

CHAPTER ONE

ELLUVIAN OF DANARRE DID NOT LIKE THRONE rooms.

For much of his life, throne rooms and audience chambers had been a grueling exercise in humiliation; humiliation was always the outcome when one had no power. His presence in a throne room was meant to emphasize that utter lack of power. He was called. He came. He stood—or knelt—at the foot of the platform that led to the raised throne.

There he had remained, while the disappointment of his lord made itself known.

There were significant differences between this throne room, this audience chamber, and the throne room of his youth. An act of war had given him a freedom he had never before possessed.

And the actor in that action occupied the current throne as a force of nature, uneasily caged by masks of civility and mundane governance. Elluvian had been announced; he had been given permission—or an order—to approach the Imperial Presence. His steps across the runner that covered worked stone were as loud as his breathing.

Before him sat the Eternal Emperor, Dariandaros of the Ebon Flight. Neither name had been used by any of the Emperor's subjects for centuries. Elluvian, however, remembered. The only freedom he had ever known had occurred because of war. At the end of the third war, the Dragon Emperor had demanded oaths of allegiance from each and every Barrani adult who had survived it and intended to live within the boundaries of the Empire.

Elluvian had offered his willingly. He had offered it without reservation. Had the Emperor demanded Elluvian swear a blood oath, a binding oath, he would have done so without hesitation. The Emperor did not demand his True Name. Anything else, he could live with. Nonbinding oaths were just words.

He knelt.

"Rise," the Emperor said. The undercurrents of his voice filled the vaulted ceilings above with a distinctly draconic rumble. Elluvian obeyed, meeting the Emperor's gaze for the first time; the Dragon's eyes were orange, but the orange was tinged with gold.

No discussion between Emperor and subject was private. The Imperial guard and the Imperial aides were omnipresent; an Imperial secretary or three were positioned by the throne to take notes where notes were necessary.

"Approach the throne."

Elluvian was aware that of all the Barrani—each forced to offer an oath of allegiance to the Emperor directly—only a handful were allowed to approach the throne. It was not considered, by most of his kin, an honor. Were any of those disapproving kin to be present, they would have obeyed regardless. Just as Elluvian did.

The Imperial guards stepped back.

"You look peaked, old friend," the Emperor said, when the guards were standing as far from the Emperor as they were willing to go.

"You did not summon me here to discuss my health."

“Ah, no. But I have been informed that I lack certain social graces, and it seems incumbent on me to practice.”

Elluvian raised a brow. His eyes were blue; Barrani blue denoted many things. At the moment, he was annoyed. Annoyed and tired.

“Very well. The Halls of Law seem to be having some minor difficulty.” When Elluvian failed to reply, the Emperor continued. “In particular, and of interest to you, the difficulty involves the Wolves.” Of course it did. The Halls of Law were divided into three distinct divisions: the Hawks, the Swords, and the Wolves. The only division of relevance to Elluvian was the Wolves.

Elluvian exhaled. “Again.”

“Indeed.” The Emperor’s eyes remained orange; the orange, however, did not darken toward red, the color of Dragon anger.

Elluvian bowed his head for one long moment. His eyes, he knew, were now the blue of anger and frustration. In a life considered, by the youthful Barrani and Dragon kin, long, failure was not the worst thing to happen to him. But consistent failure remained humiliating—and no Barrani wished their failures dissected by Dragons. He struggled to contain emotion, to submerge it.

In this, too, he failed.

“I have never understood why you wish to create this division of *mortal* Wolves. We have power structures developed over a longer stretch of time, and we have not descended to barbarism or savagery. Those who have power rule those who do not.”

“That is what the animals do. Those with power rule those with less. We are not animals.”

Elluvian’s mood was dark enough, the sting of failure dragging it down in a spiral that had no good end. Humans, who comprised the vast majority of mortals within the Empire, were one step up from animals, with their unchanging, fixed eye colors, their ability to propagate, their short, inconsequential lives.

“I do not understand the Empire you are attempting to build. I have never understood it, and the centuries I have spent observing it have not surrendered answers.” The admission of ignorance was costly.

For a man who professed not to want to rule by power, his form of communication was questionable. He commanded, and those who had survived the wars and sworn personal loyalty to the Emperor—most Barrani, given the sparsity of Dragons by that time—obeyed.

Elluvian had been summoned. The summons was, in theory, an invitation, but Elluvian was not naive. The oath of service had weight and meaning to both the Emperor who had demanded it and the man who had offered that vow.

Mortals were not a threat to either the Barrani or the Dragons, but many of the Imperial systems of governance—the Emperor’s word—were most concerned with those very mortals. The Emperor had created the Halls of Law, with Swords and Hawks to police the mortals who vastly outnumbered those who rose above time and age. He had also created the Wolves.

“No,” the Emperor replied.

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