

CHAPTER ONE

Private Kaylin Neya was on time for work and the world hadn't ended.

A few people's lives, on the other hand, were in question. The amount of sarcasm Clint could put into shocked silence wasn't illegal. Yet. But Kaylin had to grudgingly admit, as she glared her way past his lowered halberd and into the Halls of Law, that wings he extended were a nice touch.

The Aerie was almost empty, but it usually was at this time of day; the Halls themselves were suspiciously quiet. Then again, maybe the Swords were actually earning their pay instead of milling around the Halls looking smug. Even on her bleariest mornings, Kaylin couldn't have missed the tension and worry that seemed to permeate the city streets recently, and keeping the peace, such as it was in a crowded city, was *their* job. For a change. The day was already looking brighter. She glanced up as a shadow passed her, and saw a lone Aerian traversing the space high above; he wasn't practicing maneuvers, and his wings were extended for a steady glide. She still envied the Aerians their wings, a little.

She felt a smidgen of sympathy for the Swords, but didn't let it show. Much. It wasn't often that the entire city had almost defined a new sea coast by the simple expedient of being under most of the surrounding water. She was certain that stories and rumours about the larger-than-Imperial-edict tidal wave that had almost destroyed the harbour – for a start – had been making the rounds, and growing bigger, if that was even possible, with each telling.

She was waved through – without sarcasm – when she approached the guards that separated the Hawks quarters from those of the Wolves or the Swords. The halls were vacant, and even the duty roster seemed to have gathered no darts.

"Oh come on, guys," she said, when the entire office stopped as she entered and approached Marcus' desk. "I'm not *always* late. Don't you have anything better to do?"

"Have you checked the duty roster, dear?" Caitlin asked, from the safety of her desk. Not that she was ever in any danger; if the office had a collective mother, it was Caitlin.

"Oh. No." She turned, and at Marcus' bark of a command, turned back. Marcus' growl was low, and it was short. He must be tired. And a tired

Leontine was generally best kept happy by little displays of obedience. Or big ones.

The paperwork on his desk hadn't really diminished, but to Kaylin's admittedly inexperienced eye, hadn't grown; the emergency that had pulled a number of his Hawks out of their normal routine had been resolved; there was no Festival for almost another year. She couldn't quite see what would put him in a mood, but the fact that he was in one was obvious – having facial fur that bristled when you were ticked off was a dead giveaway. Having fangs that were almost as long as her fingers – the exposed parts of the fangs, at any rate – was another.

She came to stand a safe distance from the side of his desk, and waited. She even waited quietly.

Her reward? He lifted a stack of paper off his desk and dumped it in her hands. "This," he said curtly, "is your problem."

She looked down at what she had assumed were reports – or worse. The paperwork required of the office was, by all accounts, more arcane than any of the magic it also required. To punctuate this, the window very sweetly told the entire office what the hour was.

Kaylin really hated the window. There was money riding on how long it took someone to accidentally break it, and money riding on who had the accident. There weren't many rules that governed office bets, but one of them was that you couldn't place money on yourself. Which was fair, but in Kaylin's case, prevented her from winning much.

"Well? Are you going to stand there all day?"

Kaylin looked down at the first sheet in the stack – and it was a single, large sheet. "No, sir."

"Good. Take note of the roster – your rounds have been changed."

"Since when? I checked it last night."

"Since then, obviously."

She caught Caitlin's frantic gestures out of the corner of her eye, and nodded. She considered going to the roster by way of Caitlin's desk, but since they were in opposite directions, and Marcus could watch you while his back was turned, she decided to actually go to the roster instead.

Her shoulders did a severe downturn when she saw what had been written beside her name. Even Severn's name, at the same location, didn't bring much cheer. The Imperial Palace?

"Don't make that face," Teela said, in her left ear.

Barrani could walk in perfect silence, but it took work, and Teela was

usually too damn lazy. Kaylin's little start did not, however, cause her to drop the bundle of paper. Given Marcus' mood, that was good.

"What's eating Marcus?"

Teela shrugged, long black hair rising and falling like a perfect curtain. Kaylin tried not to resent the fact that the Barrani weren't governed by any regulations when it came to anything they wore. Regulations were, after all, supposed to be practical and as far as Kaylin could tell, Barrani hair never tangled, never got caught in anything, and never got in the way.

And they were gorgeous and lived forever. If it weren't for the fact that they adored politics – preferably with blood and death – they'd be insufferable.

"He's Marcus," Teela added. "But he's been in that mood since late last night." Her tone of voice made it clear that it was serious enough that Kaylin should change the subject *now*, and Kaylin had known Teela for so many years it wasn't possible to misinterpret.

"Figures. Save a City, get sent to the Imperial Palace."

"It's more impressive than being sent to the docks or the Commons."

"More people to offend."

"True, and some of them are significant." Teela smiled. In all, it wasn't a happy expression. "Have you even taken a look at what you're holding?"

"I just got it, Teela."

"You might want to read it over," the Hawk replied. "Severn's waiting in the West room. And so is the Dragon."

#

The Dragon was generally known as Lord Sanabalis by the rank and file. One of Four Dragon Lords that comprised the Dragon contingent of the Imperial Court, he was also a member of the Imperial Order of Mages. He had graciously come out of teaching retirement to take on one pupil, that pupil being Kaylin herself. She tried to remember to be grateful, and usually succeeded when she wasn't actively staring at a candle wick in a vain attempt to get it to catch on fire.

Which, come to think, was most of the time.

But she knew her lesson schedule more or less by heart now, and none of those lessons started at the beginning of her day. Given her nocturnal activities, and the desire of the Hawks not to annoy the mages, Marcus had forbidden any lesson that started before lunch. It gave her a decent chance of not missing any.

So Sanabalis wasn't here to teach her anything new about candles. She pushed the door open – it was open, so she didn't have to go through her daily ritual of teeth-grinding while waiting for the doorward to magically identify her – and saw that Severn and Sanabalis were seated across the room's only table, talking quietly.

They stopped when they saw her, and she slid between the door and its frame, dropping the stack of paper on the table top.

"Marcus is in a mood," she told Severn.

"It's better than yours."

"I'm not in a –" she stopped. "You mean better than mine will be?"

"Pretty much. Take a seat. Lord Sanabalis is here to inform of us of our duties, and to escort us to the man we'll be aiding."

When Severn spoke Barrani, it was generally a bad sign. Lord Sanabalis, on the other hand, always spoke in Barrani.

"We don't have to talk to the Emperor, do we?" She said, sinking into the chair slowly. It was rock hard, in any case, and it weighed more than she did.

"No," Lord Sanabalis replied. "Unless something goes gravely, gravely wrong, the Emperor has more important duties to attend."

"Does this mean there's no lesson today?"

"There will be, as you say, no lesson for the course of your duties at the palace."

"Well, that's something. Who are we investigating?"

Severn hesitated.

"Investigating?" Sanabalis replied, raising a brow. "I rather think, if you were sent to investigate someone, the last place the Hawks would agree to second you would be the Imperial Palace. As you *should* know, the Imperial Guards deal with any difficulties that arise in the Palace. And they do not arise."

"Yes, Sanabalis." She hesitated. "What are we doing there, then? We're not exactly guard material –"

One of his silver brows rose into his thinning hairline.

Fair enough; if the Imperial Guard would be offended at outside investigators, they would probably completely lose it at outside *guards*. "So we're not there as investigators, we're not there as guards. Are we there as Hawks?"

"In a manner of speaking."

She grimaced. "That usually means no."

"You are Hawks or you could not be seconded in this fashion. You are not, however, there as representatives of the Law."

The old bastard looked like he was enjoying himself. Exactly how he conveyed this, Kaylin wasn't quite certain – his expression was neutral enough, and his voice was smooth as glass.

"So what are we there as?"

"As cultural resources," he replied smoothly.

"As what?"

"Cultural Resources."

"I heard you. What exactly does that mean?"

"Ah. Have you taken a moment to peruse the documents you placed upon the table?"

"No."

"I'd advise you to do so. We are not expected at the palace until after lunch. I felt, given the unpredictability of your schedule, that this was wisest."

"But –"

"Many of the questions you are no doubt impatient to ask will be answered by even the briefest of perusals."

She wondered if he were a betting man. Or Dragon. But given Dragons in general, she doubted it.

"If it eases your mind, Private Neya, Sergeant Kassan *is* required to pay you for the time you spend seconded to the palace. He also," he added, lifting a hand to stop her from speaking, "expects you to report in in the mornings."

"For some reason, he is concerned about the assignment. I can't imagine why."

#

"Act One: Scene One." Kaylin looked at Severn. "*Act One: Scene One?*"

"It's a play," Severn said, shrugging slightly. The left corner of his mouth was turned up in something that hinted at amusement. "You're familiar with plays?"

Kaylin snorted. She read the description of stage materials – mostly the painted facades of buildings and bushes, in different sizes. And, she thought, in odd colours. "Poynter's road?"

Severn nodded. "It's –"

"I know where it is – but the buildings don't look anything *like* that on Poynter's."

"Kaylin –"

"No, Corporal Handred, allow her to speak freely. It will, in theory, get it out of her system."

"You want me to read a play?"

"Not exactly. The play itself is not complete, or not complete to our satisfaction. The author's name might be familiar to you." He raised one brow.

"Richard Rennick." She looked at Severn. "Should we know him?"

"He's the Imperial Playwright," Severn told her quietly. "The position is held by one Playwright every five years; there's usually a competition of some sort – a series of different plays staged for the Emperor. He apparently won, three years ago."

Lord Sanabalis said, "The Emperor feels that human arts should be encouraged. Don't look at me like that, Kaylin. Dragons seldom have an interest in drama."

"Who's the judge of this contest?"

"The Emperor."

"So the winner is the person who appeals most to someone who doesn't even like plays?"

"Something very like that," he replied.

"And you want us to ... work with this Rennick?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Perhaps you should read more than three pages."

She grimaced. "Sanabalis –"

"Lord Sanabalis," Severn corrected her.

"Lord Sanabalis, then. What on earth do I know about plays?"

"Clearly nothing." He frowned. "However it is not for your expertise in the dramatic arts that you have been seconded."

"Go on."

"It is for your expertise – such as it is – on the Tha'alani."

It was Kaylin's turn to frown, but some of the exasperation left her, then. "I'm not an expert," she told him quietly.

"No. But the Tha'alani seconded to the Court would possibly be even less comfortable in an advisory role."

"If they can't –" she stopped. "Why has the Emperor commissioned a play about the Tha'alani?"

He didn't answer. But she met his eyes; they were their usual placid gold. His lower membranes, however, were up.

"It's because of – of the water, isn't it?"

"The tidal wave."

"That one."

"Yes. I am not aware of how much you saw, or how much you read about after the fact – but the Tha'alani, led by their castelord, left their quarter in larger numbers than the city has ever seen. They walked to the docks, and they spread out along the port and the sea-wall. When the waters began to shift – and it was dramatic, Kaylin, even to one who has seen as much as I have –"

"You weren't there," she told him, but the words were soft. "You were with us."

"I accessed records when I returned to the Palace." His was now using the teacher's tone of voice.

And I didn't, Kaylin supplied. She glanced at Severn, who nodded very slightly. She cleared her throat. It was still hard for her to think about the Tha'alaan, and the Tha'alani *were* the Tha'alaan in some ways. "They hoped to save the city, if the waters rose."

"Yes. But I invite you to think about appearances, Kaylin."

"The wave didn't hit the city."

"No. It did not. The Oracles, however, were not widely bandied about. For many people – for almost all of them – the first warning of danger was the sight of the water itself, rising. The storm before it signified nothing, to them – it was merely weather."

She nodded slowly.

"From their point of view – from what they could *see* – the Tha'alani went to the waters, and the waters rose."

She closed her eyes.

"You understand our difficulty."

She did.

"You yourself feared the Tha'alani. You do not do so now," he added. "But you must understand the fear that people have."

She nodded quietly.

"The Emperor understands it as well. He cannot, of course, explain the whole of what happened – and given the sparsity of reports generated by your office in the wake of events, I am not entirely certain he could explain it even if that was his desire. I am not, however, here to lecture you on the quality of your paperwork. I believe it best that some things remain uncommitted to paper.

"I, however, was fully debriefed. What I know, he now knows. He will not expose The Keeper, and no mention of the young Tha'alani man will leave the Court for that reason. Nor will the young Tha'alani man face the Emperor's Justice, for that reason."

The fact that the Emperor couldn't reach him probably had something to do with it, in Kaylin's opinion. She managed to keep this to herself. Instead, she returned to the matter at hand. "So this Richard Rennick wrote a ... play. About the Tha'alani."

"He wrote a play about the Tha'alani's attempt to save the city, yes."

"But all of it's garbage. Because we're not allowed to tell the truth."

"Garbage is an unfortunate choice of word. Lose it," he added, condescending to speak Elantran. He must have been serious. There were whole days where he affected complete ignorance of the language which most of the city actually spoke.

She picked up the sheaf of dog-eared pages. "Have you even read this?"

"I have. It is not, I believe, the current version, if that's of any consequence."

"What do you mean?"

"Where we could prevail upon the Tha'alani at Court, we did. The effect that this had upon the playwright was ... unfortunate."

"What happened?"

"Ybelline and her companions were given a copy of the play. They read it with some concern."

"I bet."

"They returned the play to Mr. Rennick. Luckily Lord Tiamaris was at hand; he intercepted their corrections."

"This would be lucky because?"

"They understand the Emperor's concerns. Believe that they feel them even more strongly than the Emperor does. They are not... however... " His hesitation spoke volumes.

Kaylin almost winced. When the silence got awkward, she sighed and looked at Severn.

Severn nodded.

"They don't *know* how to lie," she said quietly. "And this... all of it ... it must seem like one big lie to them."

She'd managed to nudge Sanabalis' brows toward his receding hairline, which had to count for something. On the other hand, the fact that his surprise was more due to her comprehension than their inability probably counted for something too.

"If the truth is supposed to ease people's fear, Ybelline could learn to live with that. But in her world, lies don't ease fear. So I imagine what she handed back to Rennick – or what she tried to hand him – was pretty much all of truth she thought it safe to put out there."

"Indeed."

"And the Emperor's version of safe to put out there isn't the same."

"Again, astute. We may yet make progress in your life as a student."

"I think it would be easier than this. What did Rennick say?"

Sanabalis did wince, at that. "I think it best to ignore that. Suffice it to say that he did not feel his efforts to be adequately appreciated. Ybelline, however, did understand the difficulty, and if you must find a person to blame for your current assignment –"

"I won't blame her."

"-- she suggested you. And Corporal Handred. She said she was confident that you would work in the interests of her people, but with a better understanding of the intended audience for the play itself."

"Meaning my people."

Sanabalis nodded. "Which reminds me of another matter Ybelline also mentioned. The Swords have stationed a small force adjacent to the Tha'alani Quarter," he added, in a more subdued tone. "And before you ask, Kaylin, yes, it was entirely necessary."

"Ybelline has asked for your aid in the Quarter."

"For *my* aid? What the hell happened?"

"However," he added, lifting a hand in the universal 'I'm not finished, so shut up' gesture, "you are to visit the Quarter *after* you report for duty."

#

On the off chance that Kaylin decided to reverse the order, Sanabalis chose to accompany her to the Palace. This wasn't the first time he'd done

this, and to be fair, if he'd gone ahead, she would have gone to the Imperial Palace by whichever convoluted route took her to the Tha'alani quarter *first*. But as she had to stop by the Quartermaster to get kitted out in appropriate dress uniform – and as the Quartermaster was still a touch angry, which wasn't exactly the right word for his state (the right words couldn't be used in polite company of any race, all of the Hawks being multilingual when it came to swearing) – she actually appreciated Sanabalis' suspicion, because if the Quartermaster was willing to make her wait or suffer, he was *not* willing to piss off a Dragon Lord.

He was, however, unfailingly polite and friendly when talking to Severn. Severn did not lose expensive dresses.

She took the uniform from Severn's hands, and headed to the lockers, where she added a much cleaner – and longer – surcoat to the clothing she generally wore. If she were a Sword, she'd also get a thin chain hauberk that was shiny and clean, because those looked good; Hawks didn't generally have them as part of their uniform, dress or no, although most of the human Hawks did own one.

She had managed to lose her daggers – where lose in this case meant that something magical had transformed them into part of a very elaborate yet somehow very skimpy dress – and had bought a single replacement. The other dagger was coming out of her pay.

But it wasn't coming out of her hide, for which she should probably be grateful.

Severn straightened her surcoat. It had the usual embroidered Hawk, dead centre, but the golden thread and the beading was so perfectly clean it almost hurt to look at the flight feathers. To this, Kaylin added a small, bead-work patch.

"I don't think it's necessary," Severn told her. But he didn't tell her to take it off, probably because he knew she wouldn't. The beads survived anything. Which was more, she thought glumly, than could be said about the rest of the clothing she owned.

She took the time to clean her boots.

Severn caught her arm and said "There's nothing to be nervous about."

She winced. "That obvious?"

"You don't generally care about your boots, no."

"I just – Marcus *hates* it when I go to the Palace. I swear he sits by his damn mirror waiting to hear that I've been thrown in the dungeons or eaten or something."

They started to walk down the hall, and Sanabalis took the lead.

"You aren't reporting directly to the Emperor," Severn replied. "So it's unlikely that anyone you offend will have you eaten."

"You're sure?"

"Unless the Emperor's decided that you really are a threat to his Empire, in which case he could dispense with the petty part of you actually annoying some high-ranking official, and go straight to the eating. He's an Emperor. He doesn't have to worry about the niceties of the Law."

She squared her shoulders. Smiled at Severn. "I know I'm going to have to learn how to do this – how to talk with people who've never even approached the banks of the Ablayne. But I'm not good at lying. I'm not good at talking."

"You talk all the time," he said, with just the hint of a smile. He was already moving out of the way before she hit him.

"I talk to people who know more or less what I know, and who don't bloody care if I say things nicely or not. I hate the idea that my career is riding on my ability to be someone else's idea of polite."

"I would dislike it as well," Sanabalis said, with a hint of the same smile Severn had offered. "But if it's of comfort, Kaylin, you will not feel this way in twenty years."

She bit her tongue. Hard.

And he nodded in approval.

This was going to be a long assignment.

#

On the way to the Palace, she read as much of the play as she could. She'd seen some street theatre in her time, but her entire familiarity with plays put on for an audience involved a lot of loud children and the Foundling Halls' small stage. Marrin, the Leontine who guarded and raised the orphans in said Hall, had put aside one of the large rooms in the former manor, for just that purpose. For most of the year it stood empty, but during Festival season, and at odd intervals throughout the year, the cloths were dragged off the various bits and pieces of furniture – and the paintings and candelabras – and the room was opened to the visiting actors.

Kaylin had been there for almost all of the plays that occurred at any time other than Festival; Marrin often called her in to help supervise. She didn't always *get* the play, and some of the stories which were clearly meant to *be* familiar to small children before they watched the play were a mystery to her – but the men and women in their funny hats and wigs and make-up were

universally friendly and warm. The kids loved plays; they would watch in near silence, near being as much as anyone sane could hope for, and laugh or scream at all the right lines.

Kaylin seriously hoped that this play wasn't meant for those children, because they would have been bored *to tears*. And bored children were a special hell of their own.

As near as she could tell, Mr. Rennick had decided that a budding romance between two Tha'alani teens was a good idea – for reasons that made no sense to Kaylin. Having seen evidence of the Tha'alani concept of romance, Kaylin had no doubt at all that this would be first on the list of things that Ybelline had attempted to correct. Second on that list would be the disapproving parents. Third on that list would be the couple attempting to sneak off somewhere together so they could be alone.

She stopped herself from dumping the play out the window, and only partly because the Swords on the streets were in a bad enough mood they might stop even an Imperial Carriage and attempt to hand someone a ticket for littering.

"Does this *ever* get to the point?"

"Hmmm?"

"I mean, does he even get to the docks and the damn tidal wave?"

"Well, yes – but the love story is meant to convey to the audience that the Tha'alani are as human as they are. And misunderstood love occurs in all species."

"It does?"

"Well, in Mr. Rennick's mind, yes. But I would say that he is not entirely wrong."

"Oh. What does a Dragon romance look like?" She asked.

Sanabalis snorted. Kaylin swore she saw a small plume of fire erupt just above his beard. Which was going to be all of his answer on that front, and Kaylin couldn't offhand recall mention of a female Dragon at court. She was certain they must exist somewhere.

She wondered, briefly, what a Barrani romance looked like, and decided she probably wouldn't be able to tell the difference between that and one of their assassination attempts. Instead, she said, "look, the Tha'alani *are* like the rest of us. Sort of. But this whole romance – it's just wrong. I think Ybelline would find the ... the possessiveness, the sense of –"

"Ownership?"

"Don't mock me, Sanabalis. What I'm trying to say is that they don't

experience love that way."

"Which is not, in fact, what you did say."

"Fine. The point is, they don't. They don't have the disapproving parents thing, and they definitely don't sneak off for privacy."

"Ah. Well, then, how would you structure a play in which it was utterly essential that the audience empathize with the Tha'alani?"

"Honestly?"

"Honestly."

"I'd write about the years in which they were tortured like criminals because they wouldn't serve the Emperor by reading *other people's minds for him*. Because they couldn't, without going insane, and driving everyone they knew and loved insane in the process."

Sanabalis eyes shaded to orange. In Dragon eyes, this meant irritation. Red was anger, and in general, if you saw red Dragon eyes, it was probably the *last* thing you would ever see.

"Kaylin," Severn said.

"It would work," she told him, an edge to the words. "People could sympathize with that."

"I believe it would cast the Emperor in an unflattering light."

She said nothing. Loudly. But it didn't last. "I'm sorry, Sanabalis."

"Generally one apologizes for behaviour one means to curb," he replied stiffly. But his eyes shaded back to burnished gold.

"It worked for me," she told him quietly. "Knowing that – knowing what they suffered – it changed the way I felt about them. Look – I understand why people are afraid of the Tha'alani. I know why *I* was. It never occurred to me that they wanted to be left alone; that they never ever wanted to read *our* minds. And the experiments conducted on the Tha'alani – it changed the way I felt about them. Forever."

He nodded. "You understand, however, why that information could not be part of a public entertainment."

She nodded slowly. "It's just that it would work, that's all." She looked at Severn. "Did you *ever* fear them?"

"Yes. But my understanding of the Tha'alani was different."

She had the grace to say, "you *wanted* to understand them."

"Yes."

"I wanted to hide from them."

He nodded again. "It's natural. Kaylin, I'm five years older than you are."

Five years ago –"

"It's not your age," she said, swatting the words away. Willing to be this truthful. "It's *you*."

"Perhaps. But I've often found understanding my enemies gives me an edge when confronting them." He paused and then added, "The first Tha'alani I met was Ybelline herself."

"You met her *first*?"

"I was under consideration for the Shadows," he told her. "Ybelline could read everything of note, and still remain detached. There are very few others who could. She was summoned. And it is very, very hard to fear Ybelline."

Kaylin smiled at this. It was a small smile, but it acknowledged the truth: it was hard to fear her. Even though she could ferret all truth, all secrets, from a human mind. Because in spite of it, one had the sense that Ybelline could know everything and like you *anyway*.

Maybe that was something they could work with.

#