

## CHAPTER ONE

In the old days, before the Dragon Emperor -- sometimes called the Eternal Emperor by those who did the toadying -- had come up with The Law, and the laws which governed the Empire, angry Dragons simply ate the idiots who were stupid enough to irritate them, or, if they were unappetizing, burned them into a very slight pile of ash.

Ash had the advantage of requiring little to no paperwork.

Marcus Kassan, the Sergeant of one branch of officers who served the new-fangled Law, the Hawks, stared gloomily at a pile of paperwork that, were it placed end-to-end, would dwarf him. At over six feet, that was difficult. The desire to shred it caused his claws to flick in and out of the fur of his forepaws.

The desire to avoid annoying Caitlin, the woman who was -- inasmuch as the Hawks allowed it -- denmother to the interior office which set schedules, logged reports, and prepared duty rosters and pay chits, was just *slightly* stronger. In their personal life, Leontines disavowed all paperwork, usually by the expedient of chewing it, shredding it, or burning it, when it wasn't useful for the kits' litter.

Then again, he'd been at his desk for the better part of an hour. He expected there'd be a shift in the balance before the day -- which looked to be long and gruelling -- was over.

Caitlin smiled at him, from the nest she made of the paperwork she endured, day in, day out. It was a slightly sharp smile that looked, on the surface, quiet and sweet. That was Caitlin. Human all over. She'd been with him for years. He was aware of her value; the three people before her had lasted two weeks, three weeks, and four days respectively. They had all babbled like morons.

*Fear does that*, Caitlin had said, when she'd applied for the job. She was bird-thin and fragile to the eye, and her voice was soft and feminine; no growl or fang there. But definitely some spine; she was one of two people who manned the desks who could stand six inches from his face when he was on the edge of fury. She barely blinked, and attributed that, regretfully, to his breath.

At any other time of the year, paperwork was optional. Pay chits and duty rosters weren't, but he was enough of a Sergeant to at least sign off on

them when he wasn't actively composing the lists themselves. No, *this* hideous mess was courtesy of Festival. Permits, copied laboriously by clerks in some merchant branch of the Imperial palace, had been sent by dimwitted courier in bags that were half again as large as Caitlin. Bags. Plural.

But not just permits; Festival regulations which seemed to change year after year, the names of important dignitaries from the furthest damn fringe of the Empire, manifests of cargo transports, and diplomatic grants were also shoved in the same bags; the latter were, however, sealed in a way that screamed "special privilege". Diplomatic Immunity.

Marcus hated Festival season. The city was enough of a problem; throwing foreigners into the streets by the thousands was just asking for trouble.

Not only that, but every get-rich-quick scheme that had occurred to any half-wit moron in the street could be expected to rear its imbecilic head during the next two weeks. Unfortunately, every get-rich-quick scheme that occurred to any cunning, intelligent person would *also* rear its head during the next two weeks. The money that flowed into the Empire's capital during Festival was staggering, and everyone wanted a piece of it.

The Swordlord, and the men who followed his orders, were probably in worse shape, and this provided a moment's comfort to Marcus; he was Hawk, through and through; the Swords were his natural rivals. Not, of course, his enemies; they all served the Lords of Law, and they all worked in the labyrinthine buildings referred to as The Halls of Law by people who saw them from the outside. But the Hawks and the Swords had their own way of doing things, and when Festival season was at its height, there were always disagreements.

On the other hand, at least the Swords *were* in the streets; the damn Wolves were at bay. It was hard to hunt in the city during Festival, even at the behest of the Wolf lord; the Wolves were kept in reserve in case of riot, when *all* servants of the Law could be called into action. This was, however, downtime for the Wolves, and Marcus sullenly resented them their freedom.

Paperwork was best left for bureaucrats.

Unfortunately, bureaucrats were damn good at shovelling the work onto the shoulders of men and women who were already too busy, where being too busy meant they didn't have time to kick up enough of a fuss to give it *back*.

He heard a door slam. It was followed by a raised, angry voice -- only one -- and the sound of a very heavy tread. Deliberately heavy.

Paperwork looked almost good in comparison.

"Oh dear," Caitlin said. "That's three this week."

"Two. One of them left last week." He rearranged the paperwork in the vague hope that this would provide some sort of fortification against the red and dour expression of a very annoyed mage.

Sure enough, down the long hall that led from the West Room, which had been ceded to the Hawklord for educational purposes, the swirling robes of a man who had probably been ancient ten years ago came into view. His fists were bunched just below the drape of long sleeves, and his forehead was engraved with permanent wrinkles. The kind that said "bad mood".

The office had grown somewhat quieter as people stopped to listen in. You could count on curiosity to get the better of work at Festival.

The man stormed over to the Sergeant's desk. "You will tell the Lord of Hawks that I am *finished* with this -- this ridiculous task!"

Marcus raised a brow. Given that his face was entirely composed of golden fur, this should have been discomfiting at the very least.

"The girl is *untrainable*. She doesn't listen. She barely *reads*. She thinks like a -- like a *common soldier*. She is rude beyond bearing, she is stupid, and she is an insult to the Order of Imperial Mages!"

The other brow lifted slightly, as the Leontine attempted to look surprised. This was, however, lost on the mage, who was as human as Caitlin -- as human, in fact, as most of the other paper pushers who called the office their second home.

Leontines were many things, but actor wasn't one of them. They were sort of the anti-actor.

"Tell your superior that I will have *words* with the Imperial Order about this!"

As he'd now heard a variant of this speech three times, he had it memorized. It generated some paperwork, on the other hand, which soured a mood that was worse than sour to begin with.

Holding his tongue was difficult. Holding his claws was a shade more difficult. He managed to breathe shallowly enough that the growl couldn't be heard over the mage's shouts.

Which went on for another five minutes before he stormed off. It was a wonder he wasn't followed by black clouds and lightning bolts.

"Oh dear," Caitlin said again, rising. "He didn't last two days."

Marcus shrugged, letting the growl into his words. "I told the Hawklord,"

he said.

"I know. I think we all tried. There must be a suitable mage somewhere in the Order --"

"I doubt it. You know how the Dragon Emperor feels about mages and sanity." Marcus pushed himself out of his chair. His claws clicked against the floorboards.

"I'll tell the Hawklord," he said with a shrug.

"I'll talk to Kaylin," Caitlin added.

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Kaylin Neyra was sitting in the West room, her arms folded across her chest. There was a candle on the desk; it had been cut in half.

"Dear," Caitlin said quietly, "I *think* you're supposed to *light* it."

Kaylin muttered something about light and places in which it didn't shine. She was the youngest of Marcus' Hawks, and it showed.

"He really is a nice old man," Caitlin began.

"They're *all* supposed to be 'nice old men'." Kaylin shoved herself out of her chair, as if she were a miniature Marcus. On the other hand, she had boots instead of bare pads, and her very human nature didn't lend itself to extended claws and long fangs. "They're arrogant, they're long-winded, and they think they know everything."

"They do know a lot --"

"They know a lot about useless things! Light a candle?" She rolled her eyes. "I can light a candle in five seconds, the normal way. I can kill a man just as easily as a Mage -- and probably more efficiently." Her hands fell to her daggers and rested there. "I can run faster, I can see farther, I can --"

"Kaylin," Caitlin said, raising both her hands. "No one is doubting your competence as a *Hawk*. You're an officer of the Halls of Law."

"And how is *this* supposed to help me?"

"You cut the candle in half, dear?"

"It didn't get that way by itself."

"No, I imagine it didn't." Caitlin shrugged. "You've already annoyed a number of the Imperial mages. I do think it would be best for the Hawks if you tried not to annoy any *more*." She paused. Added, "You've got to *expect* a little arrogance, Kaylin. These men are old, they've survived the Emperor's service, and they are considered experts in their field. Given your general reaction to any power that isn't owned by the Hawks, I'll forego mention of the fact that these men *are* powerful. And you're insulting their

life's work."

Kaylin's lips were set in a line that could be called thin. Or invisible. "I don't want to be part of their life's work," she said at last. "I want to be part of *my* life's work. I want -- all I've wanted since the first day I was introduced to all you -- is to be a Hawk."

"You *are* a Hawk, Kaylin."

"The Hawks don't employ mages."

Caitlin's smile froze in place. "You do realize that annoying them probably won't stop them from coming?"

"I can try."

The older woman's expression gave trying a different meaning. "I believe the Hawklord will want to speak with you. Again."

Kaylin's shoulders sagged. She walked past Caitlin and out of the room.

#

The Hawklord's tower boasted a fine set of stairs, one that curved upward against the inner wall in a continuous stacked spiral. There was good stonework here, girded by brass rails, and the echoes went up forever, bouncing against the walls.

Or against the breastplates of the guards on the various landings Kaylin walked past.

She nodded at them; they nodded back. If they were inclined to smirk, they managed to hide it, which was just as well. A brawl on these steps could cause injury. And, following it, more injury of an entirely Leontine nature. Marcus didn't approve of Hawks fighting each other in the Halls; he'd long since given up on Hawks squabbling after too many drinks in their private time.

The door to the Hawklord's inner sanctum, with its much-hated magical ward, was as usual closed. Kaylin, grimacing, placed her palm squarely against that ward and waited while the familiar prickle of magic ran up her arm and caused her hair to almost stand on end. The first time she'd touched it, she'd sworn her head off. Unfortunately for Kaylin, the more severe of the words occurred as the doors were opening; the domed cavern that the Hawklord ruled had reminded her of the unpleasant existence of acoustics. The Hawklord himself reminded her about the correct use of language in his presence.

It mostly consisted of "don't talk" in exactly the wrong tones. Kaylin wasn't a firm believer in soft-spoken threats, but if anyone could make her one, it was Lord Grammayre, the Aerial who held the title of Lord of

Hawks.

She walked across the threshold.

The Hawklord, pale white wings turned toward her, was waiting in the silence. When he turned, she could see a piece of paper in his hands. It seemed to command most of his attention.

And given what it probably said, that wouldn't last long.

She paid him the obeisance the difference in their ranks demanded: she knelt. This was only partly because she was his junior in every possible way. The other part -- the one that wanted to remain a member of his Hawks -- was not above a little grovelling, especially when there were no other witnesses. It wasn't the worst thing she'd done in his presence by a long shot.

His eyes, narrow grey, travelled along the top of her head, as if they could scalp her, and keep the scalp as an object lesson for *other* Hawks. Marcus, all bristling fur and exposed fangs, was no match for the Hawklord when it came to intimidation; Kaylin had annoyed them both in her time, and had more than ample evidence.

He handed her the piece of paper. She had to rise to take it. "That," he said, "was the third member of the Imperial Order of Mages you've managed to offend in less than ten days."

She recognized Leontine scrawl; it was bold, dark, and put holes in the paper.

'He started it' was not an option, and she bit the words back, swallowing them. "I've never been a good classroom student," she said at last.

"We're well aware of that," he replied, his words dry enough to catch fire. "We've attempted to keep your academic transcripts from the mages who have condescended to tutor you. Unfortunately, they seem to think it necessary to review them."

She said nothing, as it seemed safest. It usually was, and she frequently failed to remember this until after her mouth had engaged. "I don't understand why you even think it's necessary," she said at last, when his silence grew a little too weighty.

He raised a pale brow. His eyes, Aerian to the core, were shading to blue, which was never a good sign.

"The Hawks don't employ mages," she said, woodenly.

"You are not a mage."

"Then why --"

He lifted a hand. "I have always considered patience a virtue when dealing with the Hawks," he told her, "but I find that, as usual, you tax precious resources.

"Therefore, I will be blunt. You are a Hawk, but you are also -- as you well know -- blessed or cursed with magical ability. You can't control it well enough; you don't understand what it is, or what it can do. It is the opinion of experts that the power itself *can* be wielded in a manner similar to the control exerted by the Mages."

*Which experts?*

"Do not even think of asking, Kaylin." He knew her far too well.

"It's *Festival*," she snapped. "We're up to our armpits in work -- if we're lucky. We've just gotten the tally of so-called diplomats and Important Visitors," she managed to wedge a powerful sneer into each syllable of the last two words, "and we're undermanned, as usual.

"I *don't* have time for this right now."

"I will agree that the timing is not the most opportune," the Hawklord said, in a tone that implied the exact opposite. "But as the timing is not of our choosing, we have little choice.

"I understand what you're attempting to do, Kaylin," he added, his voice smoothing to velvet. "And I will now insist that you cease this. It is unworthy of you. You can insult and infuriate every Mage who crosses the threshold on my behalf, if it pleases you. But they will not stop coming. Do you understand?"

She didn't.

He raised a hand to his brow. As gestures went, it was human, and even if it hadn't been, it was transparent. "The Emperor himself has taken an interest in your education."

They were not the words she expected to hear. They were also the last words she *wanted* to hear. Unfortunately, lifting her hands to stop her ears wasn't an option.

"How much does he --"

"He *is* the Emperor; it is to the Emperor that the Lords of Law are beholden. How much do you think he knows?"

The words Too Damn Much flitted about, but she tried to ignore them.

"You fought a Dragon," he added quietly. "You fought the only Dragon who has ever survived being outcaste among his kin. The battle was felt all the way to the palace. Some diplomacy was necessary -- you can thank Tiamaris for his intercession -- and there were, perhaps, a surfeit of actual

facts offered. But enough was said. The Emperor knows that you bear the marks."

Her eyes fell to her sleeves automatically; they always did, when anyone spoke of the strange writing that ran the length of her arms and her thighs. They had been symbols to be hidden, when she had been a child on the edge of adulthood; she knew them now as words. Or names. But whose words and whose names were still mostly mystery -- and in Kaylin's universe, it was vital that they *stay* that way. She was used to them, in any case; the new ones bothered her more.

"He is," the Hawklord continued, "also aware that you bear a Barrani mark."

"Everyone is," she said.

"Were it not for Tiamaris, he would not be inclined to ... give you the benefit of the doubt. He has shown some forbearance, in this. But he has made clear that you present a danger *if you cannot be trained*. And it seems that you intend to demonstrate your intractability in the worst possible way. For you," he added, as if it were necessary.

"I will send for another member of the Imperial Order of Mages."

She was stony silence defined.

"If you happen to offend him before the week is out, you will be suspended from active duty. Have I made myself clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good."

She was aware that he had just won someone the office betting pool, but could not for the life of her remember who. Just as well. She waited for a few minutes, but he had turned from her, and was now studying the opaque surface of the room's long mirror. The fact that it *was* opaque made it clear that whatever he was looking at was keyed to his eyes alone.

She started toward the door.

"One other thing, Kaylin."

"Sir?"

"If you are late for any *more* of these lessons, it will come out of your pay."

"Yes, sir."

Kaylin and punctuality lived on separate continents. Another happy source of petty betting in the office. She looked at his profile; he hadn't bothered to look in her direction.

But something about his expression was stiff and wrong. She watching



the lines around his mouth deepen until his face looked like engraved stone, but less friendly. Whatever it was he was looking at was something he didn't like -- and at Festival time, Kaylin could honestly say she had no interest whatsoever in knowing what it was.

She chose the better part of valor and left. Quickly.

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Tain, his black hair flowing in a healthy trail down his back was the centre of the crowded office when Kaylin made it back down the stairs. As he was the only Barrani in attendance, it answered a question, albeit not a pressing one.

He smiled as she slid silently through the open arch and along the nearest wall. Even without breathing, it was impossible for her to sneak up on a Barrani Hawk; she knew. She'd been trying for seven years.

"Kaylin," he said, looking up. His eyes were that shade of bottomless green that made jewellery superfluous. It meant, on the other hand, that he was happy. Or as happy as any Barrani ever got when they weren't killing someone or winning some invisible-to-human-eyes political struggle.

If Leontines were incapable of acting, Barrani were their opposite; they were incapable of not acting. Immortal, stunningly beautiful, and ultimately cool, they had a quiet love of showmanship. It had taken her years to understand that, as well.

They were, however, plenty capable of being smug, which Tain was now demonstrating to the office staff; he had coins in his hand.

Had *she* won, she probably wouldn't. But there was no such thing as a friendly bet among the Barrani, and no one -- not even the men and women who were nominally his equals in rank -- wanted to be in the wrong kind of debt to a Barrani.

Still, it didn't stop them from betting. She prided herself on introducing the office to this past-time; it was one of the few that she'd enjoyed in her childhood. Then again, anyone who grew up in the wrong part of town -- the huge neighbourhood known colloquially as the fiefs in the right parts of town -- enjoyed gambling. There wasn't much else about the life *to* enjoy.

Certainly not its brevity.

She shrugged and made her way to Tain. "You won?"

"It looks that way." His teeth were chipped; they made his smile look almost natural. They also made him obvious to anyone who hadn't known the Barrani for months; they looked so much alike, it was hard for humans -- or mere humans, as the Barrani often called them -- to tell them apart.

Much malicious humour could be had in mistaken identity -- all of it at cost to the person making the mistake.

His smile cooled slightly as his gaze glance off her cheek. There, in thin blue lines that could be called spidery was the mark of Lord Nightshade -- the Barrani outcase Lord who ruled the fief that Kaylin had grown up in. It meant something to the Barrani.

If she were honest, it meant something to her. But she couldn't quite say what, and she was content to let the memory lie. Not that she had much choice; Lord Nightshade was not of a mind to *remove* the mark, and short of that, the only way to effect such a removal also involved the removal of her head. Which, according to Marcus, she'd barely miss anyway, given how much she used it.

In ones and twos the dozen or so Barrani -- well, fourteen, if she were paying close attention -- that were also privileged to call themselves Hawks had been brought by either Tain or Teela to look at the mark.

In one or two cases, it was a good damn thing Teela was there; they were almost unrestrained once the shock had worn off, and the restraint they did have was all external.

Kaylin had gotten used to this.

And the Barrani, in turn, had grown accustomed to the sight of the offending mark. But they didn't like it.

They didn't like what it meant.

Kaylin understood that the word they muttered under their breaths was something that loosely translated into consort. Very loosely. And with a lot more vehemence.

Pointing out that marking a human in this fashion was against both Barrani caste law *and* Imperial Law had met with as much disdain as Kaylin ever showed the Barrani.

"Fieflord, remember? Nightshade? Not exactly the biggest upholder of Imperial law?"

But she didn't take offence. It was hard to; they were Barrani. A Barrani that wasn't arrogant was also not breathing. And in a strange way, it was a comfort; they were enraged *for* her.

Of course there was a tad more possessiveness in that anger than she'd have ideally liked, but beggars couldn't be choosy.

"Where's Teela?" she asked Tain. The two were often inseparable.

Tain's silence had a little of the Hawklord's grimness.

"Either you're not going to answer," she said carefully, "or you are, and I won't like it."

"Why would you be displeased?" He said.

"You are."

"It is a matter that concerns the Barrani." Cold and imperious.

"This means you won't answer."

"No," he said, the word measured and stretched thin, given it was only a meagre syllable, and that, in Elantran. Elantran was the default language of the Hawks, because everyone spoke it. Unfortunately, the labyrinthine paper trail of the Law itself was Barrani; he could have spoken his mother tongue, and she'd've been able to follow it with the ease of long practice. Barrani being one of the few things she'd been able to learn while locked in a classroom and chained to a desk, metaphorically speaking.

"You've looked at the duty roster?" He added.

"Not recently. It's not like it hasn't been changed six times a day for the last week. Why?"

He gestured toward the board that had been nailed into the wall by an annoyed bureaucrat. There, also nailed into the wall, was a long piece of paper that bore several marks and a few gashes -- that would be Marcus.

The only time the duty roster was this complicated was during Festival. She approached the board and scanned it carefully.

"I'm not on it!"

"Lucky you. You *want* to talk to so-called merchants who can't spell and can't plot their way out of a wet bag?"

"It's better than the alternative."

"And that?"

"Talking to -- or listening to -- Mages who couldn't police their way out of a murder." She frowned. "What's this?" She asked him softly.

"Good girl."

Anyone else, she would have hit. Barrani, on the other hand, required more cautious displays of annoyance.

"High Court duty?" She frowned. Looked at the names. There were Aerians among them, and Barrani; there were almost no humans.

Severn was one of them.

"What the hell is High Court duty?"

"Have you paid no attention to office gossip?"

"I've been busy being insulted by Imperial Mages."

"This Festival," he said quietly, "The castelord has called his Court. It has been a number of years since he has chosen to do so; I don't think you were even alive for the last one."

She had never been good in the classroom. She had never been bad outside of it. "Teela's gone to Court," she said flatly.

"She was summoned, yes."

"But she's --"

"She has not been summoned as a Hawk," he continued quietly. "She will take her place among her peers in the high caste."

Kaylin almost gaped at him. "Teela? In the High Caste Court??"

His expression made clear that there was nothing humorous about it, although Kaylin wasn't laughing.

He nodded. The nod was stiff for a Barrani nod; they kind of epitomized grace.

"Is she in trouble?"

"She may well be."

"Why?"

"She failed," he said softly, "to bring the nature of your ... mark ... to the castelord's attention."

"But he --" she stopped. "Evarrim."

"Lord Evarrim. You attracted his interest," he added softly. "What have we told you about attracting the interest of a castelord?"

"It's lethal."

"Yes. But not always for you." The disapproval in the words was mild, for Tain. "She will be called upon to defend her oversight," he added.

"You're worried?"

Tain shrugged. "She owes me money."

Kaylin laughed. It was a bitter sound. "Severn's there."

"I note that you haven't tried to kill him since you returned to active duty."

She shrugged. It was easier than words. Everything about Severn had changed. And much about Kaylin, to Kaylin's horror, had changed as well.

What they had -- what had driven them apart -- had been the foundations upon which she'd built this life; he'd kicked them out from under her feet, and she still didn't know where to stand. Not where he was concerned.

But she'd been given the opportunity to be rid of him. And she'd rejected it, in the privacy of the Hawklord's tower. There wasn't likely to be a second such opportunity offered.

"Why is he on duty roster there?"

Tain didn't answer.

"Why am *I* not on -- oh. Never mind." She lifted a hand and covered the mark on her cheek. To Tain, it made no difference; she could have gouged a chunk of her face off, and he'd still see it. Anyone born Barrani would.

"It will be over in one way or another."

"Over good, or over bad?"

"It depends," he said. His voice was the kind of guarded that implied imminent death. "On the castelord."

"But she's a *Hawk*!"

"Indeed. The Hawks are comprised of many races, however, and the caste law of the race has precedent in exceptional circumstances. As you would know, if you'd paid more attention in your classes."

Exceptional circumstances: When either of two situations proved true. One: No other species was involved in the commission of the crime or its outcome. This was about as likely as the sun never rising or setting, at least in *this* city. Two: No member of any other species could be found who would admit that they had been damaged in some way by the commission of the crime in question. This, given the nature of the Barrani's exceptionally long memory and their famous ability to nurse a grudge down a dozen merely mortal generations, was entirely *too* likely.

"He can't make her outcaste. She's already pledged to Imperial service."

"The Lords of Law are pledged to the service of the Emperor. Employing an outcaste Barrani would not be in the best interests of any one of those Lords."

"Marcus won't let --"

"Kaylin. Let it go. As I said, it is a Barrani affair. Teela accepted the invitation; she has gone."

"You let her go." She didn't even bother to try to keep the accusation out of her voice.

"And had you been summoned by your castelord, we would have done the same."

"Humans don't have castelords. Not like that."

"No. Not like that. You couldn't. The span of your years is too short;

were it not for the intolerable speed at which you breed, there would be no humans in Elantra." He turned away, then.

And she realized, as he did, that he'd slipped into High Barrani, and she hadn't even noticed.

Mouth set a thin line, she worked her way over to Marcus' desk. He was, to no one's surprise, on lunch. On early lunch. She was certain there was some betting going on about the duration of the lunch itself.

But that wasn't her problem.

She began to leaf through the notices and permits on his desk, moving them with care, as if they had been constructed by a finicky architect who'd been drinking too much.

After about ten minutes, she found what she was looking for: The writs or grants of rights given to foreign dignitaries.

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