

Chapter One

Kaylin had a new home, and she loved it.

The Imperial Palace was, to many, the pinnacle of dream homes. But to Kaylin, it had been a nightmare—one that she'd finally escaped. The Palace Guard no longer lined the halls outside of her room, and her rooms were no longer so grand or so fine that she felt like she didn't belong in them. The shutters on her windows—and they were shuttered, not barred—weren't as warped as they had been in her old apartment, but the windows opened to let both light and air in, when she desired it.

And best of all: Dragon arguments no longer woke her out of a sound sleep.

In theory, Barrani arguments were quieter than draconic arguments, Barrani throats being confined to the general shape and size, even if they were immortal. Angry Barrani weren't exactly *safer* to be around, but at least they didn't demand attention half a city block away.

So much for theory.

The Barrani engaged in this particular argument were in the same building. Their shouts shook the floor, which

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shook her bed, which caused Kaylin to sit up and scrabble under her pillow for the dagger she always slept with.

Her small dragon familiar, usually a floppy and relatively inert mass somewhere at the top of her pillow, hissed. It was dark enough—barely—that she could feel him more than see him.

In response to the stray thought, a soft glow lit the interior of the room. This was a standard feature of living in an intelligent and responsive building, but three weeks in, Kaylin still found it a bit creepy.

“I’m sorry, Kaylin,” Helen said, although she didn’t dim the lights. “It’s habit. Generally when people are worried about visibility, it’s because they might injure themselves in the darkness.” She was, of course, nowhere to be seen—or, conversely, *everywhere*, as she *was* the building.

Guilt, of course, came on the heels of light. Kaylin wasn’t used to guarding her thoughts. She could (mostly) keep the bad ones firmly sealed behind her teeth, but Helen didn’t require the spoken word. Then again, Helen didn’t seem to judge or take offense at the unspoken word, which was definitely for the best.

The floor shook again, and this time, Barrani words were clearly audible. There were, as expected, two voices, crashing into each other: Mandoran’s and Annarion’s.

“What exactly are they doing?” Kaylin swiveled to dump her feet off the side of her bed. The mattress was dense and thick, but it was not—like palace mattresses—three feet off the ground.

“Disagreeing.”

“Sorry, I got that part. What are they disagreeing about?” Mandoran switched, midsentence, to the Elantran that was Kaylin’s mother tongue.

“You can’t hear them?”

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“I heard the last bit, and you should tell Mandoran that what he’s suggesting is anatomically impossible.” She walked to the chair nearest the actual closet and retrieved the clothing she’d be wearing, bar disaster, to the office today. The small dragon showed his appreciation for being rudely woken by taking off with the stick she used to keep her hair off her neck and face. He also squawked a lot.

“Mandoran says,” Helen finally replied, “that it’s not anatomically impossible for them. Annarion says—”

“Yes, thanks, I heard his response. Have they let up at all in the past four days?”

“They haven’t been shouting at each other—”

“I mean, have they taken *any* breaks?”

“No, dear.”

“It’s probably a miracle they’re both still alive.”

“Mandoran agrees. He apologizes and says they will take a break now, and resume practice once you’ve headed into the office.”

In the three weeks since their narrow defeat of the ancestors, Annarion had not emerged from wherever he was training. Kaylin didn’t expect that he would until Helen believed that his self-containment was complete enough to walk the city streets without immediately attracting every Shadow in the heart of the fiefs—or worse.

He’d already done that once, though unintentionally. Helen insisted that Annarion had been shouting for attention—for want of a better description—and the ancestors had heard him. Since Kaylin had been standing beside the young Barrani for most of his stay in Elantra, she sympathized with his confusion: she certainly hadn’t heard—or seen—anything that demanded attention. Nothing beyond his striking Barrani looks, at any rate.

But...the Shadows *had* come, leaving the containment of the fiefs and venturing into the streets of Elantra proper.

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And they'd made a beeline to Annarion. They weren't particularly careful about anything standing in their way, especially once they turned their attention to the Barrani High Halls. At that point, the Barrani and the Dragon Court had arrived in force.

The city had mostly recovered, although the streets in the high-rent district were no longer flat; the stone had been melted, and the creatures that had done the melting had left marks in the road when it once again solidified.

Helen was attempting to teach Annarion to be *quiet*. For some reason, Annarion did not take as well to these lessons as Mandoran had done. Mandoran joined Kaylin from time to time; Kaylin suspected that he did it just to annoy Annarion.

Then again, Annarion was desperately worried for his brother, Lord Nightshade. Nightshade's abrupt disappearance from his fief—and, more important, his castle—weighed heavily on his younger brother, who suspected that his presence was the cause of Nightshade's absence. Kaylin privately agreed, but she didn't blame Annarion.

She blamed herself. She shouldn't have let Annarion visit his brother in Castle Nightshade. She shouldn't have let him out into the city at all until she was certain he wasn't a danger to others.

And you would have stopped him how, exactly?

Rationally, she was not responsible for anything that had occurred within Elantra. But as hers had been the hand that had rescued Annarion and the rest of his cohort from their jail in the Heart of the Green, her guilt had clear and undeniable roots. Kaylin attempted to push aside the feelings of remorse—they pissed Teela off when she was in the office, and while Teela couldn't actually read minds, her

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familiarity with Kaylin's moods made her intuition pretty much the same in practical terms.

The sounds of shouting that would have contained nothing but curse words in most languages diminished as Kaylin made her way out of her room.

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The halls in her new home were in far finer repair than the halls in her first home had been. Doors lined the walls—doors behind which some of her friends now lived. Those friends were seldom in their own rooms, with a single notable exception: Bellusdeo. Her sole guard, Maggaron, had spent two weeks standing in the hall outside of the Dragon's doors; he took breaks for food, but they were short and silent.

Mandoran and Annarion spent their days—and nights—in what Helen referred to as the training room. It wasn't, as far as Kaylin could tell, actually a room in the strictest sense of the word. Teela—the reason that Kaylin had attempted to even find it—didn't consider it a room in the loosest sense of the word, either. Kaylin pointed out that it had a door.

Teela in turn pointed out that Helen—whose voice was present—had had trouble giving the two Hawks necessary directions to reach it; in Teela's opinion, the door had only been created as a visible marker. Helen confirmed this.

Regardless, although the two not-quite-Barrani boys had rooms of their own, they'd been holed up in a part of the mansion that couldn't be considered home, Maggaron had been standing or slumping against a wall in the hall, and Bellusdeo had treated her room like an impregnable fortress. As housewarmings went—and Kaylin had only attended one, at Caitlin's insistence—it was unsuccessful.

Kaylin, however, had felt at home in her room from the moment she crossed its threshold.

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She felt at home in the dining room, even though it was large; she felt at home entering the front door, even though it opened to a foyer with multiple levels and too much light; she was even becoming more comfortable with Helen's habit of treating her thoughts as questions, and answering them out loud. Tara, the Avatar of Tiamaris's Tower, did the same. It was hard to feel lonely in this house. If it was also hard to be alone—and it was—Kaylin didn't mind. Helen didn't judge her thoughts, her moods, or her achievements—or, more specifically, their lack.

"I would," Helen said, as Kaylin made her way to the dining room. "But thoughts are not actions; they're not *plans*. If you were planning something unwise, I would tell you." This was demonstrably true. "If you were planning something unethical, I would also tell you. I have lived with tenants who have chosen to act against their own beliefs—and the results were not pleasant."

"They messed up?"

"Ah, no, dear. I have had a number of tenants since Hazielle. It is almost universally true that what you cannot bring yourself to do—or perhaps to avoid doing—you cannot believe anyone else would avoid. For instance: if you decry lying, but then do it yourself—and not in the way manners might dictate—you quickly assume that no one is honest. If you betray a trust for your own benefit, you assume that no one is trustworthy.

"This eventually causes a spiral of ugliness and loathing. The reason I would stop you from doing something you despise is not necessarily because I would despise it. It is because of the effect it would have, in the end, on the way you view and interact with the important parts of your world. If you have no self-respect, your ability to respect anything or anyone else is in peril."

Kaylin thought about this as she ate.

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Mandoran soon joined her, looking glum and exhausted. Had he been mortal, she would have attempted to send him back to bed. Since he wasn't, and given that he was up against the wall of Annarion's frantic fear for his brother's safety, she decided against it.

"He's going to be the definition of anti-fun until we find his brother. I've taken quite a personal dislike to Lord Nightshade." He pushed food around his plate as if the eggs were unappetizing. "If it weren't for his brother, we could try to learn to be 'quiet' at a reasonable pace. The way things stand now, Annarion might as well be mortal."

"And you mean that in the nicest possible way, of course," Kaylin replied.

"Not really." Being on the receiving end of Kaylin's glare, he glanced at Helen; her Avatar had been waiting, more or less patiently, in the dining room. She appeared entirely unruffled by his comment.

"Look, I understand why mortals are in a rush about everything—they get old and weak so quickly that they can't afford to take their time. We're not mortal. We have time."

"We don't know what happened to Nightshade."

"We know he isn't dead."

"There are worse things than death."

"One of which would be practicing with Annarion," Mandoran replied. Wincing, he added, "Great. Now he's angry."

Kaylin was on Annarion's side this time, but said nothing; the Hawks had taught her to leave Barrani arguments between the Barrani who were having them.

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Thanks to Annarion and Mandoran's not exactly silent disagreement, Kaylin was in no danger of being late for work. The midwives had called her out twice during the past

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three weeks; they'd sent a runner to the house each time. So far, Helen seemed unwilling to install active mirrors in the manse. Mirrors were modern necessities. Anyone of import used them to communicate, *especially* in emergencies. Since Kaylin was feeling surprisingly awake despite the hour, she turned to Helen to tackle the subject for a third time.

"I need some sort of working mirror connection somewhere in the house. It doesn't have to be everywhere. It could be in one room. Or even only in mine. Marcus mirrors whenever he needs someone to shout at, and the midwives' guild mirrors when there's an emergency. So does the Foundling Hall. I can't ask the midwives' guild to send a runner between the endangered mother and this house and expect me to make it there in time. So far I've been lucky, but I doubt that will last."

Helen's expression flattened. There was a reason this was the third attempt at discussion. "I have made some inquiries about the mirror network; they are incomplete thus far. I am perhaps remiss; I do not wish to insult either you or the people for whom you work. But the mirror network is *not* secure. I am almost certain such forms of communication would not have been allowed in my youth."

"Almost everyone has some sort of mirror access." Everyone, Kaylin thought, who could afford it. She hadn't had a mirror when she'd lived in the fiefs. She hadn't daydreamed about having one either—she hadn't really been aware of their existence until she'd crossed the bridge. "Some people—mostly Barrani—have even set the mirror network to follow *them* when they move from place to place. And if the Barrani are willing to use it, how dangerous can it be?"

"There are many things the Barrani do—and have done in the past—that you would consider neither safe nor

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respectable.” Helen sighed. “Understand that the mirror network is a magical lattice that underlays the city.”

Kaylin nodded.

“At the moment, it is a magic that I do not permit across my boundaries. It appears to have been designed to travel around areas of non-cooperation; it therefore skirts the edge of my containments. I have not disrupted it in any fashion—it did not seem to be directly harmful. If you wish to have access to your mirror network, I would have to alter my protections to allow the grid’s magic to overlap my own, at least in part. I do not know who, or what, is responsible for the stability of the grid; I do not know who, or what, created the spells that contain it; nor do I fully understand the magic that sustains it.”

“Don’t do it,” Mandoran said.

Kaylin glared at him. “Why not?”

“You don’t let stray magic into the heart of your home.”

“Everyone else does.”

“So I’d gathered.” He winced. “Teela’s in a mood, by the way.”

Great.

“I don’t know what kind of power your people have—I have to assume it’s not significant.”

Big surprise.

“But someone with significant power could transmit or feed an entirely different kind of magic through the lattice on which the mirror network is built.”

“I’d think the Emperor would have something to say about that—mirrors function in the Palace.”

“Dragons aren’t as fragile as mortals, for one. Look—I’m not an Arcanist. There are no doubt some protections built into the mirror network to prevent its use as a weapon. I can imagine those protections being successful in most cases—

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but not all. Magic is not precise; it's not entirely predictable—as you should well know.

“But the possibility of being used as a weapon is not the only threat the mirrors might pose. It's highly likely that they could transmit private information to outside observers.” His expression darkening, he added, “I mean—Teela lets the damn network follow her.”

Not for the first time, Kaylin wished she could be part of that internal dialogue. “The communication—the flow of information—is bound to mirrors. Teela can't just speak to me whenever she wants unless I carry a portable mirror on my person—and those are way too expensive to give to a private. I can mirror Teela—and she'll pick up *if* she's near a functioning mirror. Break the mirror, and you break the communication. And the mirrors aren't any sturdier than regular glass.”

“If you were better at magic,” Mandoran told her, “you could easily do what Teela does. It wouldn't be expensive.”

Kaylin's magic lessons had been severely disrupted for the last two months, but the implication that she was incompetent was clear. She tried to swallow her defensive words because, blunt or not, he was only speaking the truth. She even managed to succeed, although swallowing food was easier. She focused on that instead.

“If you allow your network access to *this* house, as opposed to the hovel you purportedly lived in before the palace,” Mandoran continued, “the information to be gained could be a danger—to Helen. No one was interested in your previous home until Bellusdeo arrived. They might have had a great deal of interest in your palace residence, but Teela tells me the palace is practically a magical stronghold.” His expression made it clear that he didn't agree. And also made clear, after a moment, that Teela

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didn't think much of his disagreement and was letting him know.

The thought of Teela in lecture mode made Kaylin appreciate being left out. "People mirror me when they need me. And when they *need me*, it's an emergency. They don't have time to run halfway across the city to hand-deliver a message." She turned to Helen and added, "Even Tiamaris—the Tower of Tiamaris—has mirror access."

Helen frowned. "Let me see, dear."

Kaylin was already thinking about mirrors made of water in the large, glyphed stone room of that Tower, Tara standing beside them, her eyes not quite human.

"Is it only in that room that you have access to your network?"

Kaylin frowned. "No. Tara can create a mirror out of nothing if we need one."

"Understood. I will look into this further. I am no longer—as you know—what I was when I was first created. Information I once possessed has now been lost, and I must work the way you do." This was not in any way accurate, but Kaylin didn't quibble. "It would be useful to have some contact with at least one of the Seven Towers; the Seven do not take unnecessary risks." She glanced at Mandoran. "Perhaps you can be of aid in this regard."

"I'd like to be a guest, if it's all the same to you." Mandoran's answer—which didn't appear to line up with Helen's comment—caused Kaylin obvious confusion. "Guests aren't asked to do necessary work—in large part because they can't be trusted with it." Mandoran's smile was sharp, lean.

"I am not Barrani," Helen replied, an edge of disapproval in her otherwise correct voice. "Believe that I would know if you were misbehaving anywhere it was likely to cause damage." Her expression softening, she added, "We would

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not have survived without your intervention—and to intervene, you stood almost at the heart of my power. As such, there is now very little with which I would not trust you.”

“It doesn’t seem like an adequate reward for good behavior,” Mandoran replied. He was grinning unrepentantly; it made his entire face both younger and more compelling. “I am, on the other hand, willing to entertain the prospect—if helping out around the house gets me out of other duties.”

“I don’t know why you say these things; you are just going to annoy your brother.” Helen’s voice was now reproving.

“Too late.” Mandoran had apparently had enough of the breakfast he’d hardly touched. He stood, turned to Kaylin and added, “Sorry if we woke you up.”

“I had to go in to work today anyway.”

“That’s what *I* said, but Helen didn’t agree.”

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As Kaylin left the dining room and headed toward the grandly lit front doors, there was another surprise waiting for her. The wide, curving stairs had a person on them. Bellusdeo.

Kaylin almost didn’t recognize her. Gone was the fancy court dress that marked so much of her life in public; she was wearing pants and a tunic. The shirt beneath the tunic was beige, and if the cloth was a much more expensive weave than Kaylin could afford, it wasn’t immediately obvious. Her hair had been pulled up off her shoulders; she wore no obvious jewelry.

“Do I have something unpleasant on my face?” Bellusdeo asked, her eyes a steady bronze.

Kaylin remembered to close her mouth. “No—it just feels like it’s been so long since I’ve seen it.”

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“And absence has made your heart grow fonder?”

Kaylin blinked.

“It’s a mortal phrase, I believe.”

“Mortal covers a lot of cultural territory.”

“True. I admit that I don’t completely understand the usage. I’m using it incorrectly?”

“I wouldn’t say that, exactly. Are you coming with me to the office?”

“I’m not dressed like this for Diamart’s abominable, condescending lessons, no.” Her smile deepened in exactly the wrong way. “When he is recovered enough that apoplexy won’t kill him, I think I will be, though.”

The small dragon, having resumed his ownership of Kaylin’s shoulder, snickered.

“Get it out of your system now,” Kaylin told him. “I’d like to be taken seriously by the rest of the Hawks once we get to work.”

He hissed laughter.

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“You’re going to find the office a lot quieter,” Kaylin told Bellusdeo as they walked.

“Why?”

“We lost four Barrani Hawks and a dozen Aerians; the Swords lost at least that many men and women. The office is still functioning; the duty roster is still being filled in all divisions that require one. It’s not that no one dies in the line of duty—they do. But this is the first time we’ve lost Barrani.”

“Is it the first time the Barrani have been injured?”

“What? No, of course not. Barrani arrogance doesn’t lend itself to caution. But nothing we run into on a regular walking beat is capable of taking down a Barrani.” Kaylin exhaled. “But we lost four in the battle with the ancestor. *Four*. We don’t get a lot of Barrani applying for the force.

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They're culturally willing to swear to protect the city—but the 'serve' part of our oath really gets stuck in their throats."

Bellusdeo chuckled. "Some things never change."

"No. The Barrani weren't given funerals that the rank and file in the Halls could attend. The Aerians were—but half of the Aerian funeral service takes place in the air or in the Aerie, and not all of us could get there or participate in those. Grammayre asked the Aerie if they could hold the parts that take place *inside* the Aerie somewhere the wingless could reach, and they agreed." Most of them, anyway. One or two Aerians, raw with grief and anger at the loss, wanted their beloved departed to have nothing to do with the office that had indirectly ended their lives.

Kaylin hoped that the respect and grief of the Halls of Law would at least make them understand that their loss was felt, and felt keenly; that the lives of the lost had been respected and valued. She wasn't certain, though. Funerals hadn't been part of her childhood. A gathering of the living around the dead had usually had more to do with desperation than respect or comfort.

"Why do you think they serve?"

"The Barrani probably do it because they're bored."

Bellusdeo nodded. As an immortal, her thoughts on boredom resembled the Barrani opinion with which Kaylin was so familiar.

"The rest of us?" Kaylin shrugged. "I can't speak for the others. But me? I wanted to be involved with something I could respect. I wanted—and maybe this is stupid—to be the good guy or the hero."

"And now? I take it from your self-deprecating tone that you think the desire was naive."

"A little. When I first met the Hawklord, I didn't feel naive. I felt that everyone else was—I mean, everyone who lived on this side of the Ablayne's bridge. Because they'd

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had it so easy. I still think that sometimes.” She shrugged again. “I wanted to be part of something bigger than me, in the end. I like the sense that we’re working on something together. That if justice and the law isn’t perfect, it’s better than the alternative. Someone is always going to be at the top. That’s just a law of power.

“But if the law can sometimes be used to protect those who don’t have that power, it’s better than nothing. Do you think I’m stupid?”

“Frequently,” Bellusdeo replied, but her voice was gentle. “But not in this. I wanted to be perfect, when I ruled. I wanted to be a queen who could be admired and followed; I wanted to make no mistakes. In that, I failed. But I considered the alternative worse: to not try. I learned from my mistakes. I made new ones. As I gained power, the cost of my mistakes grew—because it wasn’t just me who would pay for them. It’s the one silver lining to the cloud of being powerless, here.”

“You could join the Hawks.”

“Given your Sergeant’s attitude toward Dragons, I highly doubt it.”

“He’s not in charge. If Lord Grammayre gives you permission...” Kaylin trailed off.

“He would require Imperial permission first, and I highly doubt he would receive it. Not in my case. And yes, I am aware that Lord Tiamaris has been, in the past, considered a member of the Hawks. I am content, however, to be allowed to accompany you on your patrols. If,” she added, “you have no objections.”

Right at this very moment, Kaylin didn’t.

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If anyone else was surprised to see Bellusdeo approaching the Halls in regular clothing, they were better at containing their shock than Kaylin was.

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Clint and Tanner were on door duty, and therefore had the first opportunity. They nodded to Bellusdeo; they were not required to be more formal while on duty. Not that any of the Hawks were great at formality, except those in the upper echelons.

“Anything I should be dreading before I’m given permission to enter?” Kaylin asked, glancing at Clint’s wings. They’d been singed, but not in a way that would prevent flight; Clint had assured her that they would be fully functional, and he’d been right.

“Moran had a screeching fight with Ironjaw. She also had a clipped, angry ‘discussion’ with the Hawklord.”

“Moran?”

“You might remember her? Shortish, speckled wings, foul temper, runs our infirmary?”

Moran had reportedly been clipped by fire that was hot enough to *melt stone*. According to Teela, one of her wings was a disaster; her prognosis for future flight was not good, and she was supposed to be confined to the Aerie in the Southern Reach.

“Why is she even in the office? Shouldn’t she be at home?”

“You might want to keep *that* opinion to yourself today,” Tanner replied, wincing. “She is not in the mood to have her presence at work criticized, and she made that quite clear.”

“Can she even *fly*?”

Silence.

Kaylin turned to Bellusdeo. “We’re going to take a detour to the infirmary.”

“Were we not just warned against that?”

“Not exactly,” Kaylin replied at the same time as Clint said, “Yes.”

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“I am not familiar with Moran,” the Dragon said. “I’ve met her, of course, but our paths have not otherwise crossed.”

“If you’re smart, they won’t cross today.” Clint glanced at Kaylin before adding, “But if you mean to tag along where Kaylin goes, smart won’t count for much.”

“Thanks a bunch, Clint.”

“I thought you valued honesty?”

Chapter Two

“If your Sergeant was unable to convince Moran that her services are not currently required, what do you think you’ll achieve?” Bellusdeo asked pointedly as they made their way to the infirmary.

“I’ll worry less. I just want to make sure she’s all right.”

“You don’t expect her to be all right.”

Kaylin rolled back her sleeve, exposing the bracer that she wore. It was a gift—of sorts—from the Imperial Treasury, and it looked like a golden manacle, but longer, and with gems. The gems were actually buttons, and when pressed in a specific sequence, it opened. If one didn’t know the sequence, the bracer wouldn’t open. If it didn’t open, it did not come off. Cutting Kaylin’s hand off would not remove the bracer—because while she wore it, her entire arm seemed almost impervious to physical damage.

She frequently tossed it over her shoulder; she sometimes tossed it into the Ablayne. No matter where she threw it, it always returned to its keeper.

Its keeper was not Kaylin. It was Severn.

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Today, she handed it to Bellusdeo instead. Bellusdeo didn't exactly *argue* when Kaylin dropped it, but she clearly didn't approve of the casual way Kaylin treated the artifact.

"You mean to heal her."

"I mean to try, yes. She has a very Barrani attitude toward healing. She considers it intrusive."

"It *is* intrusive."

"I didn't say she was stupid. I might in the very near future, though."

Kaylin's power had been used extensively the day after the disastrous attack. Moran had been absent from the infirmary, and the mood of the Hawks working in its crowded environs had been a blend of determination and gloom. Moran was not particularly fond of Kaylin's healing ability; she seldom allowed Kaylin to heal at all. But First Corporal Kirby, the Aerian who had taken over the infirmary in Moran's absence, was more of a pushover. He was only a little older than Kaylin, and he lacked Moran's wintery presence and absolute authority.

Since Moran hadn't been present, things had gone more smoothly. If almost two dozen officers of the law had died, many, many more had been injured. Moran felt that setting bones—arms, legs, ribs, collars—was her purview. She was less sanguine about burns—especially those that involved flight feathers or wings.

Kaylin had insisted she be allowed to heal the men and women who were not guaranteed to survive. She tended to severe burns and the infections that came with them; she was allowed to heal crushed limbs and fractured skulls. Kirby approved it all, while muttering *Moran is going to kill me* under his breath.

No one had questioned Kaylin's work in the infirmary, though the use of her power was not entirely legal. Kaylin

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was not yet a member of the Imperial Order or the Arcanum—and she would rather die than join the latter.

In *theory*, there were strict laws that governed the use of magic in Elantra. But in practice, the use of magic wasn't easily quantified. It was therefore very poorly governed.

Even had it not been, it wouldn't have mattered. The Hawklord and the Swordlord were fully capable of petitioning the Emperor for permission; neither had felt the paperwork would be productive or entirely necessary.

The beds had emptied slowly. While Kaylin *could* heal—and very effectively—the process exhausted her, and she'd only been able to work on one man or woman at a time.

At least today, if she collapsed on the way home, Bellusdeo could carry her the rest of the way.

The likelihood of that happening was very small if Moran was, as Clint stated, at her desk. Kaylin wanted to believe that Teela had exaggerated. She didn't. Moran, she was certain, should *not* be at work. Not yet.

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Clint, unsurprisingly, was right: Moran was in the infirmary.

Her left arm was in a sling, and her wings...

Kaylin shook her head. Moran's left wing was a mess; the skeletal structure of the limb itself could be seen, and huge sections of feathers were missing entirely. It looked like half of the Aerial's flight feathers were gone. Aerials, like regular birds, did molt—but they didn't do it publicly. As far as Kaylin could tell, it would be the cultural equivalent of taking a bath fully nude in the market fountain. She knew that full regrowth could take months if the feathers were damaged. She was less certain about what happened if they were simply gone.

There was no way Moran had flown here. She must have been carried.

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Moran glared at Kaylin.

Actually, she glared at everything. She nodded—stiffly—to Bellusdeo, the gesture weighted with what Kaylin felt was genuine respect. “We’re honored to have you back among us,” she said, startling Kaylin. Her expression softened slightly. “We owe you.”

Bellusdeo’s eyes, which were already mostly gold, brightened until they were shining. “I have become very fond of the Halls of Law, and of the city. I am less fond of the Barrani High Halls, but if a battle of any significance had to take place within the city—”

“It’s better there than anywhere, aye. You’ll be going on duty rounds with the private?”

“I will.”

“Then you’d best drag her off—she’s going to be late, and the Sergeant is not in a charitable mood.”

And whose fault is that? “I’m right here,” Kaylin said, folding her arms.

Moran had an impressive glare.

“What, exactly, are you afraid of? Everyone *else* who was badly injured accepted my help.”

“I am not—”

“You can’t *fly*, Sergeant.”

“Not immediately, no. The feathers will grow in.”

Kaylin didn’t believe it; she wondered if Moran actually did.

“I have already had an argument about the state of my health this morning. Two, in fact. If I did not listen to that giant, lumbering cat and I did not bow to Lord Grammayre, believe that I am not going to blithely obey a *private*.”

“Teela said you would be out for months.”

“She was demonstrably incorrect. There is nothing wrong with my hands, my legs or my eyes. I am capable of doing my duty. I can’t fly in these rooms, anyway.”

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“Moran, *please*—”

“No.”

“But your wings—”

“Do you know why I’m a sergeant in the infirmary, Private?”

Kaylin did not roll her eyes, though it took effort. “Because you can deal with the injured, regardless of their moods or state of mind.”

“Exactly. You can plead, beg, cry and curse me. I won’t be moved.”

Kaylin inexplicably felt like crying at the moment. Moran’s wings—white and speckled with a brown that almost formed a pattern when the wings were closed—were unique among the Aerians of her acquaintance.

“You still have your childish obsessions, don’t you?”

“Yes.” Kaylin folded her arms, refusing to feel embarrassed.

Moran’s eyes narrowed. They were blue. Aerial blue was not the same midnight as Barrani blue, but it meant essentially the same thing. Moran was angry. Then again, Moran was almost always angry.

“Where are you staying?”

Moran blinked. “Pardon?”

“You can’t fly. You can get Aerians to carry you to and from the Southern Reach, but you can’t fly back on your own. Given it’s you, I’m willing to bet last week’s pay that you don’t even intend to try.”

Moran shifted her gaze; it fell on Bellusdeo. There was nothing else in the room to look at, as the beds were all empty.

Bellusdeo held up both hands. “I am willing to face Barrani ancestors, Shadows and death. I am not willing to pull nonexistent rank on a private. Please don’t ask—I am here on sufferance, with the understanding that I will not

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interfere with the private's duties." She spoke in more formal Barrani, though the rest of the conversation had been uttered in Kaylin's mother tongue.

"You're a Dragon," Moran pointed out. "You don't need rank."

"She's the Chosen," Bellusdeo countered. Her eyes were still golden, although her expression was neutral. Except for the corners of her mouth, which were twitching.

Moran turned to Kaylin. She could look down on the private from the secure position of rank, but she wasn't quite tall enough to tower. "I intend to stay here until I've fully recovered."

No bloody wonder Marcus had thrown a fit. "This isn't exactly residential."

"It has a roof, and the doors are never completely unmanned. Food is within relatively easy walking distance, and if I need supplies, that's what privates are for."

"And where are you going to sleep?"

"In the Aerie in the halls."

"Which you can't reach." Kaylin's eyes narrowed a little more with each sentence.

"Which is none of your business," Moran snapped.

"Fine." Kaylin turned and marched toward the door. When she reached the frame, she turned back. Bellusdeo was still standing beside Moran; the Dragon looked amused. She was the only person in the room who did.

"I believe Private Neya is attempting, in her brusque fashion, to offer you a more amenable place to stay while you recover," Bellusdeo said.

"I don't need her charity."

"Ah."

Kaylin attempted to count to ten. She made it to three.

"But it's okay for *me* to accept *yours*?"

"I'm not offering you charity."

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“You’ve offered me help and guidance for *years*. You’ve taken care of me after training accidents. You were here when we almost lost a fight to a Dragon.” The small dragon, bored or silent until now, lifted his head and bit Kaylin’s hair.

“*You*,” Moran replied, “were *here*. Taking care of you here is my *job*. And you weren’t here for long.”

“There’s supposed to be give and take, Moran.”

“Sergeant.”

“*Whatever*. This is the first time in my entire *life* that I’m able to offer you any help at all!”

“I don’t need it.”

“*Fine*.” Kaylin turned and walked out.

*

“If you were a Dragon,” Bellusdeo said, “you’d be steaming the halls. Possibly even melting parts of them.”

“It irritates me that my help isn’t good enough.”

“The sergeant probably doesn’t understand what you’re offering. I believe the entire department knew where you were living before the assassination attempt destroyed your home. She might assume you now live in similarly-sized quarters—and frankly, the ceiling of your old apartment would be nearly crippling for an Aerial over the long term.”

Kaylin stomped down the long hall, but slowed her pace as Bellusdeo’s words caught up with her temper.

“I know you’re upset at the sight of her wings.”

“They told me—” Kaylin exhaled. “They told me she’d been damaged by the ancestor’s fire. I didn’t actually get to *see* the damage. It’s a wonder she didn’t die; there’s no way she could keep herself in the air with wings like that.”

“No. But I have noticed the Hawks keep an eye out for their own. She is alive, Kaylin. But she is an older woman, and she clearly does not care for...coddling.”

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Kaylin gave a little shriek in response. The small dragon whacked her face with his wing.

*

Marcus appeared to be looking for a suitable target for his obvious frustration. His eyes were a steady orange, and his facial fur was almost standing on end. Kaylin picked up the thrum of his growl just *after* she had time to reconsider the wisdom of entering the office. Of course. Leontine anger was never quiet or invisible.

She headed directly for his desk, bypassing the duty roster and anyone else who stood between them—except for Caitlin, who waved her over.

“Have you seen Moran?” Kaylin demanded, as Caitlin opened her mouth.

“Yes, dear.”

“Why is she even in the office? She should be at home recovering!”

“It’s...complicated,” the office mother replied. The tone of her voice had a dampening effect on Kaylin’s outrage.

“Complicated how?”

“Given that you’ve seen her—you didn’t start an argument with her, did you?”

“I didn’t start the argument, no.”

Caitlin sighed. It was as close as she generally came to open disapproval. “If Moran didn’t discuss it with you, I can’t. She is having some difficulty at home.”

“She thinks she’s going to be living here.”

“Her living quarters are definitely not your problem.”

“In the *Halls*, Caitlin.”

“You’ve lived in far less optimal conditions in your life. She won’t starve and she won’t be hunted; she’ll have a solid roof over her head. The Halls were designed, in part, with Aerians in mind. She will not suffer.”

“I want her to live with me.”

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Caitlin's eyes flicked briefly to the side, in Bellusdeo's direction. She did not, however, tell Kaylin that she thought it was a bad idea. "Let me speak with her," she said, rising. "I know Marcus and Lord Grammayre have attempted to do so, but I might have better luck with a different approach. You're certain you want this?"

Kaylin nodded, trying not to look as mutinous as she felt.

She was rewarded by Caitlin's smile. "Good. I wouldn't have suggested it—but I think that might be for the best. We're not certain that—" She shook her head. "You'd best speak with Marcus. He's been waiting for you—and not terribly patiently."

*

Marcus immediately barked Kaylin's name. Or Kaylin's rank, at any rate. No other private rushed to fill the space in front of his disaster of a desk.

"Since Moran is back, you can stop moping around in the infirmary and get back to work."

That was unfair, but life generally was. The Sergeant growled at the mirror on his desk; it flickered instantly to life as an image began to coalesce. "Corporal Korrin! Corporal Danelle!"

Teela and Tain materialized almost instantly, which meant they'd been eavesdropping from a safer distance than most mortals—at least the non-Leontine ones—could manage. Severn joined them before his name could also be barked.

This was two people too many for Elani beat work. Kaylin pushed thoughts of Moran aside.

"There was a triple murder reported up the Winding Path." The Winding Path was both the road's official map name and an accurate description. It crossed two market areas at its lowest point, and then headed toward the Southern Reach. It was not a particularly short street.

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“Where on the Winding Path?”

“At the Keffeer crossing.” As he spoke, the mirror showed a clearly marked spot on the map. “The bodies are to be moved to the morgue when you’re done.”

“What are you not telling us?”

“I am not telling you anything other than the location. You are expected there as soon as you can make it. Take the carriage.”

Kaylin glanced nervously at Teela and shook her head. “We’ll get there faster if we walk.”

“Not if I’m driving,” Teela said.

“We’ll get there *alive* if we walk.”

Marcus growled, but his eyes lost a touch of their orange; Teela’s driving was the stuff of legend in the office. “Teela, take a mirror kit. The quartermaster is waiting with it. Private, there are Imperial mages on the property. Attempt not to offend them.”

“Yes, sir.” She hesitated.

“Yessss?” He turned the full force of his gaze on the silent Dragon by Kaylin’s side. His exhale was rumbling. “You intend to follow the private?”

“If that is permissible.”

“I don’t like it. You’re not a Hawk, and this is serious Hawk work; it’s not patrolling fraud central.”

Bellusdeo was helpful; she smiled benignly and held the Sergeant’s glare until he growled again. “Keep an eye on her.”

Kaylin tried not to bristle.

“I will.”

“If any of the idiots in the office attempt to buy you a drink or grovel their gratitude, I’d appreciate it if you ignored them.”

“Oh?”

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“They’re grateful for your intervention. They’re not idiots. They’re aware that the Emperor wasn’t.”

Bellusdeo’s face stiffened. Had Kaylin been on the other side of the desk, she would’ve kicked him. She would’ve regretted it, of course—if he’d even noticed, that is.

“But they’re impressed, anyway. Private, are you going to stand around all day gaping like a new recruit?”

“No, sir.”

“Good. Head out.”

“Going, sir.”

“Good.” He ran a claw through what was fast becoming a collection of loosely connected splinters. “If you can talk sense into Sergeant Carafel, I’ll send your rank request up to the Tower immediately.” Seeing the change in her expression at the mention of Moran, he added, “No, I did not bring this up.”

“You’re at least the same rank—”

“And the Hawklord outranks her. She is not listening to either of us.”

Kaylin shrugged. “Caitlin went to talk to her. I want her to move in with me.”

He growled his way through a Leontine phrase for which there was no Elantran equivalent. Teela caught Kaylin’s arm and dragged her toward the nearest exit.

Kaylin shook her off as soon as they’d made it out the doors. “If it’s all the same to you, I’d rather not let the quartermaster see my face. He’s pissed off at Jenkins at the moment, and I’d like him to stay that way.”

“Jenkins has offended you? He’s a bit green, but—”

“No, he hasn’t. But it’s the first time in months that someone *else* has been the quartermaster’s official problem child.” Jenkins had recently lost a sword. “I’d just as soon not remind him that I exist.”

*

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The Winding Path met Keffeer about a third of the way up the gentle incline on which the southern part of the city was built. It was well away from the Ablayne, although one small stream trickled down from the rocky heights of the unoccupied reach and fed into it.

The homes were not as fine as they were in the expensive districts around the Imperial Palace, but they weren't as run-down as the buildings in the fiefs, either. There were fences and gates that fronted the street, but they weren't uniform.

"Did he even give us an address?" Kaylin asked, as Keffeer came into view.

"You were there. You heard just as much as we did," Teela said. She was, as Mandoran had said earlier, in a mood.

"Yes, but I *remember* less clearly."

"No, he didn't."

Tain, silent, cast a sidelong glance at Bellusdeo. "You might want to sit this one out," he told her.

She raised a golden brow. The line of the arch was almost identical to the line of the Arkon's when he did the same thing. "Do you feel that I am in marked danger in this investigation?"

"It's a distinct possibility."

"And you think that I am likely to fall prey to this theoretical danger when two mortals will not?" She glanced pointedly at Kaylin and Severn, neither of whom were stupid enough to say anything.

Teela grinned. "Give it up," she told her partner before turning to Bellusdeo. "The reason he's attempting to be cautious is the lack of information we've been given. It implies—heavily—that the star of this leg of the investigation is going to be Kaylin."

"Kaylin? Why?"

"Thanks," Kaylin interjected.

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“Kaylin is particularly sensitive to magic and its remnants. You’ve probably heard her whining about door wards?”

“I’m breathing, so yes,” Bellusdeo replied.

“It’s not just door wards. Any use of normal magic—”

“How are we defining normal?”

“Magic that might be used by a mage of the Imperial Order and most of the Arcanum. The Arcanum does have some branches—you know what, never mind. We can discuss this in a tavern on an off-night. The point is, Kaylin’s sensitive enough to see magic without using any of her own—that we can detect, anyway. The Sergeant doesn’t wish to influence what she might—or might not—see. He’ll have some inkling of what the Imperial mages discovered.”

“Inkling?”

“They’ll write a report, but it won’t come in until tomorrow at the earliest.”

“Is everything in your city reliant on reports of this nature?”

“Yes. Paper is easier to lose than Records.” She turned to Kaylin. “What are you looking at?”

Kaylin swore under her breath. Mostly. “I think I know where we’re heading.”

*

Magic gave Kaylin hives. She’d gotten used to this in the West March, though the magic of the green didn’t cause the same reaction as the magic on the streets here did. The Imperial roads, such as they were, were well-kept, from the merchant gates to the city’s economic center.

But the stones on the Winding Path were cracked.

Kaylin knelt.

“Did we get any witness reports?” she asked, as she touched the cracks she could see.

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“Let me access Records,” Teela replied, and did so. Kaylin felt a twinge as the pocket mirror came to life in the Barrani Hawk’s hand. “Yes.”

“What did they say?”

“Marcus has put a hold on that information until you tender your first report.”

Kaylin was annoyed, but she tempered her reaction. “Do these cracks look strange to you?” she asked.

“What cracks?”

Which answered that question. “You know, when I first started training with the two of you, we had normal cases.”

“Technically, yes. Your first case—”

“Don’t mention it. I wasn’t a Hawk then.” She rose. The street, in her view, was cracked, the stones listing toward the crack as if something very large or very heavy had recently traveled on this road. But the cracks themselves felt odd. She stopped a yard up the Path, and knelt again.

At her back, she heard the familiar clink of metal against metal. Severn was unwinding his weapon chain. Neither Teela nor Tain told him to stop. “What does the road look like to you?” she asked him.

“Flat, for the most part. It’s a relatively smooth incline; there are patches of weeds to either side. You don’t see that.” It wasn’t a question, but Kaylin answered it as if it were, describing what she could see.

“This isn’t your usual paradigm,” Teela said.

“No. And I see no magical sigils, either. It’s not *strong* magic, but it’s definitely there.”

“Records,” Teela said. “Record.”

Kaylin described what she saw for a third time, and Teela moved the mirror so that it captured the street. She then handed the tiny captured image to Kaylin. Kaylin, well aware that her head would be on a pike if she dropped or damaged *this* mirror, took it gingerly. The image in the

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mirror was what Severn had described. She handed it back to Teela.

“What do you normally see?” Bellusdeo asked, as Kaylin rose again.

“Sigils and words,” Kaylin replied. “They’re often splashed against walls or doors like random paint. The larger the sigil, the greater the magic that produced it.”

“Not cracks.”

“Not usually, no. I think one or two of the mages in the Imperium look at magic as dimensionality, though. They see containers. Where magic has been cast, they see the type of shards you’d see if you dropped a vase. The greater the shattering, the larger the magic that caused it. One of them sees particular colors of glass or glaze—his version of my sigils.

“The crack—it’s mostly one—veers at the gate three houses to the left of where we’re standing.”

“The short, wooden gate?”

Kaylin nodded. “Why are you making that face?”

Severn coughed. “I don’t think that that’s the house with the bodies,” he said.

Sometimes Kaylin’s entire life felt like a game of gotcha. “Which house is it?”

“Three down,” he replied, “and on the other side of the street.”

*

Teela didn’t head to the aforementioned dwelling immediately. She began to cast instead. Her spell was much stronger than the afterimage of magic left on the road; Kaylin’s skin goose-bumped in protest. The Barrani Hawk handed the mirror to Tain as she knelt in the center of the road.

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“Honestly, kitling,” she said, passing her hands over the crack that Kaylin could still see. “How bad a teacher can Lord Sanabalis be?”

“He’d say the quality of the student is the determining factor,” Kaylin replied. “Are you getting anything?”

“My initial response would usually be no.”

Kaylin, having worked with Teela for years, waited as the Barrani Hawk rose and retraced Kaylin’s exact steps. She was frowning; her eyes, which had been as green as they ever got at work, were shading toward blue. It was a green-blue, so she was concerned, but not overly worried. Tain, on the other hand, was definitely worried.

Kaylin raised her brows at him, and he shook his head. “If you teach me nothing else in your short life,” he said, “you have forced me to reevaluate boredom as a concept. There is definitely such a thing as too much excitement.”

“This isn’t too much excitement,” Kaylin quite reasonably pointed out.

“Not yet. Are you betting?”

“Is she breathing?” Teela cut in. “Shut up, both of you. I can’t concentrate.” Severn—much more quietly—asked Tain what the bet, stakes, and odds were. Teela did not tell Severn to shut up.

The Barrani Hawk rose. “There *is* something. I wouldn’t have noticed it—I’m only barely detecting it now.” She glanced at Tain, who shrugged.

“Magic was never one of my strengths.”

“Bellusdeo?”

“Yes, it was considered one of mine.” The Dragon was frowning. She looked at Kaylin. Or rather, at the small dragon sitting on her shoulder. “Well?”

The small dragon was silent.

“Bodies, or house across the street from the bodies first?” Tain asked.

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“House,” Kaylin said.

*

“Let Teela do the talking,” Severn suggested as they followed the path of this indeterminate magic to what appeared to be its source. “Records indicate that this house is occupied, that the taxes are paid up and that the owner is not a person of political significance.”

Kaylin said nothing. That lasted for five seconds. “Is it too much to ask,” she said, under her breath, “that I not be shoved out in the dark with zero information whatsoever and asked to find something?”

“We’re in the same dark. If you hadn’t been arguing with Moran—how did that go, by the way?—you would’ve been in the office when the request came in.” When this failed to appreciably lighten Kaylin’s mood, he added, “You know that magical precepts are both individual and susceptible to suggestion.”

“I bet Ironjaw has more information.”

“The sergeant is not a mage.”

Neither am I. She kept this to herself, aware that she was cranky in part because of her discussion with Moran. She was old enough not to be treated like a child.

Teela approached the gate, raised a hand, then lowered it. The frown she wore seemed etched into her otherwise perfect face. “Kitling?”

Kaylin shrugged off her resentment and came to stand by Teela’s side. She also poked the small dragon, who squawked quietly, but lifted one transparent wing. He tapped her face gently, to make a point, but kept the wing extended so it covered her eyes.

To Kaylin’s vision—with the added interference of translucent dragon wing—the gate looked weathered. It was slightly warped. The nails that held it in place had rusted a bit, but that was it. “It’s a gate.” She turned to glance back

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at the road and froze. After a second, she lifted her hand to gently catch the small dragon's wing. He expressed his appreciation of this loudly, but stopped short of biting her fingers.

“We've got a problem,” Kaylin said.