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Cast in Blood

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*This is for Terry, a West reader who followed
me to the Cast books and has read every word,
in raw first draft, from the beginning.*



01

Kaylin was late to work, for the first time in weeks. Months, maybe. The intense betting pools about her time of arrival had died down to a tiny trickle. Tanner raised a brow as she made her way up the stairs. Clearly they hadn't completely gone away. That was the expression of a man who was going to lose money.

"Lord Sanabalis is in the West Room," he said.

Kaylin grimaced. "What day is it today?"

Clint shook his head. "Magic lesson day. Severn's queued for your Elani beat after the lesson." He paused, and then said, "Midwives' guild?"

She shook her head. There was no reason she'd slept in; no reason that she'd made her way past the breakfast table—against Helen's admonitions—and out the door half an hour late. It wasn't Mrs. Erickson, who was awake, and in whose hands breakfast prep now resided; it wasn't the visiting gold Dragon.

Something felt *off* in her house, and Helen hadn't seen fit to complain about whatever it was. Kaylin had even asked, once. Helen's lack of answer made clear that her instincts were right: something was wrong.

Terrano and Mandoran, often at the breakfast table, were notably absent, not that she'd intended to join them. She half

suspected they were avoiding her. Neither of them was much good at keeping their thoughts to themselves.

If she had another day like this—or two, maybe—she'd have to ask more than once. She knew that if she demanded answers, Helen would have to give them. But if she forced Helen to answer—if she pushed through the barrier of preference and choice—she'd be damaging something important, and she might never be able to repair it.

She paused in the aerie—the towering atrium in which Aerial Hawks practiced their maneuvers. She had, in her earliest years with the Hawks, loved it here. Here, where she could watch and daydream and even yearn at a great enough distance that nothing she could do could break or destroy anything of beauty. She'd once believed that if she'd been born with wings, she'd have freedom.

She knew better now, but some hint of those old dreams lingered.

Hope squawked loudly in her ear. She covered it reflexively.

Back then, she'd had no familiar. She'd had few friends. She'd had very little in the way of responsibility. But she'd had the Marks of the Chosen, even then, and she could feel them almost vibrate.

That's what was wrong. It was subtle; they weren't glowing. But it almost felt as if they were jostling for position against her skin, butting into each other, moving in a flat, unseen frenzy.

Ugh.

Hope bit her hand.

“Sorry. I just didn't get enough sleep last night.”

Squawk.

“Or the night before. Or the night before that. Okay?”

He huffed and deflated, returning to his shawl position across her shoulders.

“*We all* have days like this.” She wasn't sure if she was arguing with a winged lizard or talking to herself. Probably both.



But: she was late for the first time in a couple of months, and this time she didn't have an excuse.

The general mood in the office made it clear that people had persisted in betting; not as many as before, when Kaylin's time of arrival had been far more flexible. But some were annoyed and some were cheerful.

"Are you coming down with something, dear?" Caitlin asked, as Kaylin drifted past her desk.

"I don't get sick. You know that."

"There's a first time for everything."

"I'm not coming down with anything that I'm aware of. No fever, no coughing, no chills, no anything."

"And you haven't been out drinking with the Barrani Hawks?"

"No." Strictly speaking, this was *mostly* true. But she hadn't gone out in the past week.

Caitlin had that mother hen expression Kaylin found so difficult. She liked what it meant. Caitlin was worried for her. Her worry implied affection, even love of a kind. But she hated to be seen as a child that was in need of mothering. It hurt her pride.

You are a child, the condescending voice of Ynpharion said, which didn't help. It had been weeks since she'd last heard Ynpharion. They'd been busy weeks, but still. The voice of this particular namebound didn't make her day any brighter.

She managed not to snap at Caitlin, so gratitude won out—but it was awfully close.

Why are you even talking to me? Kaylin demanded, as she stomped toward the duty roster.

A loud growl diverted her. Right. Sanabalis was waiting in the West Room.

I have been asked to inform you that there might be some trouble in the near future.



What kind of trouble?

I am uncertain. The Lady asked that I reach out; she did not command it. Had she, Ynpharion would have had no choice. If Kaylin reluctantly knew his name—and she did—he had offered it—willingly—to the Consort. It was the Consort he served; he was grateful to serve her. Whatever Kaylin had done to save his life paled in comparison; he accepted it because it had allowed him to find the lord he truly wished to serve.

Ynpharion didn't correct her; it was true. But it was also true that he avoided all contact with Kaylin where possible these days. If the Consort thought there might be difficulty in the future, it was serious.

But her job was serious as well, and she was late to meet Sanabalis. The Arkon. The new Arkon. She had taken a distinct dislike to the changing of names. People had had perfectly *good* names before, and now it was all up in the air, and Kaylin made mistakes constantly.

She'd gotten a bit better about it, but she imagined it'd take months until the new names became the normal ones.

The Arkon was sitting in a large chair at the otherwise empty conference table. His eyes, when he looked toward his tardy student, were orange. To her surprise, there was no candle in front of him. Candles had been the implement of teaching torture that he had previously employed.

"You're late."

"Sorry. I didn't realize you were coming today."

"I believe you were informed."

"I've been a bit busy, and your lessons aren't an emergency."

The Arkon exhaled a small stream of smoke. "We have heard from Lannagaros; he believes you aided Lord Bellusdeo, with the help of Mrs. Erickson."

Kaylin nodded.



“Lord Bellusdeo’s situation is now *extremely* unusual, but she does seem to be far less prone to tantrums.”

“She isn’t prone to tantrums at all.” Kaylin pulled out a seat and took it, with very little grace.

“She wouldn’t throw them in your presence—you might not survive. If you disbelieve me, you must speak with Lord Emmerian. *After* we have finished this class.”

“There’s no candle.”

“No. Unfortunately, this is not that kind of class. I have surrendered some of my authority as your teacher—as Arkon, I have other duties that occupy too much of my time. It is a wonder to me that Lannagaros did not torch most of the collection in the Imperial Library centuries ago. And before you defend him, I understand that to Lannagaros, they were the remnants of his desire for the scholarship offered by the lost Academia.”

“I thought he took most of that with him?”

“You are incorrect. He felt that it would teach me needed patience to be forced to look after what remains of the collection. From time to time, information from his various relics and artifacts has proven essential—but not in a reliable or dependable way.”

Sanabalis—ugh, the Arkon—had never struck Kaylin as particularly impatient. Had the Dragon who replaced Lannagaros as Arkon been Tiamaris, she might have agreed or at least found it less implausible.

“Your interference—your *welcome* interference—in Lord Bellusdeo’s difficulties made clear to us that your magic, as Chosen, is not strictly the talent-based magic of Imperial mages.”

“Or Arcanists.”

“You’re a Hawk. That goes without saying.”

“Teela was an Arcanist.”

The Arkon’s eyes reddened.

Kaylin murmured apologies. Hope snickered.



“Your magic seems very tied to context and circumstance. It seems—from observation—to respond to your will and your need. It does not respond in predictable ways. But the few documents the palace has retained that concern the Chosen imply that this has always been the case. My attempts to teach you how to channel your magic have resulted in very little conscious, deliberate control.”

“Meaning?”

“I have been attempting to teach you mathematics. I should instead have been attempting to teach you art.”

Kaylin blinked. She didn’t hate math. At least there were right and wrong answers. She knew when she’d made a mistake. She knew when she hadn’t.

Art wasn’t something taught in the Halls of Law.

“I have therefore arranged supplementary lessons. Before you ask, no. I am not an art teacher. Creativity is about expression.”

“Then . . . why are you here?”

Sanabalis smiled. With teeth in it. “Rumors have reached the ears of the Emperor.” He fell silent.

“Does this have something to do with the dead?” Kaylin finally asked, when Sanabalis failed to speak.

“Possibly the future dead,” he replied. “Although it is not clear, given my brief interactions with Mrs. Erickson, that the Barrani leave ghosts in their wake.”

Kaylin winced. “This is about the High Court?”

“There has been movement there that might become cause for concern. Our informants are not highly placed at the moment, for obvious reasons. In normal circumstances, we would ignore any difficulties from that quarter, unless the High Lord intended to foment open rebellion and war.”

Kaylin nodded.

“You are aware—of course you are—of the changes in the High Halls the most powerful of the Barrani call home.”



She nodded again.

“The changes have caused some social unrest. Those who might once have perished when they underwent the Test of Name do not perish now. The Lords of the High Court were once designated as such by the simple expedient of their survival. Now that is not the case. While some fail to pass that test—or so we have been informed—many have not. The number of Lords of the High Court has grown.”

Kaylin shrugged. “They can’t have as many as the human caste court.”

“Ah, no. But they consider the human caste court almost irrelevant. There are a handful of lords with significant economic power, but the rest are unremarkable. Adding to their number gives the lords of actual power people to rule, in a fashion that does not imply treachery.

“Prior to the recent changes in the Halls of Law, the hallowed Barrani ceremony weeded out those of insignificant will or power. It apparently does not do so now.”

“You want me to talk to people.” By *people* she meant either Teela or Sedarias. She preferred Teela.

“I leave that decision in your capable hands. But you are aware that much of the Barrani economic power resides in the streets of Elantra. If divisions are brewing, if a Barrani war begins, it is from those streets that economic power will be withdrawn or leveraged.”

Kaylin nodded. “You think it’s that big?”

“We are uncertain, but we are concerned. That is not, however, the entirety of the reason I chose this block of time. I have, as you have noted, dispensed with the candle. Any attempt to force you to channel the power of your Marks through acceptable traditional means has failed to take. While you have managed, once or twice, to light the candle, you have scorched the table, melted the candle, and missed the wick.”

“So . . . what did you want me to do?”



“I want you to consider who, and what, you are. I want you to access the emotions that seem to be the largest driver of the power you use. Do not look at me like that; it is considered disrespectful—at best.”

“Like what?”

“As if I have taken leave of my senses.”

“You realize that almost *all* of my training has been about *suppressing* random emotion, right?”

“Acceptable. Do not punch people in momentary rage.”

“I mean it, Sanabalis.” Ugh. “Arkon. You have my Records. You know what happened before I became an official Hawk.”

“If you are referring to the slaver, yes, I am aware. He was skinned alive—and the shock did not allow him to pass out before he had experienced all of it.” He spoke without horror. Teela spoke of the same incident with a complete lack of horror as well.

Kaylin couldn’t quite manage it, and she’d been the person who’d killed the man.

Kaylin believed the slaver had deserved to die. But she could have killed him by breaking his neck. Or stabbing him in the heart—if she could find it. The death itself had been horrific. Teela felt death was death, regardless of how it arrived. She’d said that. She’d said that a hundred times while Kaylin had hyperventilated as she crashed.

“I believe that is the source of your problem. You did not control, did not even consider controlling, your emotions. Your power flowed naturally into your rage, and you used it. We do not intend for you to run around Elantra in a rage, but you are not the child you were on that day. You have used the power of the Marks in the years since then—but desperation seems to be your driver. It is a better driver than rage, but it is, as you are well aware, unreliable.

“I can set fire to this city without any deep emotion. I can



transform into my draconic self without rage. Rage does not help our kind. It is control that we measure and value.

“That control does not entirely work for you. You must find a way to access the emotions that drive your connection to your own power if you wish to avoid situations in which desperation is your only emotion.

“Awareness of your emotional state does not depend on rage. If it did, we would not be having this discussion; the risk to the rest of us would be too great. The only way you use your Marks in deliberate fashion is to heal. It is proof that something other than rage can drive the conscious use of real power. The healing is impressive,” he added, voice softening. “But healing is often something done after the fight, not before.”

“What kind of fight are you even expecting?” She didn’t bother to keep her tone neutral.

“At the moment, not a fight we cannot win.”

That wasn’t exactly comforting.

“We are content to leave this in the hands of Hawks. I have an appointment with Lord Grammayre after our lesson is concluded. I will request flexibility in your schedule in the near future.”

The lesson ended up being much shorter than the usual candle torture. Sanabalis asked questions that were personal in nature. Kaylin punted. If it was true that she needed to somehow invoke emotion on command, she sure as hells wasn’t going to do it front of the new Arkon.

For once, Ynpharion—whose presence lingered—agreed. Agreement meant silence; he couldn’t possibly be agreeable in actual words that might sound like approval.

This is what the Lady wanted you to warn me about, isn’t it?

Perhaps. She does not allow me to spy on you; she feels it is beneath her.



But not you, clearly.

I serve her. Information that might become relevant is just that: information. How it is gathered is a minor concern.

And you're going to tell her that the Imperial Court has spies in the High Halls.

This time, his obvious contempt was clear. *Do you expect us all to be as naive and foolish as you? Of course they have spies in the High Halls. We have spies in the Imperial Palace.*

The funny thing was: she was far more comfortable with this version of Ynpharion. When he was actually polite and respectful, it made her suspicious.

Because you fail to understand the bond itself. Again. I must assume it's deliberate.

It wasn't. I don't spend my free time thinking about you.

Or any of those whose names you hold.

She might be more comfortable, but that didn't mean she enjoyed speaking with Ynpharion. *What exactly is the Lady afraid of?*

Ynpharion did not reply. No, of course not.

Kaylin exhaled. *Ask her if it would be acceptable if I visited.*

The silence was quantitatively different, but it was there. *She does not think it particularly wise at this time. If, however, you feel it urgent, she will grant that permission; she will not take the risk of extending an invitation. She asks, however, that you visit in the company of a guard you trust. She does not consider An'Teela to be a suitable guard.*

Does she think any of the cohort would be suitable?

Silence again. It lasted longer. *No. They are too linked with Mellarionne. Understand that she is not particularly concerned for your cohort. It is your safety that concerns her.*

Can I come with Severn?

I fail to see how that would be any protection at all. No pauses there; he hadn't bothered to ask.

Well, it's Severn or Bellusdeo. I suppose I could ask Nightshade, but I was under the impression that outcastes would be far worse.



She suggests perhaps Lord Andellen.

Kaylin frowned. Barrani names were so similar she sometimes had to sort through them before she could come up with a person to attach them to.

Lord Andellen was Nightshade's second-in-command. The most loyal of his Barrani lieges. Kaylin's work in the High Halls had allowed her to ask that Lord Andellen, exiled but not out-caste, be allowed to return to the Halls until she passed away. She certainly hadn't asked for that boon for her own sake—the High Halls gave her hives.

Everything about this felt wrong, off-kilter.

If you visit, she will instruct the guards to allow you to enter; they will take you directly to her. Give me some warning should you think it necessary to meet with her. Pause. She feels Severn would also be acceptable because she suggests, if you visit, you visit as a Hawk.

Kaylin froze on the spot. It took her a moment to find her own feet. *She wants me to come as a Hawk?*

She feels it will emphasize your caste. You are human. Those who wish to harm their rivals on opposing factions will think several times about adding human bodies to the brewing conflict, especially if they are Hawks.

Is she in danger? Kaylin began to walk, her steps slow. She wasn't always the best at reading undercurrents and subtext, because she had so little of either to offer. But Ynpharion wouldn't have made the attempt to contact her if the circumstances didn't involve the Consort, at least peripherally. *Ynpharion, tell me.*

Silence.

Severn looked up as she approached. He nodded, falling into step beside her as they left the halls for their Elani beat. They'd be a bit early, but Kaylin was now too restless to pause or make small talk. She needed to be moving. She needed to do something.



Maybe that was why her Marks seemed almost jittery: she was. Something was happening, or about to happen.

Severn glanced at her; she felt his muted concern. Of course he was concerned. Even her thoughts were loud. She'd never quite figured out how to mask or obscure them, how to slide into a superficial layer of thought while avoiding the thoughts that were actually important.

"Try not to kick Margot's sign over."

"I didn't do it last week."

As beats went, Elani was harmless. Most of the regulars were so accustomed to Kaylin's familiar they no longer made the attempt to purchase him. People less familiar with the Hawks still asked. She almost hoped someone would try to swipe Hope. It would give her something to respond to, some way to relieve some of her building steam.

No one did.

You look like thunder, Severn observed. If you want to start an incident—or have an incident start—try looking friendly.

Kaylin shook her head. She had paused in front of Evanton's. She almost entered. But Evanton's wasn't where she was meant to be. Had Evanton wanted to see her, Grethan would have opened the door as she approached the faded lettering of the store window.

The only silver lining on the cloud she'd become—Severn being right, no doubt—was the fact that there were no incidents, and reports would be minuscule enough even Kaylin could get them in on time.

But she'd been ill at ease for a couple of days now, and she expected bad news.

In the end, she didn't worry about reports. She didn't worry about Elani.

When news came, it arrived in a way no one else could hear.



She felt it first, on her tattooed cheek; she lifted a hand to touch the mark Nightshade had left on her face. It felt like years ago. It had been maybe two—at most.

Severn stopped as Kaylin did, his steps so naturally in time with hers the pause was instinctive, automatic.

She lowered her hand.

“Your cheek is bleeding.”

A single streak of blood reddened the palm of her hand. She nodded, turning toward the streets that led to the bridge to Tiamaris. It was the only way anyone with legitimate business entered the fiefs anymore. *Nightshade?*

There was no answer.

Kaylin began to run.



02

She hadn't heard from Nightshade in almost a month. Helen kept the namebond contact out of the house, because she didn't completely trust the fieflord. But Helen let him into the house, in person, whenever he wanted to visit Annarion. If she didn't entirely trust him, she didn't entirely distrust him, either. Kaylin, sprinting all out, didn't disagree.

Ynpharion's warning, Sanabalis's information, and her own sense of restless anxiety had come together in a visceral near certainty. That and her bleeding cheek. Severn kept pace with her; they could run without break through a quarter of the city, but not at an all-out sprint. Though gaining the bridge across the Ablayne required slowing to a quick jog.

They were wearing the Hawks' tabard. The guards situated on the fief side of the bridge frowned but made no attempt to stop them. They jogged across the bridge, into Tiamaris proper. The Dragon had made significant changes to the fief he ruled in the short time he'd captained the Tower; it now felt like a poorer district within Elantra. Not the warrens, but a place that was slowly struggling its way out of that almost lawless state.

She hit the fief side of the bridge and shouted. "*Tara!*" She then continued to jog.

She wasn't surprised to see the shadow of a Dragon's de-



scent before she'd reached the streets that formed part of the Tiamaris-Nightshade border.

"This had better be an emergency," the Dragon fieflord said, his orange-red eyes the size of Kaylin's face.

"I need to get to Nightshade."

"That fief is not under my jurisdiction."

"No—it's Nightshade's. At least for now."

"Your cheek is bleeding." He exhaled a stream of smoke; that was his only pause. "Very well. Get on. If this causes diplomatic issues, the Halls of Law will hear about it. Tara is concerned," he added, which explained the speed of his appearance. Kaylin had expected that. He lowered himself to ground so Kaylin could scabble up his side.

Severn leaped up onto Tiamaris's back, behind Kaylin; they both braced themselves as the Dragon launched his bulk into the sky. The city shrunk beneath Tiamaris, but not too much; he flew as close to the ground as the aerial demands of flight permitted.

"Where?" he asked.

"I don't know—I just know something's wrong!"

"Do you know where he was?"

"I just said—" She stopped. "He didn't answer. When I reached out, he didn't answer at all. It's namebond stuff. I don't always understand it."

"Clearly." The word was more felt than heard; Tiamaris vibrated with the sound of his own voice. "You can, however, find him if he still lives."

She felt the hair on her arms rise in a ripple of goose bumps and sensitivity. Tiamaris, in draconic form, was casting a spell—a traditional one, in Sanabalis's terms. Severn snaked an arm around her waist as she closed her eyes; she wasn't certain which came first.

Nightshade.

Silence.



Tell us where you are. We're coming on dragonback.

Silence.

She'd been told she would know if he was dead. No one whose name she held had died—not yet.

Ynpharion said, *So, it starts. And it ends.*

If you can find it in yourself, be helpful or shut up.

The Consort believes he was traveling to see his brother.

Why? She cursed. *Never mind. Not important.* It wasn't. How the Consort knew could wait. Nightshade himself couldn't. She inhaled, exhaling slowly as wind whipped strands of hair from her face.

If it was true that she'd know if Nightshade was dead, he wasn't. Not yet. But Ynpharion believed she could find him. Somehow. It had been a long time since she'd been the one to initiate contact with the fieflord. He, like Ynpharion, was aware of where she was or what she was doing—or he could be.

But he hadn't reached out either, and if she were honest, she was comfortable with that. She wasn't comfortable with his death. Didn't examine the why of that. Instead, she listened as she tried to find Nightshade through a namebond she didn't really understand.

But Ynpharion, curse him, was right. She could sense *something*, a flicker of light she could almost see, although her eyes were closed.

"We need to cross the border," she told Tiamaris. The familiar painful tingle of magic made her arms highly sensitive to the cloth that was rubbing against them. "Can you stop that?" she asked, trying—and failing—to sound less annoyed.

"Stop what?"

"The spell. Whatever you're casting, stop."

Silence.

Kaylin frowned. "It wasn't you who cast the spell, was it?"

"No. I will have to have a word with the Arkon if you can even ask that question."



Kaylin was at a loss for words. This level of magic, at a distance she couldn't even see, was the equivalent of an Arcane bomb. A very big one.

But the buildings beneath Tiamaris's massive wingspan hadn't been destroyed, and a bomb that felt this large at this distance could level part of a city block. Maybe the border buildings were different. Or maybe there was no Arcane bomb.

Nightshade couldn't have been in Castle Nightshade; the Tower's defenses were ferocious. Even if an invited guest had tried to harm or kill him, the Tower would have prevented it. She didn't think he could be in the streets of his fief, although there, assassination stood a better chance.

If what had threatened him had come from *Ravellon*, the Tower's defenses would aid him within the boundaries of the fief itself. But what if the threat wasn't Shadow? How useful could the Tower be?

She felt *certain* that he was in the border zone. She didn't bother to put that into words. Tiamaris was already flying there.

"Have Shadows been more active recently?" Kaylin shouted in what she hoped was the direction of draconic ears.

"Not notably. Some of the Norranir remain at our borders; most have migrated to the fief of Bellusdeo. They are very, very sensitive to incursion; no alarm has been raised. Do you fear Shadow has managed to infiltrate Nightshade?"

Did she? Or was she just hoping? And if she *was* hoping it was Shadow, what in the hells was wrong with her?

The border zone emerged beneath Tiamaris's wings. She wanted to tell the Dragon to fly lower, to fly more slowly. The latter he could do, but not without circling, and that felt like almost no movement at all. But as he wheeled, as he came closer to the ground, as his shadow darkened buildings, she felt the painful slap of magic grow stronger.

She shouted directions.

"She means the other left," Severn said, raising his voice.



“There—the building on the very edge of the border zone from the Nightshade side. You can see the smoke rising from it.”

“I do not have permission to land within the fief itself.”

Kaylin almost shrieked in frustration—and pain.

“Set us down at the edge of the border!”

“Where the bodies are,” Severn added. He didn’t seem to be shouting—Kaylin certainly was—but his voice carried.

Tiamaris offered no further argument; he landed.

Severn had been right. There were bodies. Some were missing limbs, some missing heads—although the heads, detached at the neck, weren’t far away. Not all of them were dead, but most were dying. They were armed and armored in a style consistent with the High Halls, the High Court—and its many members.

They are, Ynpharion said. His focus was so intent, she could almost feel it and pushed him back. *They are not Nightshade’s people.*

They aren’t anyone’s people anymore, she snapped. She didn’t understand how she hadn’t seen this from Tiamaris’s back.

Magic, Severn said.

But you could see it?

I cheated. Be careful.

She nodded, waiting beside the Dragon until Severn had fully dismounted. She waited until he was armed. He’d pulled the twin blades of his most significant weapon but hadn’t unwound the chain.

Kaylin had long knives, and she drew one. She then glanced at Tiamaris.

The Dragon glinted red as he nodded. He didn’t return to the air or his own fief, but he didn’t cross the almost invisible line that marked the edge of the border zone, either. Then again, his breath had range. Kaylin’s daggers—or Severn’s weapon—lacked that.



Together, the two Hawks walked toward the building Severn had indicated from the air. One wall was a blackened mess; stones—for it was a stone building—had cracked and fallen, both outward and inward. She passed over headless bodies, choosing a path that wasn't littered with the dying. Dying Barrani could still take out two human Hawks if that was their intent.

She counted ten bodies. She wanted to sprint ahead, but training overtook impulse. *Ynpharion, what's the smallest unit of a Barrani war band? What are the numbers?*

Between twelve and fifteen, historically.

Twelve to fifteen. She counted ten and glanced at Severn.

"It's a war band," he said, hearing the question she hadn't put into words. Maybe hearing the question that followed—*how do you know this?*—but ignoring it for now.

Barrani played games of politics—their polite word for assassination—but this was different. There was no subtlety in it. Someone had sent a *war band* into Nightshade.

They could not afford subtlety if they intended to remove Nightshade, Ynpharion said. His interior tone had sharpened, not in his usual condescension, but almost in earnest.

Do you recognize any of the dead? she countered.

No.

Does the Consort?

She is our Lady. This meant yes. Ynpharion's next question made clear that the Consort was far less concerned with the war band. *Can you sense Nightshade?*

Kaylin frowned. *I'm not certain. I think—I think he's in the ruins of that building. It would be a better place to deal with greater numbers of assailants, but a worse place to use his sword—it's too large, and buildings this size weren't meant for all-out combat. Not that way.*

The sword, Ynpharion said in the same urgent tone, *was not the only reason he was feared.*



Severn tapped her shoulder, as if aware of her ongoing conversation with Ynpharion. He probably was. *I want to enter the building first—I have some protection against magic.*

I have Hope. She poked the familiar. Hope sat up. His eyes were wide open, his head scanning the streets.

“Wing,” she told him.

Hope lifted a wing and placed it across only one of her eyes. He didn’t even smack her with it, which meant he knew it was serious. She had seen the bodies of the Barrani only when she landed. If a spell of concealment had been cast, it was large enough to cover the whole of the building and the streets surrounding it. The magic that had been invoked seemed to be a barrier of some kind—a way of keeping the immediate battle from being noticed by anyone not involved in it.

The rest of the smoking building looked normal from the wing-eye view. *Has my cheek stopped bleeding?*

Severn nodded. *The mark is still there.*

Would it vanish if he were dead?

I don’t know. If I had to guess, I’d say yes.

There had been whole years when she wished Nightshade dead. Years in the streets of his poorly ruled, neglected fief. Years. Sometimes, though, she didn’t think about him at all. She was an orphan, protected by another orphan; there was no reason she’d ever cross even his shadow.

There are worse fieflords.

There are way better fieflords, Kaylin shot back. Severn had never resented Nightshade—person or fief—as much as she had.

Although she had Hope, she let Severn move a yard or two in front; Hope was scanning the streets, as was she. The windows of buildings across from this one seemed closed; she caught no glimpse of assassins there.

The door that Severn approached had been blown off one of



its hinges and listed in the blackened frame. Given the state of the walls, the door should have been destroyed.

Severn stationed himself on the hinge side of the doorframe.

Have you found him? Ynpharion's voice was sharper. Too sharp.

Kind of busy right now. Kaylin matched his tone.

Silence. Anger. Something else in the mix. Worry? Fear?

She cursed him in Leontine, which had less of an effect when the words weren't verbalized, although he did hear them through the namebond.

Ready? Severn asked. At Kaylin's nod, he lashed out with his left foot and kicked the door. Whatever had preserved the hinge was gone; the door flew in.

Lightning flew out.

Kaylin took a risk. "Nightshade?"

The lightning wasn't followed by any other attack. "Lord Kaylin?" Not Nightshade's voice.

"Andellen? Is that you?"

"I have my lord with me; he is injured. He is unconscious."

"The rest of the attackers?"

"Very dead. There were only two who made it through the door."

Kaylin immediately swung round and rolled through the doorframe, coming up on her feet prepared to throw herself forward if necessary. Severn was less than a step behind.

Hope, however, leaped off her shoulder before he could become part of her somersault. He squawked very, very loudly, in august displeasure.

Nothing attacked. Kaylin saw another door—this one was open. Through it, she could see Andellen. He was bleeding but appeared to have all of his limbs; he'd taken a quarrel wound on his right shoulder.

His thigh was slashed, his hands slick with blood; she



couldn't tell how much of it was his own. She moved toward him quickly, while Hope flapped around her head, squawking.

Andellen stepped aside before she could touch him. As he did, she could see Nightshade. His hand had a white-knuckled death grip on *Meliannos*, but that hand was still attached to the rest of him. She could see no visible wound, but he was unconscious.

Unconscious. He couldn't do what Andellen had just done. He couldn't avoid her touch. She hesitated.

Do not do it, Ynpharion snapped.

Why not? I already hold his name.

Ynpharion knew this but was outraged at her casual statement. *You know very well why not. Are you a fool? The secrets of the powerful are not yours to know unless they are offered. Lord Nightshade is among the very powerful.*

He might die if we don't move him.

Silence. It was a longer silence, and there was heat in it, fear, even disagreement. Ynpharion was arguing with someone. Kaylin could guess who.

She wants me to save him.

She has not yet decided!

No—you haven't decided. She wants me to save him.

She acknowledges the danger to you; it is the only reason she feels conflicted. She points out that you bear the mark of the Erenne. She says you understand the danger.

She did. Immortals didn't want to be healed. Ynpharion hadn't wanted to be healed. She'd forced herself into his life because she'd wanted to heal him. She'd taken his name. If she'd had any way of scrubbing that knowledge from her brain, she'd've done it in an instant.

She looked at Nightshade, kneeling by his side to gauge his level of injury. His limbs had not fallen in a way that implied they were broken—but back injuries weren't always obvious either. If she wasn't careful—if they weren't careful—moving him could finish him off.



There was no wound that implied loss of blood would kill him. He was pale, but Barrani were often pale. They didn't tan or burn the way normal people did, unless they *wanted* to.

She looked up at Andellen. "Do you know what caused this?"

Andellen was silent for a long beat.

"It's not Shadow?" This was asked with more force.

"It is not Shadow as I understand it. I would guess poison, if I were pressed; I would not like my lord's life to depend on that ill-formed guess."

"What did you see?"

"Nothing. I heard him grunt. I heard him fall. At that point, the attackers who managed to follow us into the house were still alive. They did not remain so for long."

Long enough.

She frowned, sheathing the one long knife she carried. She closed the eye that wasn't behind Hope's translucent wing, and focused. Through Hope's wing, Nightshade's pallor was subtly different. She looked for exposed skin, for any sign of a needle, a dart, but could find nothing.

Andellen's injuries were far more obvious.

"Is it safe to take his hand from the sword?"

"I would not, were I you. *Meliannos* is a weapon meant for fighting many things; not all are, or can be, easily seen. It is possible that his grip on the sword has preserved him."

They were as far away from Castle Nightshade as they could be while remaining within the fief's boundaries. Taking him to his Tower when he was in this shape would be deadly if any of the attacking Barrani remained. Andellen could—and would—fight, as would Severn, but the Barrani wouldn't need a small war band to finish them all off. Andellen's skills could be trusted, but he'd be saddled with two humans as comrades.

"How many of Nightshade's Barrani servants can be trusted?"

She could feel Ynpharion's deep annoyance at the question. Fine. "Did any of the Barrani take a blood oath of service?"



Andellen failed to reply. She looked up at him and revised her opinion about his ability to fight. Neither he nor the lord to whom he'd devoted his life was going to be much help should they be required to fight their way to the Tower where Nightshade would be safest.

"Is there such a thing as magical poison?" she asked instead. *Ynpharion?*

It would not be called poison, Ynpharion replied. Wait a moment, if that's possible for you.

If it was magic, Kaylin's healing might be hampered. If the magic had done damage, she might be able to alleviate that—but she was no longer certain.

She called his name. *Calarnenne.*

He didn't answer.

She called it again, with more force, with true intent. When she did, she almost felt his familiar, lurking presence—but there were no words, no deliberate response.

Hesitating, she continued to study his pallor. "Hope, do you see what I see?"

Hope squawked; it was the affirmative squawk, but it felt slightly hesitant.

Severn?

"No."

But you could see the attackers from the air.

I could see past the barrier. I'm almost certain that barrier wasn't erected by Nightshade. Would you recognize his magic?

Kaylin shook her head. *I never saw him cast a magic powerful enough to leave a sigil. Either that or the magic he used didn't require one. I'm not sure how the Towers function in that regard.* She'd never considered it before.

She hesitated and then reached out to touch Nightshade's pale cheek with her left hand.

His skin was hot.



The cheek that carried the Erenne's mark burned at the contact; she hadn't expected that. She didn't even need Severn to tell her that her cheek was bleeding again. Closing both eyes, she started to examine his physical body the only way she knew how. She built the bridge of power she had always crossed to heal.

She touched nothing.

She felt nothing. Only the fevered heat beneath her palm made clear she hadn't lost the necessary physical contact. That made things simpler.

"He's feverish. I don't know enough about Barrani physiology to know how much of a fever Barrani can safely maintain, or for how long." She couldn't read him at all. She couldn't tell if there were internal injuries she couldn't see.

"We won't make it back to the Tower. We have a Dragon waiting in the street at the edge of the border. If he had permission to fly—and land—we could ask him to take us to the Tower. But the Tower will be a problem. I can't wake Nightshade. I can't *get* his permission, if Tiamaris would even ask it."

"I highly doubt a Dragon is capable of the subtlety required to pass beneath the Tower's notice." Andellen's voice was stiff. Tiamaris was standing at the very edge of Nightshade, and Nightshade had a death-grip on *Meliannos*, one of The Three, weapons considered dragonkillers by the Barrani.

Kaylin grimaced. "Fine. We need Nightshade not to be here. I don't know how much time we'll have. I don't know if there are spies who are waiting until they feel enough time has passed that they can approach. Help me carry him."

"What do you intend?"

"I don't have a Tower. I could ask Tiamaris to shelter him while we try to figure out what's wrong. Tara might have some idea." Before Andellen could reply, she said, "Or I could



take him to my home. Helen used to be the home of a sorcerer. She might be able to give us information.”

The Consort would prefer that, Ynpharion said.

Andellen carried Nightshade across the border. Tiamaris was, as Kaylin had said, waiting—and he hadn’t bothered to transform again. He was a large red Dragon whose scales reflected the day’s light. His eyes were orange, but red flecks—far more visible in eyes of this size—were moving in.

“I need you to carry us to Helen,” Kaylin told him, without preamble.

“I cannot legally do so in this form.”

“I don’t think the city streets will be safe,” she said, ignoring the question of legality, although technically she was on duty. “Can you pick him up in your claws?”

“By unsafe, what do you mean? Corpses seldom pose a problem, except in that they must be removed.”

“Fourteen Barrani are dead by my count. Does that mean much to you?”

“War band, perhaps.” Tiamaris’s voice was a rumble. He knew flying in draconic form was illegal but knew as well that exceptions were often made in emergencies. In what the Emperor deemed an emergency.

Severn nodded. “There may be Barrani in the houses or streets who are waiting to confirm Nightshade’s death. If another gathering of Barrani soldiers is waiting, they’ll be waiting within the city itself.”

“You believe they would be foolish enough to attack in the Emperor’s streets?”

“They were foolish enough to attack Nightshade in his own fief.”

Tiamaris rumbled. “Your request does not appear to be entirely foolish, given Lord Nightshade’s condition. Fine,” he said, dropping High Barrani for Elantran for the single word.



“Andellen is coming with us.” Kaylin let the statement tail into a question by tone alone.

“He will not be an encumbrance. But Kaylin, I do suggest we move.”

Severn hadn't sheathed his weapon. He turned. In the distance, Barrani, armed and armored, could be seen. None were carrying bows.

Ynpharion cursed. To Kaylin's surprise, he chose Leontine. In any other circumstance, she might have been amused.

“Two war bands' worth of Barrani,” Kaylin murmured. She leaped onto Tiamaris's back. Severn sheathed his weapons in a single gesture. He joined her. Andellen did the same. If he had reservations about riding a Dragon's back, the obvious danger overwhelmed them. He trusted Tiamaris more than he trusted the Barrani.

Fool. It's you he trusts.

It didn't matter. Tiamaris pushed himself off the ground. Any thoughts Kaylin might have shared with Ynpharion were lost; she needed to hold on tightly, his ascent was so steeply angled.

Nightshade, he dangled in his forepaws.

Kaylin had no easy way of communicating with Helen at a distance. None of her namebound lived in her house. Severn was directly behind her. Nightshade was unconscious. Lirienne was in the West March. Distance didn't destroy the bond—it couldn't.

That left only Ynpharion, and in this particular case, he couldn't be of much use either.

“You're going to have to land on the lawn!” she shouted. Tiamaris was flying quickly; he kicked up enough wind to make shouting necessary.

He roared a *yes*.

It didn't take long to reach Helen from the fiefs; the Dragon's





speed and the lack of any aerial traffic made the distance seem trivial.

He did land on the lawn, as Kaylin had suggested. Helen *had* a tower large enough to contain a landing Dragon—it was what she opened when Bellusdeo came to visit, because Bellusdeo didn't particularly care about petty Imperial laws that made being an actual Dragon illegal without the Emperor's permission.

Kaylin suspected that blanket permission had been granted. The Emperor was pragmatic at heart. Bellusdeo would continue to be Bellusdeo. She was not his liege, and she was necessary, absolutely necessary, for the future of the race.

Tiamaris was necessary as a fieflord. But Tiamaris retained his position on the Dragon Court, and some of the funding—she'd heard this through Tara—for the reconstruction of the fief had come from Imperial coffers and taxes. Tiamaris was going to be called up on the figurative carpet to justify his draconic form—and his flight across the city proper.

Kaylin wasn't too worried. The fiefs were important to the continued existence of the city, and Nightshade was a fieflord. Towers that lost their captains declined over time; the denizens of *Ravellon* could find larger and larger cracks through which to pass. None of that was good for the Emperor's citizens.

Andellen dismounted first and moved immediately toward his lord; Tiamaris had taken care to set him down as gently as he could, given his form. Severn followed, although he turned to offer Kaylin a hand, should she need it.

She accepted it. Tiamaris's flight to Helen had been far faster—and far less careful—than his flight toward Nightshade. She found her footing and took two steps toward her house.

The door flew open long before she could reach it. Helen was standing in its frame, eyes obsidian. Kaylin shouted, "We need a room!"





Before Helen could answer—not that it was necessary—the Avatar of Kaylin’s home was pushed to one side. Annarion, Mandoran following close behind, ran out to the lawn. He didn’t appear to notice Tiamaris at all.

Tiamaris turned his enormous head to Helen. He nodded, the nod deep with genuine respect. Her eyes remained obsidian, but she returned the Dragon’s nod with a nod of her own before her gaze fell to Annarion’s back.

Tiamaris then pushed up, gaining height without the encumbrance of passengers, and headed straight toward the Imperial Palace.

The moment Annarion appeared in the open door, Andellen rose and stepped back from Nightshade. He stood at a distance as his lord’s younger—and only—brother ran to his side. Annarion knelt there, as if months of argument and bitterness had been a lie. He checked for pulse, for breath, and for the sword that Andellen had carefully resheathed. He then lifted his brother’s limp body. Mandoran would have helped, but Annarion had turned to Helen.

He didn’t speak—or didn’t speak out loud. The cohort, like Kaylin, mostly avoided masking their thoughts. It was so natural for them to speak through their namebonds that they often didn’t speak aloud at all.

Helen stared at Nightshade as Annarion carried him through the open door. Andellen, after a long pause, turned to Helen. “My apologies for our abrupt arrival. The situation was grave. We did not have time to offer advance notice.”

Annarion was often so thrown by his brother’s presence, Helen had asked that Nightshade make an appointment to visit, to better prepare herself for the possibility of conflict.

Nightshade had clearly respected what was only barely a request.

“Emergencies have their own imperatives,” Helen replied,





voice gentle. “Lord Nightshade arrived with Kaylin; it is clear she meant to carry him here. She is the master of the house; what she desires is paramount. Do you wish to share the rooms your lord will convalesce in?”

“If it will not trouble you, yes. I do not believe he will find my presence encumbering.”

“Not in his current state, no.” Helen frowned. “You might consider convalescing yourself. I will have food prepared. You will eat.”

Andellen stared at the Avatar of Kaylin’s home as if she were losing her mind.

“Don’t argue with her,” Kaylin told him. “I do it all the time and it doesn’t do any good.”

Andellen’s gaze clearly said *then what does she mean by master?* But he didn’t say the words aloud. Then again, Helen didn’t give him much time.

“An’Teela will be joining us shortly. I should warn you that the cohort is very loud at the moment. Would you like me to examine Lord Nightshade?”

“If possible. I tried to do it—but my healing magic has been thoroughly blocked. Andellen thought Nightshade’s state might be due to poison.” Poison, Kaylin was certain, she could deal with. But something had prevented any attempt at healing.

“Lord Andellen?” Helen asked, adding the requisite title she felt the guest deserved—and that Kaylin in particular should be using.

“There was no obvious wound that would have caused the collapse. Kaylin has suggested, however, that she found no dart wound, no way poison could be delivered. She believes that the poison, such as it is, is entirely magical in nature.”

Helen smiled. “Kaylin does not feel she has to mask or obscure her thoughts when she is in her own home. Or on its property. Come, enter. I can provide clothing, but it will not last when you step beyond my gates. The cohort, however, has





physical clothing, and I am certain that they would be willing to gift it for your use in the current emergency.”

Severn didn't accompany them into the house.

“You're not coming in?”

“I have some research to do,” he replied. “The Halls of Law will almost certainly demand information about what occurred.”

“The Halls don't interfere in the fiefs.”

“The *Hawks* don't interfere in the fiefs. The fiefs don't fall under legal jurisdiction—but the fiefs are an Imperial concern. News of Nightshade's possible assassination would be of great interest.”

“You want to talk to the Wolflord.”

“No. But I want access to information about the High Court. It might be a waste of time.” His tone implied the opposite.

Kaylin nodded. “Let me know if you find anything relevant.”

Severn turned and walked—quickly—away.

Helen had created rooms for Nightshade's use. She'd probably had them ready to go before Annarion had crossed the threshold, carrying the brother he both loved and hated. She didn't insist that Andellen eat the moment he entered the house; he was, given blood and damaged clothing, not yet fit for the dinner table.

She did ask him questions as they walked toward the new guest quarters, which were down the hall from the regular guest rooms. Andellen answered her.

Kaylin, however, frowned. Or frowned differently; not much had happened today that didn't deserve a frown. “You said you notify Helen before you visit.”

Andellen nodded.



“Which means Nightshade wasn’t coming here.”

Andellen fell silent.

“Who were you meant to meet? Clearly whoever that person is—or was—information about that meeting was leaked to someone who didn’t have your best interests at heart. You were the only person to attend Nightshade.”

Andellen nodded again, but the nod was stiffer.

One guard. One meeting, not held in the fiefs. Whoever Nightshade intended to meet couldn’t enter the fiefs openly. But the intended meeting must have involved Barrani; there was no other way the Barrani war bands would be so ready for action. Only one guard. Someone Nightshade had trusted, inasmuch as he ever trusted Barrani.

He didn’t usually bring Andellen on his visits to Helen.

Ynpharion showed surprising approval. Kaylin could feel it; it annoyed her, it was so condescending.

Anything I say is annoying, Chosen. Praise is condescending. Criticism is condescending.

“Helen?”

“Yes, dear. Are you certain you don’t wish to keep that channel open while you’re here? He is your only immediate conduit to the Consort.”

Kaylin exhaled. “You’re right. Fine.”

Andellen had been silent throughout; Kaylin wasn’t certain he’d heard the conversation.

“He did. I believe his possible opinions to be of value. I understand that you expect my own expertise to be more critical, but I am uncertain.”

“You don’t think it’s magical?”

“I *do* think it’s magical. But you must understand, Kaylin. When I reached the stage where I could choose my own tenants, how many do you believe were sorcerers, mages, or arcanists?”

“Zero.”



Helen nodded. “Magic is not like the study of history. It evolves. Arcanists constantly create new spells by combining old spells, by adding something to historical spells to shift and change the base nature of the magic they attempt to cast. The knowledge I have might prove valuable if you wish to untangle what was cast. But it is ancient, now. It may well be impossible without modern input, modern understanding.”

“Do you think we have the *time* to study and develop something new?”

“No,” Helen replied. “I do not.”

