

CHAPTER ONE

“It’s eight o’clock in the morning. Please remember to fill out your reports and hand in your paperwork.” Had the cheerful and musical voice belonged to a person who could be easily strangled, it would have stopped in mid-sentence.

Sadly, it was the melodious voice of the streetside window which interrupted the bustling and vastly less perky office in which the branch of Law known as the Hawks was based. That window, which had been installed complete with a magical, time-telling voice in some misguided attempt at humor, had been adjusted in the past couple of weeks by Acting Sergeant Mallory, and no one who had to work where they could hear it--and were prevented by office regulations from destroying it--considered the adjustments to be an improvement.

Sergeant Marcus Kassan, the large and currently bristling Leontine behind the central desk in the Hawk’s Office raised his fist and flexed his fingers. Long claws, gleaming in the sun’s light, appeared from beneath his golden fur. He had not yet shattered the window--and given it was installed with the guidance of Imperial Mages, that would have been damn hard--but he looked like he was on the edge of finally doing it in. The betting pool had not yet been won, but at least three people were out money, Private Kaylin Neya being one. The office had discovered, however, that the windows couldn’t be scratched, and Kaylin had argued vociferously that this should have counted as a victory condition. She’d lost.

Then again, Leontines were generally all about the clawing, biting, rending, and ripping out of throats; they weren’t as good with smashing things.

Kaylin’s personal favorite was the new end-of-day message, wherein the cheerful voice of the window told the departing staff that they were to be in the office at 7:00 a.m., and they were to be shaved, where shaving was appropriate, and otherwise clean. She was less keen on the last bit, in which the Hawks were reminded to check the duty roster for last minute adjustments.

“Why doesn’t he just have the mages shut it down?” she asked Caitlin, as Marcus drove new furrows into his desk.

“I think he considers it a reminder of the differences between Sergeant Mallory’s temporary tenure and his more permanent record,” Caitlin replied. The reply, like the question that engendered it, was very, very quiet. This didn’t guarantee that it couldn’t be overheard, but unless Marcus had it in for you, he was capable of a bit of selective deafness. If he hadn’t been, his office would be half-manned for at least an entire duty cycle, and the half that was left alive would be too busy cleaning up to cause trouble.

“Neya!” Given Marcus’s current mood, the fact that there had been no bloodshed was pushing the good will of whatever gods watched over underslept and underpaid police. “You’re due out on beat in five minutes. Stop bothering Caitlin and hit the street.”

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Kaylin’s beat was Elani Street and its surroundings, and her partner was--as it so frequently was, these days--Corporal Severn Handred. He was already kitted out and ready to go when she careened down the hall to the locker room. He raised an eyebrow, one bisected by a slender scar, while he watched her use the wall as a brake.

“What? I’m not late yet.”

“Not yet. It’s hard to be late when the window is nagging.”

She grimaced. “Marcus took his claws to it yesterday.”

“Don’t start.”

“I think that should count.”

“Is the window still in one piece? Then it doesn’t count.” Severn was at the top of the betting pool at the moment, and looked to be secure in his position, but they’d both grown up on some pretty mean streets, and “secure” meant something different to them.

This was probably why they got along so well with the Barrani Hawks. The Barrani were noted for their love of the political. Political, in the context of their race, usually involved assassination, both literally and figuratively, and smallish wars. They understood that anything they owned had to be held against all comers. Those who held less were perfectly willing to test the definition of “secure”, often to the breaking point.

Of course, unless one of those assassination attempts was lucky, the Barrani weren’t about to expire of old age; they didn’t. Age, that is. They had long

memories, and they could easily hold a grudge for longer than Kaylin's whole life; at least two of them did. On the other hand, they made immortality look like one long gripe-fest, admittedly with killer clothing, so it was hard to begrudge them their eternity of suffering. Or of making everyone else they knew suffer. Kaylin, as a human, would eventually clock out, which would in theory earn her some peace.

She dressed quickly, straightening out the cloth and under-padding that had managed to crumple in the wrong places the way it always did, and then rearranged her hair so it was pulled tight and off her face. It wasn't immortality that she envied the Barrani; it was their damn hair. It never got in the way of anything.

She made it out of the locker room with seconds to spare; Severn caught her by the shoulder and adjusted the stick that held her hair tightly in place so that it actually did the job.

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Elani Street was, of course, Charlatan central. It was also, unfortunately, where real magic could be found if you didn't have access to the Imperial Mages, or worse, the mages of the Arcanum, which access pretty much described ninety-nine percent of the city of Elantra. Kaylin had never understood how it was that people capable of genuine enchantments were willing to hunker down with total frauds.

The end result, however, of some fraud was ire, and the end result of ire, if not checked, was directly the purview of the Hawks. It was more colloquially called murder. It didn't happen in Elani often, because even if you were almost certain the so-called magic you'd purchased was a lump of rock, you couldn't be as easily certain that the person who'd sold it to you was incapable of something more substantial.

There were, however, no murders on the books today. Or at least not murders that Kaylin knew about, and therefore not murders that she would be called in to investigate. She'd wanted a few weeks of quiet, and she'd had them. For some reason, it hadn't improved her mood.

Severn noticed. Then again, it was hard not to notice. While he frequently walked streetside, Kaylin's accidental mishaps with merchant boards now numbered four.

“Kaylin.” He stepped to her left, and took up patrol position merchant-side.

She couldn't bring herself to say it was accidental, although she did try. But the boards that promised to find you your One True Love were a particular sore spot for Kaylin, in part because it was impossible to walk past the damn things at *any* time of day, and not see people waiting in the storefront, behind glass. Some had the brains to look ill-at-ease, but if they had the brains, they clearly lacked self-control; some just looked desperate and flaky.

All of them would be disappointed.

“You know they piss me off,” she muttered.

“On the wrong day, sunlight pisses you off.”

“Only in the morning.”

“Noon is not considered morning by most people. Tell me,” he added. “Because if you keep this up, Margot is going to file an incident report, and you'll be in the hotseat.”

Margot was the name of the proprietor of this particular haven for the hopeless. She was a tall, statuesque redhead, with amber eyes that Kaylin would have bet an entire paycheck were magically augmented. Her voice, absent the *actual* drivel she used when speaking, was throaty, deep, and almost sinful just to *hear*.

Kaylin was certain that half of the people who offered Margot their custom secretly hoped that she would be their One True Love. Sadly, she was certain that Margot was also aware of this, and they'd exchanged heated words about the subject of her lovelorn customers in the past. Petty jealousy being what it was, however, Kaylin was liked by enough of the other merchants, mostly the less successful ones, that Margot's attempt to have her summarily scheduled out of existence--or the existence of Elani Street--had so far failed to take.

“If I knew what was bothering me,” she finally admitted, “I would have warned you this morning.”

“Warned me?”

“That I'm in a foul mood.”

“Kaylin, the only person who might not notice that is Roshan, Marrin's newest orphan. And I have my doubts.”

“I have no idea what's wrong,” she continued, steadfastly ignoring that

particular comment. “The foundling hall is running so smoothly right now you’d think someone rich had died and willed the foundlings all their money. Rennick’s play was a success, and the Swords have been cut to a tenth their previous riot-watch numbers. I’m not on report. Mallory is no longer our *acting* Sergeant. Caitlin is finally back in the office after her leave.

“But--” She exhaled heavily. “There’s just--something. I have no idea what the problem is. And if you *even suggest* that it has something to do with the time of month, you’ll be picking up splinters of your teeth well into next year.”

He touched her, gently and briefly, on the shoulder. “You’ll let me know when you figure it out?”

“You’ll probably be the first person to know. Unless Marcus radically alters the duty roster.”

#

The day did not get better when their patrol took them to Evanton’s shop. Kaylin didn’t stop there when she was on duty, because rifling his kitchen took time, and sitting and drinking the scalding hot tea he prepared when she did visit took more of the same.

Like most merchants, Evanton’s shop had a sandwich board outside. The paint was faded, the wood slightly warped. His sign, however, did not offend her; she barely noticed it. She certainly didn’t trip over it in a way that would snap its hinges shut.

But she did notice the young man who came barreling out of the door toward her. Grethan. Once Tha’alani. Hell, still Tha’alani. But crippled, shut off from the gifts that made the Tha’alani possibly the most feared race in the city. He couldn’t read minds. The characteristic racial stalks of the Tha’alani, suspended at the height of his forehead, just beneath his dark, flat hair, still weaved frantically in the air in a little I’m-upset-help-me dance, and most people--most humans, she corrected herself--wouldn’t know he was incapable of actually putting them to use to invade their thoughts.

“Kaylin!” He said, speaking too loudly in a street that was sparsely populated.

The people that were in it looked up immediately. You could always count on curiosity to dim common sense, *especially* in Elani Street. Evanton was

known to be one of the street's genuine enchanters; he would have to be, given that he was also one of the few who still had a storefront and never offered love-potions or fortunes. Had he visible size or obvious power, he would probably have terrified most of the residents. He didn't.

She spoke in a much lower voice. It was her way of giving a subtle hint; the less subtle hints usually got her a reprimand, and Grethan looked wide-eyed and wild enough that she didn't think he deserved them. Yet. "Grethan? Has something happened to Evanton?"

He took a deep breath. "No. He told me you'd be coming, and he set me to watch."

Had it been anyone other than Evanton, Kaylin would have asked how he'd known. Evanton, however, was not a man who casually explained little details like that to an apprentice, and if Grethan was valued because he was Evanton's first promising apprentice in more years than Kaylin had been alive, he was still on the lower rungs of the ladder.

He was also, she thought, too damn smart to ask.

"You're not busy, are you?" Grethan asked, hesitating at the door.

"Not too busy to speak with Evanton if he has something he needs to say," she replied.

Severn, damn him, added, "She's busy plotting the downfall of Margot."

Grethan snorted. "You're probably going to have to stand in line for that," he told her, his stalks slowing their frantic dance. "But Evanton's in a bit of a mood today, so you might not want to mention her by name."

"I never want to mention her by name. You'll note that it wasn't me who did," she replied, giving Severn a very distinct Look.

"Evanton is also not the only one who's in, as you put it, a bit of a mood," Severn told Grethan. "Maybe the two of us should wait outside somewhere safe. Like, say, the docks."

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Evanton, contrary to Grethan's report, was seated by the long bar he called a counter. It *was* a bar; some old tavern had sold it to Evanton years before Kaylin had met him. If you could see one square inch of its actual surface, it was a tidy day. Given that Evanton was working with beads, needles, leather patches, and some herbs and powders Kaylin didn't immediately recognize it,

it wasn't a day for surface area.

He looked up as she approached, his lips compressed around a thin line of needles. Or pins. She couldn't see the heads, and couldn't, at this distance, tell the difference. He looked more bent and aged than usual--which, given he was the oldest living person she'd ever met if you didn't count Barrani or Dragons, said something. Age never showed with Barrani or Dragons, anyway.

"Grethan said you wanted to see me," she said, carefully removing a pile of books from a stool a little ways into the shop. Books were the safest bet; you couldn't break most of them if the precarious pile chose to topple, and you couldn't crush them--much--by accidentally stepping on them.

He began to carefully poke pins into the top of his wrinkled apron. When he'd pushed the last of them home, he looked like a very bad version of a sympathetic magic doll, handled by someone who didn't realize they were supposed to stick the pins in point first. "Wanted is not the right word," he said curtly.

Kaylin, accustomed to his moods, shrugged. "I'm here anyway."

"Why?"

"Because Grethan said--"

"I mean, why were you sent to Elani today?"

She frowned. "We weren't *sent*. This is our beat, this rotation. For some reason, we're expected to be able to handle the petty fraud and swindling that passes for business-as-normal in Charlatan Central."

"We would be you and your Corporal?"

"He's not *my* Corporal, and yes."

Evanton nodded. He set aside the cloth in his lap, and put beads into about fifty different jars. He did all of this slowly. Kaylin, whose middle name was not exactly patience on the best of working days, sat and tried not to grind her teeth. She knew damn well he could talk and work at the same time; it was what he usually did.

"This does not strictly concern the Hawks," he finally told her, as he rose. "Can I make you tea?" Evanton did not actually *like* tea; he did, however, seem to find comfort in the social custom of being old enough to make it and

offer it.

“I’m on duty, Evanton.”

“Just answer the question, Private Neya.”

She sighed. “Yes,” she told him. “If you’ll talk while you’re doing it, you can make me tea. I don’t suppose you’ve found cups that have handles?”

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The answer to the question was either no, or she’d annoyed him enough by asking that he’d failed to find them. He made tea, and she waited, seated at the side of a kitchen table that was--yes--cluttered with small piles of daily debris. Still, none of the debris moved or crawled, so it was more or less safe.

Evanton’s brows gathered and his forehead furrowed as he sat across from her. This only deepened the lines that time had etched there. “Very well. This does not, as I mentioned, concern the Hawks. It does not, entirely, concern me yet.”

“But you told Grethan to watch for me if I happened to pass by.”

“I may have. He was hovering, and I dislike that when I’m working.”

Had he been in less of a mood, she would have pointed out that he usually disliked the absence of hoverers when he was working, because he liked to have people fetch and carry; not even his guests were exempt from those duties. She bit her tongue, however. It was slightly better than burning it.

“I was in the elemental garden this morning,” he added.

She stilled. When he didn’t elucidate, she said, “Isn’t that where you do some of your work?”

“I work there when I am not at all interested in interruption,” he replied. “That was not, however, the case this morning.”

All of Kaylin’s many growing questions shriveled and died. She even put her hands around the sides of the cup, because she felt a momentary chill.

Evanton sighed. He rose, and pulled the key-ring from his left arm. It was a key-ring only in the loose sense of the word, being larger around than any part of that arm. “Private,” he said gravely.

“I’m not sure I ever want to set foot in your garden again,” she told him, but she pushed herself away from her teacup.

“I’m sure you don’t,” was the terse reply. “Especially not today. But I’m

tired. If you see it for yourself, you'll spare me the effort of coming up with words."

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Because he was Evanton, and his home was a mess, the halls they now walked were narrow and cramped. Shelves butted against the walls, in mismatched colors and heights. "Is this one new?" Kaylin asked, in a tone of voice that clearly said, *how could you cram another bookshelf into this space?*

"I have an apprentice now," Evanton replied. "And I'm not about to move my work so that he has someplace to shelve his."

She winced. She'd had issues with Grethan in the past, but at the moment she felt sorry for him; having to deal with Evanton in *this* mood should have been enough to send him screaming for cover.

Then again, he *was* out somewhere with Severn.

Evanton reached the unremarkable door at the hall's end. It looked, to Kaylin's eye, more rickety and warped than the last time she'd seen it. He slid the key into the lock, but before he opened the door, he turned to Kaylin and said, "Don't be surprised to find the garden somewhat changed since you last visited."

Having offered warning, he pushed the door open.

It opened, as always, into a space that was larger in all ways than the building that girded it; it had, for one, no obvious ceiling, and no clearly visible walls. This garden, as Evanton called it, was older by far than the city of Elantra; it was older than the Dragons or the Barrani. According to Sanabalis, it had always been here in one guise or another, and while the world existed, it always would.

Evanton was its keeper.

As jobs went, it certainly promised job security. Sadly, a bad mistake on the job also promised to end the world, or come so close what was left wouldn't be in any shape to complain or fire him.

Kaylin blinked at the harshness of this particular daylight, and she followed Evanton in through the door--and into the gale.

On the first occasion Kaylin had come here, led by Evanton, it had been breezy, warm, and quiet. He had assured her at that time that that state was the norm for his garden. Looking at his back, she saw his grubby working tunic

had been replaced entirely by deep blue robes--and that these robes were now the new homes of trailing rivulets of water. The wind picked at his sodden hem and strands of his hair. Clearly the garden wasn't giving him much respect.

Kaylin's hair flew free as the stick Severn had carefully adjusted was yanked out by the wind; this lasted for at most half a minute before the strands were too heavy. They now clung to her face.

"Evanton!"

He didn't turn at the sound of his name, and Kaylin shouted it again, putting more force behind it. When he still didn't turn, she took a step toward him, and saw that the grass--or what had once been grass--was actually a few inches of mud. Her boots sank into it.

If the small and separate shrines that had been dedicated in corners of this place were still standing, the visibility was poor enough that she couldn't see them.

She almost shouted his name again, but he turned just as she reached his back. "Follow," he told her, cupping his hands around his mouth and shouting to be heard.

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