Now. Also: make sure to take names of all those you’re certain were involved in both the death and the planning, and kill them in the least humane, most public fashion you can.”

“That’s illegal,” Robin reasonably pointed out. “And she’s a Hawk.”

“True. But most Barrani crimes that involve only Barrani aren’t illegal, according to the caste court. I don’t know if it would work the same way for humans—we’re all pretty sure the Halls of Law were created for the sake of humans in this city. And the human caste court clearly *has* intervened when



murderers and victims were both human—they just don’t do it very often.

“I mean, *most* crimes in your city are exclusive to humans, there are so many of you.”

Fair enough. “So, if your parents were murdered, you’d demand the Halls of Law investigate?”

“In my case, sure—the murderers are generally executed and dropped off at the Halls of Law as corpses to prevent such an investigation.” He grinned. “It’s a fast way to get them executed.”

“And you’d be safe?”

“I’d be hunted for a bit, but with less intensity. Probably. And actually, no, I wouldn’t care. My parents are already dead, but even if they’d died recently, I wouldn’t consider it my responsibility to avenge them. They discarded me first.”

“Then Teela—”

“She considered it her life’s ambition to avenge her mother’s death. But her mother didn’t throw her away—she tried to protect her until the end. It’s why she died.”

“Did she get her revenge?”

“Oh yes.” Terrano’s smile was soft and unpleasant. “But that left her with a few centuries of no goal at all. I think it’s why she joined the Hawks, in the end.”

“Her goal became justice?”

Terrano laughed again; from across the room, Serralyn joined him. Valliant might have chuckled, but as usual, he was mostly silent. “She was bored out of her mind, and she knew joining the Hawks would tweak the noses of the High Court.

“But she knows you loved your parents; she knows you were there when your mother died. She knows that you know who killed her. If your parents had been like ours—or rather, like most of ours—she wouldn’t expect your choice to be so singular.”

“So, it’s not just about the Halls of Law?”

“It is, in part. But given what we’ve learned about Gardianno, she thinks it’s necessary. She doesn’t expect you to survive if you don’t start rattling the cages. If the Halls of Law is involved in the investigation, some of the rattling will make your life infinitely worse—but some will cause people to step back entirely, because they don’t want to be implicated as an accessory to murder.

“If she believed you’d be safe without investigation, she probably wouldn’t be so hell-bent—that’s the right phrase?—on reopening it. She wants permission to make their lives miserable, because she’s certain they’re going to try to end yours.”

“Are you certain?”

Terrano shrugged. “I’m certain they’ll try. Look, I’m Barrani. We live and breathe power politics. But not all of the humans do—if they did, the city would be in a constant state of war. Or it’d be empty, because when Dragons lose their tempers, things burn.

“Most of the humans I’ve met don’t really want power in the same way. But it’s the human caste court and its styling of ‘lord’ that’s the threat, and I’ve never met anyone involved with the human caste court.”

“That’s not true,” Serralyn said from across the room.

Terrano actually flushed. “. . . I wouldn’t say I knew them well—but they were a lot more like Barrani court lords.”

“Why were you involved with the human caste court?” Robin asked.

“It doesn’t really matter anymore.”

“But it might. If you met with members of the caste court, it means you knew how to interact with them, right?”

“There’s a reason Teela wants an investigation,” Serralyn said. She had joined Terrano. “Look, lords of the human caste court have been involved—peripherally—in a lot of things that could cause real trouble. I mean, your uncle, for one. The Academia, for another. If they’d had their way, none of this would be here now.”



“And the people Terrano met?”

Serralyn rolled her eyes. “They were, as usual, trying to find some method to become immortal. Terrano lied to them, and they believed him. Sometimes people only hear what they want to hear; they disregard everything else.”

“But why did he try to meet them?”

“We were all still trapped in the Hallionne in the West March, and we wanted our freedom,” Terrano replied. At Robin’s frown, he added, “The Hallionne are sort of like Killian. They’re buildings—but they’re sentient. They’re unlike Killian in that they were never damaged or abandoned, and they serve as sanctuaries of a kind. But they can serve as prisons and jails if necessary, and . . . it was considered necessary at the time.”

“Why?”

Terrano shrugged. “Things happened.” Serralyn glared at him, and he exhaled. “I told you Teela’s mother was trying to protect Teela until the end, right?” He waited for Robin’s nod before continuing. “She was trying to stop the ceremony—the *regalia*—from being performed. We were considered children. We were too young to be exposed to it. Teela’s father killed her mother—and all of the people who sided with her mother.”

“The *regalia* is supposed to empower those lucky enough to be affected. When the green offers the *regalia*—”

“What is the green?” Robin glanced at Serralyn when he asked.

Raven snorted. She was probably rolling her eyes.

Terrano didn’t snort, but he was frustrated. Robin felt ignorant. He’d long accepted his ignorance within the Academia. Ignorance could be alleviated. It was the biggest of reasons to be here. He told himself that as he waited with less patience than he usually showed.

“We don’t know,” Serralyn said. “The green is a power contained in the West March. It’s not a power that can



be deliberately harnessed by our kin. We believe it to be sentient—but not in a way that allows communication with people like us.” Her *us* included Robin. “It has borders and boundaries that exist in the West March—that’s where Teela’s mother’s family was from. There may be other borders—but those are the ones we know. The green has always existed. There’s no historical beginning. Any research done has been allowed by the green; there are some people who cannot find their way in.

“But when the *regalia* is offered—it’s a type of story, and it’s a complicated ceremony—people *are* allowed to enter. Some gain strength or power, but we don’t understand the mechanism. If there are changes, they’re subtle.”

“But not with you and your friends?”

Serralyn nodded. “We were too young. Teela’s mother knew—that’s why she tried to save Teela. There are old laws and old rules. We were just too young. But the lords from the High Halls wanted to empower the young. We were brought to the green. We heard the *regalia*. We changed. We changed enough that we were considered a threat, a danger, to our kind. Too much of a danger to dissect and study.”

“We were imprisoned in the Hallionne at the heart of the West March.” She exhaled and silently handed the conversation back to Terrano.

Terrano picked up the explanation, although his gaze had strayed to Raven and her keys. “The only person who could leave the Hallionne was me—and that took hundreds and hundreds of years’ worth of practice. We were just trying to cause as much difficulty as possible in the West March, in the theory that it would distract the Hallionne enough that we might make a break for it. I could leave. I spent some time observing the Barrani, and then more time observing powerful humans—the caste court, and those who were members of the Arcanum. I offered them information. Some of it was even true. Not the immortality part, though.



“They caused some trouble, which is what we wanted.”

“Would you recognize them now?”

Terrano shrugged. “. . . yes. Those that survived.”

Robin filed that away. Terrano was visibly uncomfortable, which was unusual. “But . . . you’re here now. So, you did escape.”

Serralyn nodded. “And all of this is a digression. If you allow it, if you *request* it, the Hawks will reopen the investigation into the deaths of your family.”

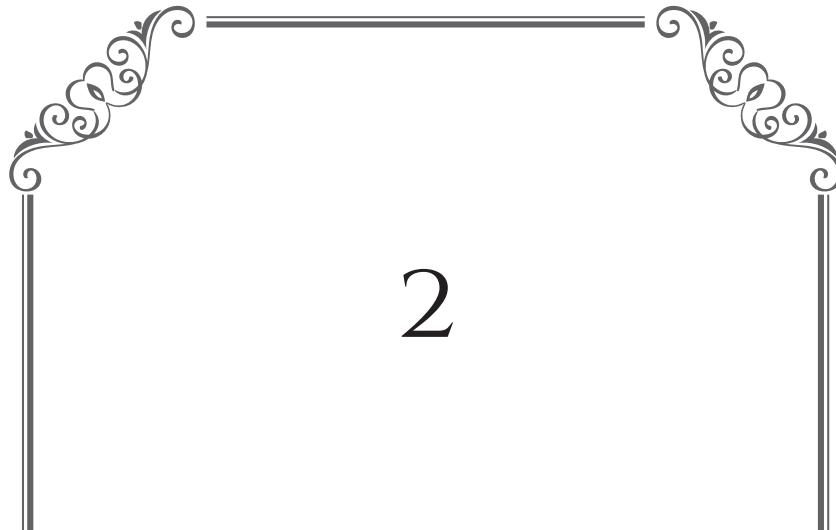
“If you don’t, things become trickier. Your cousin is currently operating as regent of Gardianno. Your uncle survived but has been convalescing at home, and your cousin has taken on his duties. Which means they’re living in the manor.”

“Most of the manor burned down.”

“Yes. But if what happened here with you, Raven, and the woman from the warrens is any indication, you *need* to be able to live in that manor. Or above it. I don’t know if your cousin will have the same goals as your uncle, but leaving that house in his hands may well result in the same difficulty. You need to be there. But you can’t be there unless you claim—and hold—the Gardianno title and assets.”

“So, Robin, what do you want to do?”





# 2

Serralyn's question lingered long after she'd left his room. Robin had no immediate answer, or possibly too damn many. What *did* he want to do?

He wanted to be left alone. He wanted to be the student he had been, first in captivity, and later with the freedom that he was assured came with being part of the Academia. He wanted to finish school, although even that concept seemed odd to him. How did one ever *finish* learning? Was there some magical point at which he'd have learned enough, and there'd be no more to be taught?

He couldn't imagine it.

But he could imagine that there were things to learn that didn't come from lectures, from the books in the student library. Some of those things directly involved his family, his familial line, and the duties he had only recently learned they must carry. Whatever was taught from Gardianno to Gardianno had not been passed down to Robin. He had been far too young, and his mother had died.

He had seen what his uncle had done with the power of Gardianno, and had seen the results: death for four unrelated students. In order to kill those students, he had first murdered



Robin's immediate family. He had burned down the manor and rebuilt it according to his own desires. He had taken the seat on the human caste court that had been reserved for Robin's family.

Robin knew nothing about the human caste court. He knew almost nothing about Gardianno. He remembered very, very little of his family. They weren't strangers to him, but it had been so long since he'd seen them, they were a blur in memory; they were almost theoretical.

They'd been murdered. And his uncle would no doubt kill others. The Hawks wanted—Teela wanted—to bring a stop to that, and she could do it far more easily by exposing the whole web of criminality.

But Robin had grown up in the warrens, where the law itself was suspect. Where bribery was a way of life, if one had anything of value, and running away was a rule of survival. He hadn't considered the needs of anyone else, except in rare circumstances—and the people of the warrens hadn't considered his needs often, either.

He exhaled. Raven remained in the room, assessing keys. She might do this for the next several hours. Everyone else had filed out, to give him time to sit with Serralyn's question. It was clear that the decision would be entirely left to Robin, but it wasn't the type of decision he was used to making.

Would he stand a better chance at surviving if he cooperated with the law?

In the warrens, the answer was a definitive *no*. But here? The chancellor abided by Imperial Law, and enforced it. He was consistent in his enforcement of rules, as well. Robin, as a student, had as much value to the chancellor as the powerful scions of the Barrani High Court.

If he kept his head down, if he refused to cooperate, would he be allowed to finish his schooling? Would he be left alone?

Robin had been good at hiding. Not nearly as good as Raven, but still: hiding had often been his only option. But he wasn't



a child now. There were choices, decisions he could make, that involved more than just immediate escape.

What *did* he want?

Raven made the annoyed sound that meant she considered the environment too noisy. “They can’t kill you either way. I’m here. And there are still places to hide here.”

Robin winced. “There are. You’ve always been good at finding hiding places. But someday I’d like to be able to live without needing them. I don’t want to spend the rest of my life hiding.”

Raven looked up from her keys. “Me, either,” she said, the words almost a whisper. As if she were struggling with the same thoughts Robin was. “But I’m only good at hiding.”

Robin looked at the keys; they trembled in her hands. “You’re good at other things.”

“Like what?”

“Friendship. You didn’t just hide with me. You stopped me from starving. You kept me safe.”

She shook her head. Sometimes she could do that for minutes. “Hiding,” she said, voice firm.

Robin exhaled. “I’m good at running and hiding. Not as good as you,” he added quickly as she opened her mouth. “But good enough. I don’t know what else I’m good at, either. I’d like to find out.”

“How?” Her eyes, as she turned to him—and away, momentarily, from the keys—seemed to be all dark fire.

“By trying different things. Maybe by failing until I figure out how not to fail. You can do that, too. We both have other things we *might* be good at. We just haven’t found them yet. This place—the Academia—is part of that, for me. It’s about learning different things, about finding things like your keys. Things that I want or need to know more about. I don’t like all of it,” he added.

“You need to learn how to do what your mother did.”



Robin swallowed. “I doubt there’s anyone alive who could teach me that.”

She nodded. And then, to his surprise, she said, “Ask the spider.”

*The spider* meant Arbiter Starrante. But to speak to the Arbiter, he would have to make an appointment, and as a first-year student, he was far down the hierarchy of those given permission to visit the library for research.

He’d also have to leave his room, and as Serralyn and Valliant were gone, he had no early warning system to make it easy to avoid visiting Hawks. He trusted Teela, but he found her so intimidating it was hard not to fall into patterns of obedience in her presence. Having Serralyn helped a lot.

Serralyn had strongly implied that even Teela would accept his decision—but Teela *wanted* a yes. Until Robin gave her an unqualified *no*, she’d continue to ask. He had an ingrained fear of disappointing powerful people. It had probably kept him alive.

He exhaled. He still didn’t have an answer.

“So, tell me about the keys,” he told his roommate, trying to distract her.

Her eyes instantly brightened. Raven’s interest in new and shiny things had developed in her time in the Academia. Granted, that had only been weeks, but as her interest spread from glass—which now had undertones of danger to Robin—she’d become more comfortable here.

She wasn’t the best student, and one or two of the teachers actively disliked her presence in the classroom. Had it not been for the chancellor, she probably wouldn’t have been allowed through their classroom doors.

She had joined Robin in rudimentary classes. Robin’s writing was poor, and his reading was slow. He’d learned as a young child, but only what a young child might learn. It was still more than many of the warrens’ citizens, but it was way, way below expected levels here.

He'd done more when he'd been captive, and he was ahead of Raven—but still behind much of the student body, even the humans. But he felt there was a purpose to the extra studying. It was like slowly prying open doors that had once been locked.

Some of the Barrani students wanted weapons classes added to the curriculum. Robin didn't add his voice to theirs, but if he could learn even rudimentary swordsmanship, he'd take that class, as well. He wanted, somehow, to be *finished*. To reach a level of knowledge and learning that finally made him feel like the adult he would become, knowledge or no.

There was just too much that he lacked.

Raven could do things that Robin would never be able to do. Like finding hiding places. What she saw, he couldn't see. But what he saw was often invisible to her. She still had problems with people; her concerns were, and had always been, different. He wondered if that would change with time—just as he had. Just as he would, in future.

If he survived.

Raven held up a single key. "This one," she said.

It looked like the other keys to Robin, although the teeth of each key differed in subtle ways. It was silver in color, and it caught and reflected the room's light. Robin frowned. He could see the rest of the keys, spread out across the pullout surface of Raven's desk. She had wanted a different desk to begin with, but heated negotiations with Killianas had resulted in one that looked exactly like Robin's. The rest of the keys reflected light, just as the key in her hand did—but the direction of reflected light seemed off for just that key.

"Raven, put that one down for a second?"

Her smile was brighter than light. She laid the key back on the desk. There, blended with the other keys, the difference in reflected light was clearer: the color was different. Raven's smile was one of delighted approval. Robin had seen what she'd seen. Probably.

"Did you *really* find these on the floor?"



She averted her eyes.

He knew she intended to stick with *the floor*, but he could easily work around that. “Did you see who dropped them?”

She nodded.

“Would I recognize that person if I saw them?”

Her frown was instant, but it was the frown she habitually wore when she was thinking through both her words and the answer to his question. She didn’t see as Robin saw, and she knew it; she didn’t know everything that Robin knew, and she seldom paid attention to people who weren’t, in some way, a threat.

She was no doubt balancing all of these contexts when she answered. “Maybe.”

“What is the key *for*?”

This time, she met his gaze and shrugged. It was shiny. It was a new treasure. The practical use of the key wasn’t her concern.

Robin picked up one of the other keys. “Killianas,” he said.

The Avatar of the Academia appeared almost instantly in the shared room, his gaze on the key in Robin’s hand.

“Do you recognize this?”

Killian’s gaze traveled over all of the keys laid out on Raven’s desk, pausing, as Robin had done, on the key that reflected light in a different way. “I recognize none of them,” he finally replied. His eyes were normal Barrani eyes; if he felt the key was dangerous, there was no sign of immediate, visceral worry.

“They were on that ring?”

Raven nodded. She snatched the special key from the desktop and slid it into her pouch—the one in which she stored her found treasures.

“Did you find the keys on the Academia grounds?”

“Yes.”

“If it were simply one key, I would not be concerned,” Killian said—to Robin. Raven was listening, but only barely. She was now concerned that Killian would try to take her treasure from her.

“These look like keys held by a custodian or a banker; there are too many here for use in the Academia. They are not inexpensive, practically speaking.”

“One of the professors?”

“Or one of the applicants.”

“Raven wasn’t certain I’d recognize the person who dropped them.”

“No.” Killian was frustrated. He was a sentient building. He could, with little difficulty, read the thoughts of the people who occupied the campus. But he could not—and had never been able to—read Raven’s thoughts. It wasn’t that she was masking them or attempting to obfuscate them; she probably wouldn’t have cared if Killian knew what she was thinking. It would save her from having to struggle to choose the right words.

But Raven knew who had “dropped” the keys; Killian didn’t. Yet.

“May I take the key ring and the keys for now?”

Raven shrugged. As long as he didn’t lay hands on her special key, she didn’t care about the rest.

Killian gathered the keys, put them back on the key ring, and turned to Robin. “The chancellor wishes to inform you that he is now considering a number of human scholars and academics for positions within the Academia.”

Robin nodded.

“All of the applications have arrived since your conflict with your uncle. He would therefore recommend caution when you are in both the lecture halls and the halls leading to them. New students have also applied—human students. There has been a small influx of Barrani students, as well.

“Your uncle intended that you perish. The chancellor feels, at this point, that it is not only your uncle you need fear. The human caste court is, by far, the largest such body of any race. You have experience with two of their lords. Neither of these lords had your best interests at heart.

“But the remedial class you share with Raven also has a



handful of new students—all mortal. I will, of course, keep watch, but demonstrably there are events that occur within the Academia that I miss. Professor Larrantin and Arbiter Starrante are doing research to determine why or how, but at this point you cannot rely on me for your safety.”

Robin turned to Raven. “Maybe you should ask Starrante if he wants or needs any help.”

She frowned.

“You knew. When Killian couldn’t see us. When we were entering a blind spot.”

She blinked. It was the *water is wet* blink. “We needed to hide.”

“Yes, but . . . you knew we needed to hide. And we needed to hide because Killian couldn’t see us. I think if you explained that to Starrante, he’d find it helpful. They’re trying to figure out why Killian couldn’t see. They’d like it never to happen again.”

“Oh.” Raven nodded. “I’ll ask.” She frowned and added, “But not Larrantin. I don’t like him.”

Robin liked Larrantin, but he agreed. Larrantin didn’t see Raven as a student, because he didn’t see Raven as a *person*. Only the chancellor’s determination—and Killian’s—made it clear that the *Academia* considered her a student and therefore a precious person.

But the keys now became another thing to think about. Robin had assumed that they belonged to one of the Academia custodians, not that there were many. He’d thought that maybe Raven had acquired them from the administration building; that place had *a lot* of offices, and a number of professors wanted physical keys, rather than the much more convenient door wards. The sheer number of keys made sense if they were copies of the professor’s various office keys.

Killian, however, could open any door on the campus, locked or no. It wouldn’t make sense to have keys for the offices of academics who liked old-fashioned doors.

Keys were better than dwelling on murder and justice. But no one was waiting for his decision on what to do about keys. Not yet anyway.

Terrano actually *knocked on the door*, which was a shock. Terrano could walk through solid stone walls. Doors were trivial.

Raven never answered when someone knocked. At most, if the knock were quiet, she'd say *door*, and Robin would rise to open it.

"You should really make her do it," Terrano said when Robin let him in.

"If someone dangerous were at the door, we'd've already left."

"I dropped by to ask if you'd like to visit our place for dinner tonight."

Robin blinked.

"I said a while ago that you should come visit, right? It's been a bit hectic, but . . . I think you and Raven should meet Helen. She'll feed you. I swear that building is *obsessed* with food. Serralyn and Valliant are coming," he added. "So, you'll have an escort, not that Serralyn is good with a sword."

Terrano winced. Clearly one of the cohort had said something sharp. "Valliant *is* good with a sword."

"Raven?"

"What?"

"Did you want to meet Helen?"

She shrugged, which wasn't a no.

"Then . . . yes, we'd love to visit. Ummm, is Teela going to be there?"

"Maybe? She comes sometimes. But if you're avoiding Hawks, Kaylin is going to be there, as well. Technically, she's the tenant and we're just her guests."

Robin shook his head. "Kaylin probably doesn't care about caste court exemptions."



“You are totally wrong about that. She *hates* them. She rants about exemptions way more than Teela does. But she hates the exemption laws; she won’t hate you if you decide it’s not worth your neck and you refuse to make a claim against them.”

The murders at the Academia had caused a quiet to descend on the student body, but that quiet couldn’t last. Once the students knew—and accepted—that the murders were not committed by fellow students or professors, they relaxed into their daily classroom routine. Robin was certain that the usual rivalries and conflicts would soon follow, which was a pity.

But if random murders were the only way to stop that, it wasn’t worth the price.

Serralyn and Valliant were waiting for him when he walked out of his last class. So was Terrano. They were glaring at each other, which meant they were arguing—but at least their arguments were done in the privacy of thought and unvoiced word.

Then again, it could be awkward to be around them when they were all fuming in silence.

Terrano, however, shed most worries easily. “You’ll like Helen,” he said. “Everyone likes Helen.”

An honor guard of three Barrani seemed excessive to Robin, but they were like family to each other. Maybe their purpose wasn’t to guard him; they were just going the same way. He relaxed, as he often did in Serralyn’s company, until the moment Raven grabbed his hand. Her fingers tightened, and as he glanced at her, he could see her eyes widening.

She shouted a single word and began to drag Robin—quickly—through the streets. He hadn’t had time to mark the streets clearly; they’d been walking at a normal pace, through roads adjacent to the Academia. But he noticed, as Raven



began to run, that the buildings themselves were more rundown, the streets slightly more worn.

They weren't in Killian's territory anymore. They were now running through the streets that formed a neutral border between the fief of Tiamaris and the Academia properties. It was cloudy, but not yet raining; daylight cast faint shadows.

They weren't running alone. Serralyn and Valliant flanked them; Terrano had become invisible the moment Raven cried out a warning. Robin shouldn't have been surprised when arrows—or crossbow bolts—thudded into the stones of the street.

"Welcome," Terrano's voice said in Robin's ear, "to politics, Barrani-style."

Another round of quarrels fired. This, Robin expected. He heard no footsteps at their backs—but his own heartbeat and thudding steps would likely drown them out.

Was he strange, then, to find an obscure comfort in Raven's hand in his? In the pace of her running, which would have pulled him off his feet had he not been able to instantly match it? He understood her flight. The weapons aimed at them appeared to be normal, not magical. Were it not for their clothing and their age, they might have been running through the streets of the warrens, heading at speed to a hiding place, where enemies would pass them by.

He'd learned a lot more about Raven since then. He knew that her ability to find hiding places was, inherently, magic—but it wasn't a magic that the Academia understood. It was a magic that the Gardianno *should* understand. Robin didn't. But understanding and trust weren't the same, and he trusted this.

She didn't find a hiding place, although she did slow. They had reached Tiamaris.

Waiting for them was the fieflord, Tiamaris the Dragon. His arms were folded, and he looked distinctly unamused, but



he welcomed them—curtly—to the fief over which he ruled.

Robin offered him a bow; Raven shrugged as if he were irrelevant.

“Tara caught wind of ill intent,” the Dragon said, as if explaining his presence. “You will be safe while you are in my fief.” To Robin’s surprise, the fieflord walked past him. “I have a few things to gather; they are not your concern.”

*Do they involve soon-to-be corpses?* Robin didn’t ask the question aloud.

Tiamaris, however, grinned. It was an almost feral expression. “The fiefs, Lord Gardianno, are not subject to Imperial Law, except at the whim of the fieflords.”

The answer to the question Robin hadn’t asked was clearly *yes*.



True to his word, the fief of Tiamaris was safe. Barrani in any number—even the two visible ones—were avoided where possible; the streets, while not empty, never became crowded enough that pickpockets could operate with impunity.



“Sedarias was right,” Terrano said as he shed invisibility and joined them.

“About what?” Robin asked. Raven snorted, and he redenied. It wasn’t the smartest of questions.

“Humans aren’t Barrani,” Terrano said, glancing at Raven. “But politics are politics the world over. People who have power don’t want to lose it. Some will do anything to keep it, and your death would be the easiest way to keep things the way they were.”

“Sedarias is facing a bit of that herself.”

“It’s not the same,” Serralyn said. “Robin hasn’t even tried to declare himself yet.”

“And the smart thing would be to make certain he doesn’t or can’t,” Terrano replied. “It’s what she’d do in a similar position.”

“She’d kill me?”

“You? No. Someone Barrani who threatened her rule of her own line? Yes. But frankly, they’d expect that.”

“Is this why you all assumed the first couple of murders in the Academia were related to Sedarias?”

Terrano nodded. “We were wrong. So far, the Academia has been absent Barrani politics.”

He didn’t expect it to remain that way.

“Human politics have rarely mattered to Barrani—but then again, Barrani politics have rarely mattered to humans. Not in this Empire, at any rate. The Academia murders, the deaths, can be attributed to human politics. Even the Barrani deaths. Just . . . not the normal way.” He glanced at Raven. Raven, aware of the glance, shrugged again.

“Death is death,” she said. “To the dead.”

“If you understand the how and why, you can prevent more deaths,” Serralyn said. Her eyes were blue. Of the Barrani of Robin’s acquaintance, hers were the only eyes that were usually green. But he understood the shift to blue; any of those arrows could have hit her, Valliant, or Terrano.

“Come on, let’s get to Helen. We won’t have to worry about possible assassins there.”

Helen, as they called their home, was on an almost deserted street. From a distance, the street seemed to be composed of fences and grass; he could see the houses as they walked past them because he could look through the fences. They couldn’t otherwise be seen from the street.

There were no homes like this in the warrens. Nor were the streets so wide, and in such good repair. There were streetlamps here, also in good repair, the light they shed so clear they must have been spotless.

He hadn’t felt intimidated by the invitation to dinner. He tried not to feel intimidated now. Raven had released his hand sometime in the fief of Tiamaris. She seemed bored. If danger



was present, it wasn't obvious to her. Given Robin's background, it wasn't likely that people would be lying in wait for him here, beyond the fences.

Terrano stopped in front of a closed gate. Closed anything didn't matter to Terrano—if he wanted to enter, he'd enter, one way or another. Even Starrante shook his head when the topic of Terrano—or keeping Terrano *out*—came up. No one else could enter the library without the express permission of both chancellor and Arbiters. Androsse didn't like Terrano; Kavallac would have disliked him had he not annoyed Androsse so much. Starrante, on the other hand, seemed genuinely fond of the Barrani almost-student.

The gate swung open; Terrano didn't touch it. "This," he said, turning to Robin and Raven, "is my home."

He then led them up the long walk to the front door. It was taller and wider than any door in the Academia except the dining hall doors—but there were two of those.

Terrano knocked.

Someone opened the door in answer. She was an older woman, hair almost entirely white. Her eyes were brown, her face networked with the lines age and sun generally put there. But her voice was strong, and it was warm.

"You must be Robin and Raven," she said, smiling. "I'm so pleased you found the time to visit. I've heard so much about you."

Robin smiled. "We were happy to be invited," he began, and then turned. *He* was happy. Raven was not. She had frozen in place. She wasn't terrified—he recognized fear when it crossed her face—but her guard was up so thoroughly Robin wasn't certain she'd enter the house.

"All of the property," Helen said, speaking to Raven, "is part of me. You have already entered my domain."

Raven folded her arms. "It's not the same."

"No?"

"You know why."

Helen's smile deepened. "Perhaps I do. The gate doesn't speak. The fence doesn't speak. Even the path is silent."

Raven nodded.

"But you hear me now."

"Your voice sounds strange," Raven conceded. "Blurry, fuzzy."

Helen's brows rose. "Does it?"

Raven nodded. "As if something were broken."

Robin knew Helen wasn't human, even if she looked it. Had he been fooled, he would have known now, because her brown irises darkened to black, and black spread across the whites of her eyes as she spoke.

Terrano groaned. "I'm hungry," he said. "If you can move out of the doorway, I'd like to go to the dining room now."

"Where are my manners?" Helen asked. "I apologize." She moved out of the way, stepping back into the house to allow her visitors to enter. Terrano and Valliant did so immediately. Serralyn glanced at Robin, and waited. Honestly, Robin sometimes forgot she was Barrani.

Raven, however, was staring at Helen.

Robin reached for her hand. There were even odds that she'd ignore it sooner than take it. But this time she allowed him to grasp it. "Do you think anything bad will happen if we enter?"

Raven frowned. "Bad things can happen here."

"Bad things can happen anywhere," he replied, voice soft. "And at least we won't have to run from assassins."

"There are *no hiding places* here," Raven told him.

"How do you know?"

Her expression folded from fear to frustration. "How can you not?"

He shrugged. "I'm Robin. You're Raven. I can only find hiding places that you've already found and shown me. But I trust Serralyn. If she thought we'd be in danger here, she'd've told us."



“There are no hiding places here,” Helen said, as if Robin had not spoken. “But you will not need them. Until and unless I am dead or permanently incapacitated, Robin will be safe here. I swear it on my name. If you cannot trust that oath, you do not have to enter.”

Serralyn turned to look at Raven, who was almost vibrating in place. Raven’s eyes were wide, dark, her forehead slightly creased, as if she had to concentrate to listen.

“I don’t like it,” Raven said.

“I know,” Helen replied. “And perhaps, in the distant past, your worry would have been justified. I take no offense at it. I understand that I am irrelevant to you. But Robin is, as you must know, in danger now, and there is at least one person present who might guide him through some of it.

“He is not what you are. You are not what he is.”

Serralyn now turned to Helen, frowning in a familiar way: she was concentrating, as if Helen were a very respected teacher, and she herself the newest of students.

“No,” Helen replied, glancing at Serralyn. “I am not certain what Raven is. But I have some sense of the *who* now.”

“Is she dangerous to you?” Serralyn’s eyes were blue. It wasn’t the question Robin had been expecting, if he’d been expecting any question at all.

“I am uncertain.”

Clearly, this wasn’t the answer Serralyn had been expecting, either.

“She means no harm,” Helen continued. “She is worried for Robin. You apparently encountered some difficulty on the way here.”

“. . . we did. Why are you uncertain?” This question, more than anything else the Barrani had said, made clear that Serralyn cared deeply for Helen herself.

“Because I am not certain, as I said, what Raven is. There is an odd echo that lingers after she speaks, and there is a strange



mutability to her physical body; it is not entirely solid to my eyes. I am accustomed to that, or have become accustomed to that, because of Terrano. And Mandoran. But their case is different."

"How?"

"They shift planes, shift places, learn to stand in the gaps between them. But they are themselves. Raven . . . it's as if she has not yet fully cohered. She seems to be between states."

Raven's frown was now similar to Serralyn's. She was listening, absorbing, attempting to make sense of what Helen was saying. She almost never did this when other people spoke, although she did listen to Starrante in a similar fashion. When Helen stopped speaking and once again turned to Raven, Raven's thinking face remained; it had overcome her immediate fear.

"Yes," she said. "Yes, we'll come in."

*We.* Robin wondered whether or not she'd've allowed him to enter the house if she'd decided the danger was too great. Or if she'd have grabbed him by the hand and made a run for the gates.

"The gates," Helen replied, smiling.