

Cast in Ruin: Chapter One

The worst thing about near-world-ending disasters according to Sergeant Marcus Kassan—at least the ones that had miraculously done very little damage—was the paperwork they generated. Two departments over, the Hawks required to man desks visible—and accessible—to the public would probably have disagreed. Vehemently. In Leontine.

In the day and a half since four very large Dragons, a small army, and every Sword on the roster had converged on Elani street, there'd been a steady stream of people coming to the office that bordered Missing Persons to make complaints, demand redress, or simply ask for some assurance that the world had not, in fact, ended. The numbers of civilian complaints had, in theory, peaked.

Theory, as usual, was invented by some bureaucrat in a high tower who didn't have to actually *deal* with said complaints. Private Neya, however, wasn't even Corporal, let alone lofty bureaucrat. She was part of the emergency shift of Hawks who'd been crammed into a workspace—already tight to begin with—in order to deal with the civilians. The Hawks who regularly manned these desks were generally older and certainly better suited to the task.

They appeared to appreciate the help about as much as the help appreciated being there.

“You're beat Hawks,” her Sergeant had growled. For some of the officers who worked in the Halls of Law, growl would be figurative. In the case of Kaylin Neya, it was literal: Her Sergeant was a Leontine. “You deal with the public every day.”

“Right. We deal with the public accused of stealing, mugging, and murder.” All in all, it didn't give the brightest window into the human condition. When Sergeant Kassan failed to even blink, she added, “You know them—they're the people I don't have to worry about offending?”

Marcus, however, had failed to be moved. Kaylin had not, which is why she currently occupied half a stranger's desk.

“You were assigned to Elani,” he pointed out. “At the moment, Elani is still—”

“Under quarantine. Yes. I realize that.”

“Since you can’t do your job there for the next few days, you can make yourself useful in the front rooms, since we *are* still paying you.”

Not surprisingly, many of the reports delivered by timid, angry, or deranged civilians involved descriptions of a giant Dragon roaming the streets. His color varied from report to report, as did his activities; he reportedly breathed fire, ate people—or at least large, stray dogs—and leveled buildings. He was alternately the usual Dragon size—which, to be fair, was not small—or giant; he was also deafening.

This last part was accurate. The rest, not so much. Kaylin, of course, knew the Dragon being described. Dragons were forbidden, by law, from assuming their native forms within the City of Elantra without express permission from the Eternal Emperor. Lord Tiamaris, however, had received that dispensation. He was, the last time she’d seen him, a shade that approached copper. He did have an impressive wingspan, but none of the eyewitnesses had claimed to see him fly.

Most of the witnesses, however, claimed that Tiamaris led a small army. The descriptions of this army varied almost as widely as descriptions of Tiamaris himself. The word *Barbarian* came up almost as often as *Savage*, but both ran a distant second and third to *Giant*. She particularly liked the two people—who had come in together and were shoving each other in between sentences—who claimed that they were an army of the shambling undead. Their size was, according to these civilian reports, all over the map; their numbers ranged from “lots” to “fifty thousand.” Most accounts agreed, however, that the strangers were armed.

This last had the benefit of being accurate. The strangers—or refugees—themselves were, as far as anyone knew, newcomers to the world—the idea that this was *a* world, rather than the *only* world being almost as new to most of the authorities as the refugees themselves. According to the Palace, and more important, to Lord Sanabalis, the refugees numbered roughly three thousand strong. As their destination was the fief of Tiamaris, no formal census had been taken or even considered. They wouldn’t technically be citizens of Elantra.

They weren’t giants, a race that Kaylin privately thought entirely in the realm of children’s stories, but they were about eight feet in height at the upper end; the children were taller than Kaylin. They didn’t speak Elantran, which was Kaylin’s mother tongue; they didn’t speak Barrani, either, Barrani being the language in which the laws were written. But the Imperial linguists, with the aid of Ybelline Rabon’alani, had gone with Tiamaris. They’d been the only people who’d looked truly *excited* at the prospect of

three thousand armed, hungry, and exhausted eight-foot-tall strangers. They were also, however, absent from the civilian reports, and therefore not her problem.

Kaylin had received some training in speaking with civilians, because some of her job did involve talking to possible witnesses in a way that didn't terrify them so much they denied seeing anything; putting it to use in the crowded office full of strangers was almost more than she could stomach. She did not, however, point out that they were blind or out of their minds; she transcribed most of what they said with unflinching attention.

This was, in part, because in the end Marcus would have to *read* most of these, or at least sign them. He loathed paperwork.

On the bright side? The unusual births, the rains of blood—and, in one area, frogs—and the unfortunate and inexplicable change in the City's geography, had ceased. Elani, however, now had a stream running along one side of the street, and the blood-red flowers that had popped up in the wake of the refugees were proving more hardy than tangleknot grass.

It would probably only be a matter of time before some enterprising fraud picked them, bottled them, and sold them as an elixir of youth; it *was* Elani street, after all.

Kaylin glanced at the small mirror at the end of the overwhelmed desk she was half behind. The Records of the Halls of Law, forbidden to the rank and file during the state of emergency, were now once again deemed safe to use, which meant the mirror added more external chatter to a loud and bustling office.

Kaylin tried to avoid listening to it; it only annoyed her. The Barrani Hawks were, of course, excused external desk duty. Something about tall, slender immortals put normal civilians off their stride; for some reason they felt the Barrani were arrogant and condescending. This was probably, in Kaylin's opinion, because they had working eyes and ears. The Aerial Hawks were excused the "emergency" shift work because the small size—and low ceilings—of the cramped room made having large wings a disadvantage. In theory.

Luckily, the force contained enough humans that the extra shifts decreed as necessary by some higher-up could be filled. If Kaylin knew who he—or she—was, there'd be a new picture on the dartboard in the office by the end of the week. Who knew a hand could cramp so damn badly when the only activity of the day was writing and trying to hide the fists that incredible stupidity normally caused.

Severn Handred, her Corporal partner, had fared better, in large part because he didn't *mind* the stupidity. He met her when she managed to edge

her way out of the single door that led—from the inside of the Halls of Law—to the office itself. There was a door on the opposite wall as well, but as it led *into* the people were waiting to make their incredibly frustrating reports, Kaylin avoided that one.

“Well?” he asked. He was leaning against the wall, arms folded across his chest.

“I didn’t kill anyone,” she replied.

“That bad?”

“I think it was the conspiracy of evil chickens that did me in.”

“Pardon?”

“You heard me. I honestly have no idea how more of the Hawks in that damn office aren’t arraigned on assault charges.”

“Bridget keeps them in line.”

“Bridget?”

“Sergeant Keele.”

Kaylin cringed. “I could see that.” Sergeant Keele was one of the staff regulars; this was her domain. She’d been entirely undelighted at the additional staff thrust upon her, in part because she felt it impugned her ability to handle the situation. She had, however, been brisk, if chilly, and she didn’t mince words—or orders. If hazing were part of the unofficial schedule of the regular office workers, it wasn’t something *she* had time for, so it had to be damn subtle.

“Can you top evil chickens?” she asked hopefully.

He thought about it for a minute. “Probably not.”

“Dinner?”

He nodded slowly. “You didn’t happen to check the mirror before you left?”

“I shut it off. Why?”

“Sergeant Kassan is expecting us.”

“What? Why?”

“The important question is actually, ‘When?’.”

She swore.

Caitlin was still at her desk, but many of the regulars had already vacated theirs and headed home, something Kaylin had every hope of doing soon. The office den mother looked up as Kaylin entered. “Bad day, dear?” she asked.

Kaylin shrugged. “It could have been worse.”

“Oh?”

“I could have been the one who had to listen to Mrs. Erickson.”

Caitlin, used to seeing some of the paperwork that crossed between offices, grimaced. Mrs. Erickson was famous—or infamous—for the messages she carried; they were invariably from the dead. The nosy, busybody dead. They ranged in importance from left shoes—Kaylin had refused to believe this until the report was pulled and shoved under her nose—to Empire-spanning conspiracies against the Dragon Emperor. Since Mrs. Erickson liked to bake, all her messages were conveyed alongside cookies or small cakes, none of which had ever caused even the slightest bit of indigestion.

“What was today’s message?”

“I missed it—I was too busy dealing with the reports about the invading army and its Dragon. Whatever her dead messenger was concerned about, though, it was long. How were things here?”

“Well, Margot is threatening to join the Merchants’ Guild and file a formal guild complaint if we don’t lift the quarantine on Elani street soon. She’s also seeking financial redress for economic losses taken because of the involuntary closure of her store.”

Kaylin snorted. “Let her. I can’t quite decide who’d be the loser in that transaction—Margot or the guild.” Kaylin despised both with a frequently expressed and very colorful passion.

“I don’t believe Lord Grammayre is looking for *more* official difficulty at the moment.”

At that, Kaylin’s expression flattened. “You’ve had word?”

“Not official word, no. But the investigation into the Exchequer is *not* going well. The Human Caste Court has closed ranks around him. The Emperor has not closed the investigation, but by all reports he is...not pleased.” She paused, and then added, “Word was, however, sent from the Palace. For you.”

Kaylin winced. “It’s only been *two days*,” she murmured.

“Two days, for Lord Diarmat, is long enough.” Marcus’s voice growled from behind her.

Marcus was at his desk, surrounded by the usual teetering piles of paper; Kaylin counted three. The gouges in the surface of said desk didn’t appear to be deeper or more numerous, which probably meant his mood hadn’t descended to foul yet.

“You’re late,” he growled. Since his irises were a distinct gold, Kaylin said, “Not according to Sergeant Keele, sir.” She walked over to his desk and took up position in front of it; Severn lingered behind.

Without preamble, he handed her a set of curved papers. She took them as if they were live cockroaches and began to read. The top letter—and it

was a letter—was from Lord Sanabalis of the Dragon Court.

Sanabalis had extended the period of grace in which she was allowed to skip the magic class he was responsible for making certain she attended; the transitioning of three thousand refugees who required housing and food were of primary import for the next week. Or two. He wished her luck during the extra work that this type of emergency generated, by which she inferred he knew of her day's work in the outer office.

The second letter was from Diarmat, and it was not, by any reasonable definition, a letter; it was a set of orders. She read it once, and then glanced up over the top edge of the page to see Leontine eyes watching her carefully.

"He is," Marcus said drily, "the Commander of the Imperial Guard, a force that is almost entirely composed of humans."

"Have you had to interact with them?"

"On several occasions. I've survived."

"Have they?"

He raised a brow; his eyes, however, stayed the same mellow gold. She had a sneaking suspicion he was enjoying this.

Lord Diarmat—whose classes were to be conducted after-bloody-hours on her *own* time—considered three thousand refugees and a significant area of the city under quarantine unworthy of mention. She swore.

Caitlin coughed.

"He *reminds* me that the first of our lessons starts *tonight*."

"Then you'd best have something to eat, dear," Caitlin told her. "I highly doubt that Lord Diarmat will be casual enough to offer to feed you."

Feed her? If she was lucky, he'd be civil enough not to eat her himself.

She looked at the window. "Time?" she asked it.

"Five hours and a half," the window replied. "Please check the duty roster on your way out."

Because she was feeling masochistic, she did. She was penciled in for yet another day on outsiders' desk duty.

Severn kept her company as she trudged down the street toward the baker's. He also handed her the coins she needed to pay Manners Forall, who happened to be manning his own stall. He smiled and said, "We don't usually see you this late in the month." It was true. This late in the month she was usually scrounging for less expensive food.

Severn said nothing, but he said it loudly, reminding her in silence of the budgeting discussion they'd failed to find the time for. It was the only silver lining on the thundercloud of Lord Diarmat and his so-called etiquette lessons. Severn didn't *remain* silent, however, and they wrangled over times

for yet a different lesson in Kaylin's educational schedule while they made their way to the Palace.

The streets weren't noticeably less crowded than they had been; apparently the crazed fear of Dragons and their itinerant armies didn't stop most people from going about their daily business. Severn left her at the Palace gates, pausing only to check her wrist. There, the bracer that she wore by Imperial Decree caught the lights above. It was heavy enough to be the gold that it looked, and it was studded with what appeared to be three large gems: a diamond, a ruby, and a sapphire.

"I haven't taken it off since we got back from Evanton's," she told him. But she didn't resent his checking, much. Diarmat wasn't known for his flexibility. "I'll see you in the morning. If I'm still alive." Severn was also penciled in for crazy duty; he minded it less ferociously.

The very forbidding and starched man whose title she couldn't recall met her at the doors; he stood well inside them, and somewhat behind the Imperial Guards who gave her a quick once-over. It was cursory, however; the man stepped forward and said in his clipped High Barrani, "Lord Diarmat is expecting you, Private Neya. If you will follow me."

She did. She could now reliably make her way to the chambers in which Sanabalis frequently conducted his meetings, and she could—if she were feeling foolishly brave—find the Library unescorted. She had no idea what Diarmat called home—or office—in the Palace, and had she not been certain of finding him in it, she would have been genuinely curious.

But during the handful of times she'd met him, he'd failed to be anything remotely resembling friendly, and *tolerant* was a word that she suspected he'd failed to learn, although his High Barrani was otherwise flawless. Severn had said that his Elantran was also flawless—and completely free from colloquialisms. Kaylin had already decided it was best to stick with High Barrani; it was a lot harder to make verbal gaffes in that language.

The starched man paused in front of a set of double doors that looked suspiciously unlike any classroom doors she'd ever entered. There were no guards at the doors, which was good. The doors were warded, which was bad. Not only were they warded, but there appeared to be two damn wards, one on each door. She glanced at her guide and said without much hope, "I don't suppose those are just decorative?"

"No, they are not. You are required to touch both wards; you are not, however, required to touch them at the same time, should you find yourself, for reasons of injury, unable to do so."

Kaylin's natural aversion to magic was not quite as strong as her aversion to having her head bitten off by an angry Dragon Lord, but it was close. She stepped up to the doors, stood in arm's reach, and grimaced; the wards were at higher than shoulder height. She guessed they'd been designed for the regular variety of Imperial Palace Guard; they had, among other things, fairly strict height requirements.

Grimacing, she placed her left palm on the left door ward, and felt the strong bite of magic travel up her arm so forcefully her arm went numb. The ward, however, began to glow; it wasn't a comforting sight, given that the light was a sickly, pulsing green. Any hope that her guide had been wrong vanished; the door didn't budge. Aware of his presence, she kept her teeth shut firmly over the Leontine words that were trying to leap out, and lifted her hand again.

It was her left hand. She was right-handed, and with her luck, the first thing Diarmat would do was ask her to write some long Barranian test; she couldn't afford to have a numb, useless writing hand. It was awkward, but she lifted her left arm again—without cursing—and placed her palm more or less in the center of its damn ward.

The door ward began to glow a livid, pale purple. It hurt to touch, and given her arm was half-numb, this said something. Unfortunately, the door wards *also* said something—and from the sounds of the echo, it was in Dragon. She did curse, then; Leontine spoken with a human throat couldn't possibly be audible over the racket the ward had caused.

To make matters worse—as if the universe needed to remind her that they could be—the hall, which was long and high ceilinged, began to fill with Imperial Palace Guards. Her starched guide didn't blink or move as she turned to face them. Give them this: they were impressive. They wore heavier armor than patrolling Hawks, they carried large swords, and they moved in frightening unison, as if this were some arcane drill and they'd be demoted if one foot was out of place.

She doubted she'd appreciate it more if their weapons had not, in fact, been pointing toward her. She didn't bother drawing her own; all she had at the moment were daggers, and one numb hand. Instead, she lifted her hands—slowly—and stood very still. The doors at her back rolled open.

“Thank you, gentlemen,” a familiar voice said. “That will be all.”

He received one very noisy salute—gauntlets did that in an otherwise silent hall—as she turned to face him. She could hear the guards form up and retreat, but didn't bother to watch them leave. Instead, she faced Lord Diarmat of the Dragon Court.

He was slightly taller than Tiamaris, and he had the broad—and, sadly,

muscular—build of Dragons in human form; he also had Dragon eyes. His lower membranes muted their color, but in this light, they were gold, although the gold seemed tinted with orange. Then again, gold was a happy color, and she doubted that someone with an expression that consistently severe could *be* happy. He was not, however, dressed in natural Dragon armor; he wore robes with a distinct Imperial Crest blazoned across the chest.

“Lord Diarmat,” she said, tendering as formal a bow as she could.

“I see that reports of your tardiness are exaggerated.” He glanced at the doors. “And reports of your effect on some of the more formal wards are not.”

She managed to say nothing.

“Nor, it appears, are reports about the need for some formal structure in your interactions with the Imperial Court.” He looked past her to the man who had led her here. “Thank you,” he said quietly. “Please send someone in two hours to escort Private Neya out; she is not, I believe, familiar with the Palace.”

The man nodded briskly. “Lord Diarmat,” he said, and then turned and walked off.

Diarmat now gestured toward the room behind the offending doors. “Please,” he said. “Enter.”

The room was, as the doors suggested, large. The ceilings were at least as high as the ones that characterized the public halls, and the walls were thirty feet away from the open doors on all sides. The whole of the office Kaylin generally called home would have comfortably fit in the space, although some of the furniture would have to be moved to accommodate it. There were two desks in the far corner, and an arrangement of chairs around one central table of medium height; there was a long table that seemed like a dining table, although no similar chairs were tucked beneath it.

Windows opened into a courtyard that had no view of the Halls of Law—and no view of the streets of the City, either; instead, there were stones that were arranged at various heights and distances, as if it were meant to be a garden. She saw doors leading out of the room to either side. This was as far from a typical classroom as a room could get. She glanced at Diarmat, waiting for his instructions.

He didn’t bother with them. Instead, he crossed the room and headed toward his desk. It was unblemished, and no mounds of paperwork teetered precariously anywhere in sight; there was an inkstand, and three small bars of wax. Even paper was absent. He took the chair behind the desk, and then frowned at the doors behind Kaylin.

“Should I close them?”

He spoke a single curt word and the doors began to roll shut on their own, which was all of his reply. He then stared at her, unblinking, until she made her way to the front of the desk.

He took parchment out of a desk drawer, placed it—dead center—on its surface, and uncapped his ink. “You have been a student of Lord Sanabalis for some months now.”

“Yes.”

“You have, however, shown little progress in the classes he teaches.”

It was a bit of a sore point, because little progress, to Kaylin’s mind, meant waste of time. On the other hand, at least she was *paid* to attend Sanabalis’s mandatory classes.

“Lord Sanabalis, under the auspices of the Imperial Order of Mages, has developed a level of tolerance for the lazy and the inexact that is almost unheard of among our kind. Mages are not generally considered either stable or biddable; were it not for the necessity of some of their services, and the existence of the Arcanum as a distinctly less welcome alternative, they would not be tolerated at all.” His tone made clear that were it up to him, neither the Imperial Order nor the Arcanum would be long for this world.

Which was a pity, because Kaylin agreed with him, and this might be the *only* point on which there would be any common ground. Defending either organization was not, however, her job.

“I am not Lord Sanabalis. What he tolerates, I will not tolerate. I have perused some of your previous academic records, but not in any depth; I no longer consider them relevant. You were not raised in an environment with strong Barrani influences, and you will therefore have little understanding of the way in which those influences govern some part of the Palace.

“They are not, however, your chief concern. I am told that you have a strong grasp of High Barrani. When the Court is in session, the language of choice defaults to High Barrani in the presence of races that are not Dragon. Were you not required to interact with the Emperor, neither you, nor I, would be required to waste time in this endeavour.” His tone made clear whose time he thought more valuable. “You will, however, be required to speak.

“Speech, were it the only requirement, you might be able to manage. Because you are considered *worthy* of such a privilege, however, correct form and behavior will be *assumed*. Any deviation from those forms will be seen as a breach, not of etiquette, but of respect. Disrespect of the Emperor is ill advised.”

She nodded. This didn’t make his expression any friendlier, and it didn’t

make her any happier; she bit back any words to that effect, and instead said, “What did I do wrong when you appeared at the doors?” She spoke as smoothly and neutrally as possible, but she couldn’t quite stop her cheeks from reddening.

He raised a Dragon brow. “That,” he told her, “is an almost perceptive question.”

Not perceptive enough to answer? She waited. The problem with immortals was that, short of immediate emergencies, they *had* forever; what seemed a long time to a normal person was insignificant to them. Their arrogance seemed to stem from the fact that they’d seen and experienced so much more than a mortal could achieve in an entire lifetime, it negated mortal experience.

Kaylin didn’t like being treated like a child in the best of circumstances—no one did—but Immortals *always* felt they were dealing with children when mortals were involved. Some were just way better at hiding it. Diarmat clearly couldn’t be bothered. She waited, and he returned to the paper beneath his hands and began to write. She could actually read upside-down writing; it was one of the things she’d figured out when boredom had taken hold in her early classes and she was trying to be less obvious about it. But in this case, she had a suspicion he’d notice, and it seemed career limiting.

She was also no longer a bored student; she was here as a Hawk, not a mascot. She left her hands loosely by her sides, and stared at a point just past his left shoulder while she waited for some instruction—to sit, to stand, to go away, to answer questions. Anything.

What felt like half an hour later she was *still* standing in front of his damn desk, and he was *still* writing. He had told her nothing at all about the rules that governed the Imperial Court or its meetings. He hadn’t spoken of any particular style of dress, hadn’t given her any information about forms of address, hadn’t demonstrated any of the salutes or bows with which one might open speech. Since she’d managed to eat something on the hurried walk over, her stomach didn’t embarrass her by speaking when she wouldn’t.

At the end of the page, he looked up. Folding the paper in three he reached for wax, and this, he melted by the simple expedient of breathing on it slightly. He then pressed a small seal into what had fallen on the seam. He reached across the desk and handed her the letter. “This,” he said, “is for the perusal of Lord Grammayre on the morrow.” He rose, and made his way out from behind his bastion of a desk; there, he exhaled. It was loud.

“Very well,” he said, as if he was vaguely disappointed. “You have some ability to display patience. Your posture is not deplorable. Your ability

to comport yourself does not directly affect the respect in which the Halls of Law are now held.” He spoke in crisp, perfectly enunciated, High Barrani. He now opened a drawer, and a thick sheaf of papers appeared on the desk.

These, Kaylin thought, would be the various educational reports he had barely, in his own words, perused.

He handed them to her; she slid the letter to the Hawklord into her tunic, and took the offending pile, glancing briefly at what lay on top of it. Transcripts, yes. To her surprise, the first one was *not* a classroom diatribe from a frustrated or angry teacher.

“This is a case report,” she said before she could stop herself.

“It is.” He walked around to her side. “Do you recognize it?”

She nodded.

“You were working in concert with two Barrani Hawks.”

“Teela and Tain,” she said. She didn’t flip through the report; she knew which case this was. All boredom or irritation fled, then.

“It was, I believe, the breaking of a child prostitution ring.”

“It was.”

“Do you recall the chain of events that led to the deaths of some of the men involved?”

She nodded again, although it was almost untrue: she didn’t remember the end clearly at all. She remembered her utter, unstoppable *rage*. And she remembered the deaths that rage—and her unbridled magic—had caused.

His silence could have meant many things, but since his face was as expressive as cold stone, she didn’t bother to look at him.

“I would like you to peruse the rest of the documents,” he finally said.

She did. It wasn’t a small pile—although it wasn’t Leontine in proportion—but there really weren’t that many cases in which she’d lost control of her inexplicable magic to such devastating effect; she had literally skinned a man alive. She didn’t regret it. Not in any real way. He would have died anyway, after his trial. But...the trial had been moot, and Marcus had *not* been happy.

The next report made her right hand tighten into a white-knuckled fist before she got halfway down the first page. It wasn’t a case report. It wasn’t a report that the Halls of Law would ever generate.

It was, instead, a report on the Guild of Midwives. She almost dropped the report on the desk. Instead, she forced her hand to relax—as much as it could—while she read. It detailed all the emergency call-ins she’d done—and it detailed, in some cases, the results. She lifted the top page. Her memory wasn’t the best, but she thought, looking briefly at dates and commentary, none in a hand she recognized, that it was more complete than

anything she could have written for him, had he asked.

Grim, she flipped through the pile, and was unsurprised to see that he also had a similar report for each visit she'd made to Evanton's shop in Elani street. This angered her less; she *knew* the Dragon Court spied on Evanton.

There was a brief report of her visits to the High Halls, again not much to fuss about; there was a report on every visit she had made in recent months to the fiefs—any fief crossing. There was a report that followed her movements to, and from, both the Leontine Quarter and the Tha'alani Quarter. Diarmat was silent as she read, as if waiting for a reaction she didn't want to give him the pleasure of seeing.

But the final report was of the Foundling Hall.