

CAST IN SHADOW

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and gave me exactly the encouragement
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CHAPTER 1

Black circles under the eyes were not, Kaylin decided, a very attractive statement. Neither was hair matted with old sweat, or eyes red with lack of sleep. She accepted the fact that on this particular morning, mirrors were *not* going to be her friend. Luckily, she didn't have many of them in the small quarters she called home. She got out of bed slowly, studiously avoided the short hall that led from her bolted doors to the kitchen, the closets and the large space she lived in otherwise, and lifted clothing from beneath a rumpled pile, examining it carefully.

It sort of looked clean.

She pulled the linen tunic over her head, cursed as her hair caught in the strings that secured it and yanked, hard. Shadows fell over the ledge of her single window, stretching across the floor at an ominous angle. She was going to be late. Again.

Pants were less tricky; she only had a few, and chose the black leather ones. They were, at the moment, the only ones she owned that weren't cut, torn or bloody.

She'd have to ask Iron Jaw for a better clothing allowance. Or more time to spend the pittance she *did* have.

The mirror in the hall began to glow, and she cursed under her breath. She'd clearly have to ask him on a *different* morning.

"Coming," she muttered.

The mirror flashed, light hanging in the room like an extended, time-slowed bolt of lightning. Iron Jaw was in a lousy mood, and it wasn't even lunch. He *hated* to use the mirrors.

She buttoned up her pants, pulled on her boots and sidled her way toward the mirror, hoping that the light was the effect of lack of sleep. Not much hope there, really.

"Kaylin, where the *hell* have you been?"

No, the mirror this morning was definitely not her friend. She pulled her hair up, curled it in a tight bun and shoved the nearest stick she could find through its center. Then she picked up the belt on the table just to the left of that mirror and donned it, adjusting dagger hilts so they didn't butt against her lower ribs.

"Kaylin Neya, you'd better answer soon. I know you're there."

Putting on her best we-both-know-it's-fake smile, she walked over to the mirror and said, sweetly, "Good morning, Marcus."

He growled.

Not a particularly encouraging sign, given that Marcus was Leontine, and had a bad habit of ripping the throats out of people who were stupid enough to annoy him. His lower fangs were in evidence as he snarled. But his eyes, cat eyes, were wide and unblinking in the golden fur that adorned his face, and his fur was not—yet—standing on end. His hands, however, were behind his back, and his broad chest was adorned with the full flowing robes of the Hawks.

Official dress. In the morning. Gods, she was going to be in trouble.

“Morning was two hours ago,” he snapped.

“You’re in fancy dress,” she said, changing the subject about as clumsily as she ever did.

“And you look like shit. What the hell were you doing last night?”

“None of your business.”

“Good answer,” he growled. “Why don’t you try it on the Hawklord?”

She groaned. “What day is it?”

“The fourth,” he replied.

Fourth? She counted back, and realized that she’d lost a day. Again. “I’m missing something, aren’t I?”

“Brains,” he snapped. “And survival instinct. The Hawklord’s been waiting for you for three hours.”

“Tell him I’m dead.”

“You will be if you don’t get your ass in here.” He muttered something else, a series of growls that she knew, from experience, meant something disparaging about humans. She let it pass.

“I’ll be there in half an hour.”

“Dressed like that? You’ll be out in thirty-five. On your ass.”

She put her palm on the mirror’s surface, cutting him off and scattering his image. Then she went to her closet and began to really *move*.

Bathed, cleaned, groomed and in the full dress uniform of the Hawks—which still involved the only intact pants she owned—Kaylin approached the front of the forbidding stone halls ruled by the three Lords of Law: The Lord of Wolves, the Lord of Swords and the Lord of Hawks. At least that’s what they were called on official documents and in polite company, of which Kaylin knew surprisingly little.

The Swords were the city’s peacekeepers. something ill-suited to Kaylin: the Wolves were its

the emeralds were empty. A peacekeeper, something named to Kaylin, the wolves were the hunters, and often, its killers. And the Hawks? The city's eyes. Ears. The people who actually *solved* crimes.

Then again, she would think that; Kaylin had been a Hawk for the entire time she'd been involved on the right side of the law, and didn't speak about the years that preceded it much.

By writ of the Emperor of Karaazon, the Halls of Law were the only standing structures allowed to approach the height of the Imperial palace, and the three towers, set against a wide stretch of expensive ground in the shape of a triangle, flew the flags of the Lords of Law: the Hawk, the Wolf and the Sword. From her vantage, they could hardly be seen; she was too close. But from the rest of the city? They never rested.

Neither, she thought, did the people who served them. She was damn tired.

The front doors were always manned, and she recognized Tanner and Clint as they lowered their pole-arms, barring her way. It was the Hawk's month for guard duty; they shared rotation of that honor with the Swords. The Wolves, lazy bastards, weren't considered fit for dress duty. Or ritual entries.

She hated ritual.

Clint and Tanner didn't love it much better than she did.

"Kaylin, where the hell have you been?" Tanner asked. It was the refrain that punctuated too much of her daily existence.

"Getting cleaned up, if you must know."

Tanner was, at six and a half feet, tall even for a human. His helm was strictly a dress helm, and it gleamed bronze in the afternoon sunlight, running from the capped height of his head down the line of his nose, as if it were a bird's mask. To either side of the metal, his eyes were a dark, deep brown.

Clint shook his head, and the glinting helm's light left an after-image in her vision. But he smiled. He was about two inches shorter than Tanner, and his skin was the dark ebony of the Southern stretch. She loved the sound of his voice, and he knew it.

It wasn't the only thing she loved about him.

"You've got to give up the moonlighting," he told her.

"When the pay here doesn't suck."

He laughed out loud, his halberd shaking as he began to lift it. "You really didn't get much sleep, did you? Iron Jaw has ears like a Barrani—he'll have your hide on his wall as a dartboard."

She rolled her eyes. "Can I go now?"

"Your doom," he said, his voice still sweet with the sound of amused laughter. But his expression gained a moment's gravity as he leaned forward and lowered that voice into a fold of deep velvet.

“Sesti told me.”

“Sesti told you what?”

“What you were doing the past two days.”

“Tell her to piss off next time you see her.”

He laughed again. She could spend all day making him laugh, just for the thrill of the deep rich tones of that voice. But if she did it today? It would be her last day. She smiled. “That won’t be until his naming day.” Aerian men were forbidden the birthing caves—unless those caves held the dead or the dying. Even then, they could come to claim their wives, no more. Kaylin had never understood this.

“When are you off duty?” she asked him.

“About two hours.”

“You haven’t been home yet?”

“Not yet.”

“Sesti had a boy. Healthy, but his feathers were a *mess*. Took us three hours to clean ’em down.”

“Always does,” he said with an affectionate shrug. “Go on. Iron Jaw’s been biting anyone who gets in reach.”

She nodded, walked past and then turning, reached out to touch the soft, ash gray of Clint’s wings. They snapped up and out beneath her fingers.

“You haven’t changed in seven years,” he told her, turning. “Don’t *touch* the flight feathers.”

If the exterior of the Halls of Law was forbidding, the interior was hardly less so. The front door opened into a hall that not even cathedrals could boast. It rose three storeys, and across its vaulted ceilings, frescoes had been painted—Hawk, Wolf and Sword, trailing light and shadow in a grim depiction of various hunts. Sunlight streamed in from a window that was at least as tall, and certainly more impressive; the colors of the paint were protected from sunlight, and always on display, a reminder to newcomers of what the Halls meant to those who displeased their rulers.

But this hall was not meant to intimidate; it was built with a practical purpose in mind—which wasn’t true of many of the Imperial buildings. The Aerians that served the Lords of Law did not walk easily in the confined, cramped space of regular human halls. Clint, armed and armored, could easily take to the air in the confines of the rising stone walls, and high, high above her, the perch of the Aerian loomed; she had seen him reach it many, many times. Aerians circled above her, against the backdrop of colored fresco, and as always, she envied them their ability to truly fly.

The closest she’d ever gotten involved a long drop that had almost ended her life. She wasn’t

eager to repeat it.

And if the Hawklord had really been waiting for three—close to four—hours now, she didn't give much for her chances. She began to run.

To the east of the Aerian hall, as it was colloquially called—and never in the hearing of one of the three Lords—stood another tall set of doors, adorned by another set of guards.

She recognized them both: Teela and Tain. They were sometimes called the twins by anyone who had no experience with the subtle temper and cruelty of the Barrani; they were seldom called that twice by the same person. Delicately built, they stood slightly taller than Clint, slightly shorter than Tanner.

Some people found the Barrani beautiful; Kaylin wasn't so certain, herself. They looked ethereal, delicate and just ever-so-slightly too perfect. Which made her feel solid, plain and grubby. Not exactly a way to win friends and influence people.

They wore the gray and gold of the Hawks in a band across their foreheads; their hair—gorgeously long, black as the proverbial raven's wing—had been pulled back and shoved neatly beneath it. Human hair—at least in the ranks of the Hawks—was not allowed that length; it got in the way of pretty much anything. But the Barrani? No such restrictions were placed on them.

Of course, having seen them in a fight, Kaylin was painfully aware that those restrictions would have been pointless.

Teela whistled. At six foot nothing, she wore armor that suited her fighting style—which is to say, none at all. But she carried a large stick. “You're late,” she said.

Kaylin had to look up to meet her emerald eyes. And emerald? They really were. Hard, sharp and a little brittle around the too perfect edges. That and a stunning, endless shade of deep, blue green. “That's news?”

“No. That's the sound of me winning the betting pool.”

“Good. I was rooting for you—and now I want my cut.”

“You'll get it,” she said with a grin, “if you survive old Iron Jaw.”

“I'm not worried about Iron Jaw. Tain, tell Teela to *shut up* and get the hell out of the way.”

“What, do I *look* stupid?”

“Usually.”

“Not that stupid.” He grinned; the row of his perfect teeth had been chipped in one fight or another. When Kaylin had first been inducted into the Hawks, Tain was the only Barrani she could always recognize when he stood among a group of his own people because he *had* a visible flaw. His only flaw. “Oh I should warn you—”

“Save it for later.”

He shrugged, lazy and slow. “Remember, Kaylin, I did try.”

She was already past them, and she spent what little breath she had left cursing the fact that the damn halls were so long.

Old Iron Jaw’s desk was huddled in the center of about a dozen similar desks, and distinguishable only by the presence of the Leontine who occupied it. Well, by that and the long furrows he’d dug there over the years when his claws did their automatic extension and raked through the surface of dense, heavy wood. This happened when he was annoyed, and the person who had annoyed him had the good fortune not to be close enough to bear the brunt of those claws instead.

For good reason, no one with brains got close to an angry Leontine. Iron Jaw—called Sergeant Marcus Kassan to his considerable face—was one of the very few who had managed to make it into the Hawks—Leontines were a tad on the possessive side, they didn’t share space well, and they responded to an order as if it were a suicide wish and they were magic wands.

Iron Jaw, among his own people, would be called the Leontine word for kitten—and its only equivalent in human speech was, as far as Kaylin could translate, Eunuch. No one used it in the Hawks.

He growled when he saw her. It was a low, extended growl and he didn’t bother to open his mouth to make it.

She lifted her chin, exposing her neck in the universal gesture of submission. It was only half-fake. In spite of his legendary temper, his surliness and his habit of making the word martinet a hideous understatement, she *liked* him. Unlike most of the Barrani, whose lives were built on so many secrets and lies they were confounded by something as inelegant and boring as truth, Iron Jaw was exactly what he appeared to be.

And at the moment, that was pissed off.

He leaped over his desk, his shoulders hunching with a grace that belied his size, and landed in front of it, four inches from where Kaylin stood her ground. His eyes were wide and his breath—well, it was cat’s breath. Never a pleasant thing.

But she knew better than to run from a Leontine, even this one. He let his claws touch her throat and close around the very thin membrane of her skin.

“Kaylin,” he growled. “You are making me look incompetent.”

“Sorry,” she said, breathing very, very carefully.

“Where were you?”

“Getting dressed.”

The claws closed slightly.

There was no way around it; she told him the truth. “I was with Clint’s wife, Sesti. Sesti of the Camaraan clan,” she added, feeling an edged claw bite skin. Knowing that she bled, but only slightly. “She had a difficult birthing, and I promised the midwives’ guild—”

He snarled. But he let his hands drop. “You are not a midwife—”

“I am—”

“You’re a *Hawk*.” But his fangs had receded behind the generous black curl of what might loosely be called lips were they on someone else’s face. “You used your power.”

She said nothing for a minute. “I couldn’t do that. It’s forbidden by the Hawklord.” Which was more or less true. Well, more true. Kaylin was, as she was loath to admit, a tad special for an untrained human. She could do things that other human Hawks couldn’t. Hell, that other humans couldn’t. The Hawks knew about her, of course.

And the Hawklord? Better than any of them, he had his reasons for mistrusting the use of that power. But what the Hawklord didn’t see, didn’t hurt. As long as he didn’t hear about it.

“Well. Sesti will owe you. Which means Clint will pay.” Marcus wouldn’t tell the Hawklord. Not for something like this. Leontines had a strong understanding of debt, obligation and family. After a moment, his perpetual lack of blinking made her eyes water. “How was the birth?”

“The baby’s fine. The mother’s exhausted.”

“Was it a close thing?”

She shuddered. She’d been late once or twice when the midwives had called her—but that was in the early years, and when she’d clearly seen the cost, she had *never* been late again. They would have called it a miracle, in the Hawks, if she could make them believe it. “Close enough. But they’ll both pull through.”

He shrugged, and leaned back against the desk. It actually groaned. “More, I’m certain, than can be said of you. The Hawklord is waiting. In his tower.”

Could things be *any* worse?

She made the climb up the stairs unescorted, although guards flanked the closed doors on every landing. They nodded, and one or two that knew her well enough either shook their heads or smiled. They were almost all human or Aerian; the Barrani were trusted, but only to a point. On a good day, she might take the time to ask them what the Hawklord wanted.

This wasn’t a good day.

She made the landing of the last set of stairs, stopped to catch her breath and shake her legs out and then straightened her shoulders, adjusting her sloppy belt. It was two notches too big, again. And she hadn't had time to punch a few extra holes.

Her hair was a flyaway mess, and her cheeks, she knew, would be a little too red for dignity—but she often had to choose between dignity and living another hour. She paused at the unattended door, and placed her palm against the golden symbol of the hawk that adorned its lower center. It was a *tal* door.

Magic trickled up her hand like a painful, frosty flicker. She hated it, and gritted her teeth as it passed through her skin. Of all the things she had had to learn to accept with grace, this was the hardest: to leave her palm there while magic roved and quested, seeking answers.

It was apparently satisfied; the doors began to swing open.

They opened into a round, domed room: the height of the Tower, and the face it showed to all but the most trusted of the Hawklord's advisors. Given what she knew about the Hawklord, that that number was higher than zero should have come as a big surprise.

She bowed before the doors had fully opened. Because she wore the uniform of a Hawk, a bow was required. Had she worn any other uniform, she'd probably have had to throw in a long grovel as well as a bit of scraping.

"Kaylin Neya," the Hawklord said coldly.

She rose instantly.

Met his eyes. They were like gray stone, like the walls of the round room; they gave no impression of life, and they hinted at nothing but surface. His face, pale as ivory, heightened their unusual color; his hair, gray, fell beyond his back. He was not Barrani, but he might as well have been—he was tall, proud and very cold.

But his wings crested the rise of drawn hood, and they were white, their pinions folded. Hawklord. It was not because he was Aerian that he was Lord here.

"Hawklord," she said.

His face grew more stonelike.

"Lord Grammayre," she added.

"I have been waiting for half of a day, Kaylin. Would you care to offer an explanation for the waste of my time to the Emperor?"

Her shoulders fell about four inches, but she managed to keep her head up. "No, sir."

He frowned, and then turned toward the distant curve of the shadowed room. In it, she saw a small well of light. And around that light, a man.

~~Some instinct made her reach for her daggers; they were utterly silent as they slid out of their sheaths. That had been a costly gift from a mage on Elani Street who'd had a little bit of difficulty with a loan shark.~~

“I have, however, no intention of embarrassing the Hawks by allowing you to speak on their behalf. I have a mission for you,” he added, “and because of its nature, I wish you to take backup.”

Great. She looked down at her boots, and the low edges of the one pair of pants she now owned that wasn't warzone material. “Lord Grammayre—”

“That was not, of course, a request.” He held out a hand in command, but not to her. “I would like to introduce you to one of your partners. You may recognize him; you may not. He has been seconded from the Wolves. Severn?”

She almost didn't hear the words; they made no *sense*.

Because across the round room—a room that now seemed to have no ceiling, her vision had grown so focused—a man stepped into the sun's light.

A man she recognized, although she hadn't seen him for years. For seven years.

In utter silence, she threw the first dagger, and hit the ground running.

He was *fast*.

But he'd always been fast. His own long knife was in the air before she'd run half the distance that separated them; her thrown dagger glanced off it with a sonorous clang. Everything in the Hawk tower reverberated; there could be no hidden fights, here.

“Hello, *Kaylin*.”

She snarled. Words were lost; what remained was motion, movement, intent. She held the second dagger in her hand as she unsheathed the third; heard the Hawklord's cold command at her back as if it were simple breeze in the open streets.

The open streets of the fiefs, almost a decade past.

His smile exposed teeth, the narrowing of eyes, the sudden tensing of shoulder and chest as he gathered motion, hoarding it.

Left hand out, she loosed a second dagger, and he parried it, but only barely. The third, she had hit his chest before he could bring his knife down.

Too easy, she thought desperately. Too damn easy.

She looked up at his lazy smile and brought her dagger in.

Light blinded her. Light, it seemed, from the sound of his sudden curse, blinded him; they were driven apart by the invisible hands of the Hawklord's power, and they were held fast, their feet inches above the ground.

Her eyes grew accustomed, by slow degree, to the darkness of the domed room.

"I see," the Hawklord said quietly, "that you know Severn. Severn, you failed to mention this in your interview."

Severn had always recovered quickly. "I didn't recognize the name," he said, voice even, smile still draped across his face. He moved slowly, very slowly, and sheathed his long knife, waiting.

And she looked up at his face. He wasn't as tall as Tanner, and he wasn't as broad; he had the catlike grace of a young Leontine, and his hair was a burnished copper, something that reddened in caught light. But his eyes were the blue she remembered, cold blue, and if he had new scars—and he did—they hadn't changed his face enough to remove it from her memory.

"Kaylin?"

She said nothing for a long, long time. And given the tone of the Hawklord's voice, it wasn't a wise expenditure of that time.

"I know him," she said at last.

"That has already been established." The Hawk's lips turned up in a cold smile. "You seldom attempt to kill a man for no reason in this tower. But not," he added, "never."

She ignored the comment. "He's no Wolf," she told the man who ruled the Hawks in all their guises. "I don't care what he told you—he doesn't serve the Wolflord."

He chose to ignore her use of the Lord of Wolves, her more colloquial title. "Ah. And who does he serve, Kaylin?"

"One of the seven," she said, spitting to the side.

"The seven?"

She was dead tired of his word games. "The fieflords," she said.

"Ah. Severn?"

"I was a Wolf," he replied, as if this bored him. As if everything did. He ran a hand through his hair; it was just shy of regulation length. "I served the Lord of Wolves." Each word emphasized and correct.

"You're lying."

"Ask the Lord of Hawks," he told her, with a shrug. "He's got the paperwork."

“No,” the Hawklord replied quietly, “I don’t.”

Severn was silent, assessing the tone of the Hawklord’s words. After a moment, he shrugged again; the folds of his robes shifted, and Kaylin heard the distinct sound of cloth rubbing against leather. He was not entirely unarmored here.

Too bad.

“I was a Shadow Wolf,” he said at last.

“For how long?” She refused to be shocked. Refused to let his admission slow her down.

“Years,” he replied. Just that.

She didn’t believe him. “He’s lying.”

“I didn’t say how many,” he added softly. As if it were a game.

“He is not lying,” the Hawklord told her. “Believe that when the unusual request for transfer between the Towers arrives, we check very carefully. When the man who requests the transfer is of the Shadows, our investigations are more thorough.”

“Thorough how?”

“We called in the Tha’alani.”

She froze. She had faced Tha’alani before, but only once, and she had been thirteen years old at the time. She had sworn, then, that she would die before she let one touch her again. The Tha’alani were an obscenity; they touched not flesh—although that in and of itself caused her problems—but thought, mind, heart, all the hidden things.

All the things that had to stay hidden if they were to be protected.

They were sometimes called Truthseekers. But it was a paltry word. Kaylin privately preferred rapist as the more accurate term.

“He subjected himself to the Tha’alani willingly,” the Hawklord added.

“And the Tha’alani said he was telling the truth.”

“Indeed.”

“And what truth? What could he say that would make him worthy of the Hawks?”

But the Hawklord’s patience had ebbed. “Enough to satisfy the Lord of Hawks,” he told her.

“Will you question me?”

No. Not if she wanted to be a Hawk. “Why? Why him?”

“Because, Kaylin, he is one of two men who understand the fiefs as well as you do.”

She froze.

“The other will be with us shortly.”

After about ten minutes, the Hawklord let them go. Mostly. The barrier that held Kaylin’s arms to her side slowly thinned; she could move as if she were under water. Given that she was likely to try to kill Severn again the minute she got the chance, she tried hard not to resent the Hawklord’s caution.

“Feel all better now that that’s out of your system?” Severn asked quietly.

She wanted to cut the lips off his face; it would ruin his smirk. “No.”

“No?”

“You’re not dead.”

He laughed and shook his head. “You haven’t changed a bit, have you Elianne?”

“Tell him to let us go and you can find that out for yourself.”

“I doubt the Lord of Hawks would take the orders of a former Shadow Wolf. Although given your tardiness and his apparent acceptance of it, he’s a damn site more tolerant than the Lord of Wolves was.”

“Try.”

He laughed again. “Not yet, little—what did he call you? Kaylin? Not yet.”

The Lord of Hawks watched them with the keen sight of their namesake.

“You want to send us into the fiefs,” she said at last, trying to keep the accusation out of her voice.

“Yes. It’s been seven years, Kaylin. Long enough.”

“Long enough for what? Three of the fieflords are outcaste *Barrani*—I could live and die in the time it took them to blink!”

The Hawklord turned his full attention upon her. “I think I have been overly tolerant,” he said at last, and in a tone of voice she hadn’t heard since she’d first arrived in this tower. “You are either Hawk or you are not. Decide.”

Her silence was enough of an answer, but only barely. “The third is coming now.”

The door, which had probably closed the moment Kaylin had fully stepped across its threshold, swung open again.

A man walked into the room. He wore no armor that she could hear beneath the full flow of his perfect robes. Her hearing had always been good. “Lord Grammayre,” he said, bowing low.

“Tiamaris,” the Hawklord replied. “I would like to introduce you to Kaylin and Severn. You will work with them.”

The man rose. His hair was a dark, dark black—Barrani black—but his build was all wrong for Barrani. He was a shade taller than Teela, and about twice her width. Three times, maybe. His hands were empty; he carried no obvious weapon. Wore no open medallion. The hand that he lifted in ritual greeting, palm out, was smooth and un-adorned.

Kaylin and Severn could not likewise lift hand—but their background in the fiefs hadn’t made the gesture automatic. Lord Grammayre was under no such disadvantage; he lifted his ringed hand in greeting, and lowered his chin slightly.

“Tiamaris has some knowledge of the fiefs,” he told them both. Tiamaris lowered his perfectly raised hand, and turned to face them.

Something about the man’s eyes were all wrong; it took Kaylin a moment to realize what it was. They were orange. A deep, bright orange that hinted at red and gold. Her own eyes almost fell out of their sockets.

“You have the privilege,” Lord Grammayre told her quietly, “of meeting the only member of the Dragon caste to ever apply to serve in the Halls of Law.”

Severn recovered first. He laughed. “It’s true, then,” he said, to no one in particular.

That rankled. “Like you’d know true if it bit you on the ass.”

“You really are a mongrel unit.”

“No, Severn,” the Hawklord replied softly. Too softly. Had it been anyone else speaking, Kaylin might have dared a warning kick.

She hoped Severn hung himself instead.

Severn fell silent.

“The Hawks have always been open to those who seek service under the banner of the Emperor’s Law. Where service is offered it is accepted, by whoever offers it. Tiamaris has chosen to make that offer, and it has been accepted, by the Three Towers. And the Emperor. If the Wolves choose different criteria upon which to accept applicants, that is the business of the Lord of Wolves; if the Swords choose to retain only the mortal races, that is likewise the concern of *their* lord.

“I would, of course, be pleased to explain your mission. But I have spent precious hours in this tower, and I have other duties to which I must attend. The Lords of Law meet within the half hour.” He reached into the folds of his robes and pulled out a large gem.

Even Kaylin could see it glow.

He held it a moment in his open palm. “This contains all of the information the Hawks have been able to gather about your mission. Some of it was placed within the gem by the Tha’alani, some was placed there by Wolves and Swords. You will study it,” he added quietly, “and it will tell you all you require.”

“If you have questions, contain them. You will have to find answers on your own. You will speak to no one of what you see within the gem. It is spellbound, and it will enforce that command.”

He hesitated a moment, and then, lifting his hand, he gestured. Kaylin fell an inch to the ground and stumbled, righting herself.

“Kaylin.”

She turned. Saw that he held out both his open hand and the large gem it contained—to her. For just a minute she considered the wisdom of a different occupation.

But her past would follow her out the doors; here it was hidden. Without a word, she held out a hand, and he dropped the crystal into the shaking curve of her palm. Blue light seared her vision; her fingers closed instinctively.

She was surprised when she didn’t throw it away.

“Interesting,” the Hawklord said softly. She thought he might say more, but the meeting with the Lords of Law clearly demanded his full attention. “You are dismissed,” he said quietly. “You may speak with Marcus. Tell him that you are to be equipped in any reasonable manner. Remind him that the equipment is not to be logged.”

“That is all.”

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