

## **Chapter 1**

The worst thing about having a roommate, in Kaylin's opinion—and admittedly after only two weeks—was morning. The fact that this particular roommate was a Dragon didn't help. Bellusdeo was clean, tidy, and ate very little. She didn't actually require sleep, and for the first couple of nights, that had seemed like a good thing because Kaylin's apartment only had one bed. It only had one room.

But around morning number four, which had come on the heels of an urgent mirror message from the Guild of Midwives and a hideously touch-and-go birth, the “good thing” developed the preceding words, “too damn much of a....”

Ten days—which included three more emergency calls—later, Kaylin struggled out of bed when the shadows in the room were far too short, and came face-to-face with someone who looked refreshed and annoyingly cheerful. She always looked refreshed and cheerful, but the annoying part had grown with time and familiarity.

It was far too late for breakfast, in part because Kaylin hadn't managed to get to the market the previous day and there was no food in the apartment.

So she scrounged for clean clothing, taking what little time she had to tend to the large unhatched egg she slept wrapped around.

“Kaylin, I think the egg has changed color,” Bellusdeo said. She stared at the egg, but didn’t actually touch it. She did, however, help Kaylin gather the cloth she kept wrapped around it when she left it for the day.

Kaylin, who was still bleary from sleep and fatigued by the work of the previous night, squinted. “Maybe. Do you think—do you think that means it’s going to hatch?”

“I don’t know. I don’t recognize the species of egg.”

Kaylin pressed her ear against the shell. She could almost hear something moving within it—but the sound was so faint it might have been due to hopeful imagination. She considered taking the egg into the office with her, remembered that it was magic lesson day, and decided to take the risk of leaving it untended for the afternoon. It was afternoon by this point, so it would be a shorter absence than usual.

Bellusdeo then accompanied Kaylin in to work.

Kaylin accepted the barrage of amused mockery her hour of arrival caused with less than her usual grace. She had managed to go almost three weeks without being late. Admittedly on two of those days she’d perambulated around the office like someone doing a good imitation of the walking dead—but she’d been timely walking dead, damn it.

“If you dislike the mockery,” Bellusdeo told her, as she walked gracefully by Kaylin’s side, “why don’t

you just arrive on time?"

"I need to sleep."

"You don't have to go the midwives' guildhall."

"If I miss a few hours here in the morning, Marcus snarls at me and I expose my throat for a few minutes. I also win someone some money in the betting pool. If I miss an emergency call from the midwives' guild, someone dies. Guess which is more important?"

Bellusdeo nodded. "We have an etiquette lesson this evening," the Dragon added. It was true. It was also a subtle reminder that Bellusdeo did make Kaylin's life a little easier, because while Lord Diarmat pretty much despised Kaylin, he couldn't openly treat Bellusdeo with contempt, and Bellusdeo had an uncanny knack for asking the direct questions that would have caused mortal offense had they come from Kaylin's mouth. In this case, mortal was accurate.

Kaylin grimaced and straightened up. "I have a magic lesson in half an hour."

"With Sanabalis?"

"The same." Kaylin hesitated and then added, "Do you think you could call him Lord Sanabalis?"

"Why? You don't. If you don't, I can hardly see that it will make much difference if I fail to do so."

"It won't make much difference to you. It'll get me in less trouble." She headed toward the reception desk, where Caitlin was watching their progress down the hall. The mirror dutifully announced the time the minute Kaylin's foot had crossed the threshold. At least it hadn't called her by name.

"Good afternoon, dear," Caitlin said, rising from her chair. "The midwives called you in last night?"

Kaylin nodded. “Marya woke me at two in the morning.”

“It was bad?”

“It was very bad; I almost didn’t make it in time.”

“Did you eat anything before you came here?”

“Yes.”

Bellusdeo lifted a lovely, golden brow, but said nothing. Not that words actually had to be spoken around Caitlin, who pursed her lips.

“Lord Sanabalis is waiting for you.”

“Of course he is.”

Bellusdeo didn’t actually join her for magic lessons; as a member of the Dragon Court—albeit on a technicality—she didn’t require them. She did, however, go to Elantran language lessons in the East Room for the duration; the Imperial Palace had ordered two linguists to work with her during that time. What the linguists made of Bellusdeo, Kaylin didn’t know; she was just grateful for the few moments in which Bellusdeo was someone else’s problem.

“I admit I’m surprised to see you on time, Private,” Sanabalis said, as she cringed her way through contact with the room’s door ward and entered.

“Oh?”

“Given the time at which you left your dwelling last evening, I assumed you would be at least an hour late.”

Kaylin sat and folded her arms across her chest. “You’re having my apartment watched at two in the morning?”

Sanabalis didn’t answer the question. Instead he

said, “How is Bellusdeo adapting to life in the City?”

“She hasn’t changed much since I spoke to you about it two days ago.”

“And have you reconsidered the Emperor’s offer to house you in a more suitable location?”

Sadly, she had. On offer was a much, much larger apartment. It was, however, farther from the office, and Kaylin still held on to the faint hope that Bellusdeo would get tired of living in a run-down, single-room apartment with no privacy, and choose to move out on her own.

So far, Dragon stubbornness was running neck and neck with human stubbornness. It seemed unfair that only the human was suffering. If they had a larger dwelling, Kaylin could have an entire room to herself, and they would have room for Bellusdeo’s Ascendant, a Norannir who would only barely fit through Kaylin’s current door—if he crouched. Maggaron could keep an eye on Bellusdeo, and Kaylin might actually have a day—at work—in which she didn’t have the Dragon as her constant companion. As it was, that Ascendant, Maggaron, had been exiled to the Tower in the fief of Tiamaris, and he was very, very glum about the separation.

What she said, however, was “No. We’re doing fine.” Kaylin’s biggest fear was that she would move, lose her small—but affordable—apartment, and have nowhere else to go when Bellusdeo finally decided to move out. Severn had suggested that she pay her rent while staying in the Imperial building, but it galled Kaylin to spend that much money on something she wasn’t even using.

She glared at her nemesis, the candle.

Sanabalis folded his hands on the table's surface; it had been newly oiled and waxed, and the Dragon's reflection stared back up at him. "Your etiquette lesson is tonight."

"I know."

"You seem to have survived the previous lessons."

"Yes. So did Diarmat and Bellusdeo."

Sanabalis winced, but he chuckled as well. "I believe Lord Diarmat is on the edge of repenting his decision to teach you; he may well ask the Arkon to undertake that duty instead."

"But he won't fall over that edge until we've suffered at least as much as he has?"

"Ah, no. I believe he would be more than willing to continue to teach you, but he feels that Bellusdeo is an impediment to your effective absorption of necessary knowledge." Sanabalis nodded at the candle. "Begin."

The entire department heard her shriek.

Only half of them left their desks to see what had caused it—or at least only half of them were visible when Kaylin threw the door open and tried to run through them into the office. She was bouncing.

"Teela! Tain! I did it!"

"Whatever you did, kitling," Teela replied, "you broke the silence spell that usually protects us from your cursing during class." She glanced pointedly at the warded door. "What do you think you did?"

Kaylin spun and pointed.

The candle's wick was actually burning. She'd been staring at it every class for what felt like years—

but couldn't have been more than a couple of months in objective time—and had even cut it in half in a foul mood. Not once in all those months had the damn thing done what it was supposed to do.

But today?

Today she'd almost felt the warmth of fire; she'd grasped and visualized its name. It had taken the better part of an hour to accomplish that much, because it was a large name and parts of it kept sliding out of her grip. It didn't matter; this was the first class she'd had with Sanabalis that hadn't ended in total, frustrating failure.

Lord Sanabalis rose, and Kaylin hesitated, losing a little of her bounce. "You didn't do it, did you? It was me?"

"It was you, Private Neya. And because you've succeeded—once—I will consider today's lesson complete. If you will accompany me?"

"Pardon?"

"I believe Lord Grammayre and Sergeant Kassin would like a few words with you. They did want to speak with you earlier, but I felt the matter could wait until after your lesson."

Yes, because Lord Sanabalis was a Dragon and Lord Grammayre and Sergeant Kassin were only the men responsible for signing off on her pay chit.

Lord Grammayre and Marcus were waiting in the Hawklord's Tower. Kaylin, torn between panic at the length of time they'd been made to wait and worry about the topic of discussion, went up the stairs at a brisk clip, as if rushing to her doom. Dragon knowledge of the effective chain of command in the

Halls of Law was pretty simple: the Dragon Court's desires took precedence over everything. It was hard to get that wrong. Their knowledge of the finer details, on the other hand—and in particular Kaylin's place in the food chain as a private—left a lot to be desired, especially since their pay and their rank weren't ever going to be at risk. She tried not to resent this as Sanabalis, curse him, practically crawled.

The Tower doors were open, which was a small mercy. Kaylin approached them, the sound of her steps on stone drawing two pairs of distinctive eyes—Leontine and Aerian. Marcus's facial fur was standing on end, and his eyes were orange. The Hawklord's wings were slightly extended, and his eyes were a gray-blue. Had she been a flower, she'd've instantly wilted under that much dry heat. Angry Leontine Sergeant, angry Aerian Commander in Chief, slightly bored Dragon, and panicked human—you could practically call it a racial congress, with humans in their usual position.

Marcus was in such a bad mood that he didn't even mention how late she was; he wasn't in a bad enough mood not to growl when she hesitated in the doorway. She crossed the threshold quickly and offered Lord Grammayre a salute. It was as perfect as she could make it—and if two weeks under the Draconic Lord Diarmat had given her nothing else, it had certainly improved the quality of necessary gestures of respect, not that she was required to salute a member of the Dragon Court.

Lord Sanabalis, as a member of said court, wasn't required to offer a salute to anyone in the Halls of

Law. Kaylin wasn't certain what formal gestures of respect he offered the Eternal Emperor, because thankfully she'd never seen the Eternal Emperor—at least not yet. She'd seen the rest of the Dragons interact with each other, and while they were polite and formal when nothing important was being discussed, they didn't spend all day bowing, saluting, or speaking full titles. She now even knew what their full titles were.

“At ease, Private.” If an order could be guaranteed to make her feel less at ease, she didn't want to hear it. The Hawklord's tone of voice had enough edge to draw blood. She nodded stiffly and dropped her arms to her sides.

“Lord Sanabalis,” the Hawklord continued, “we have news of some import to relay to the Imperial Court.”

“Good. Does it involve the current investigation into the Exchequer?”

“It does. We have an unexpected lead. Our subsequent investigations have given us reason to believe it is extremely relevant.”

Sanabalis raised a brow. “May I ask the source of that information?”

“You may; it is the only reason Private Neya is currently present.”

“I will assume that the lead did not come through the Private.”

“No. Not directly. She has been involved as your attaché in the fief of Tiamaris for much of the investigation; as she has not yet been released from those duties, she has had no direct involvement in the Exchequer affair.”

Lord Sanabalis nodded.

“Even if she is no longer required as frequently in the fief, she appears to be the unofficial minder for the newly arrived Lady Bellusdeo.”

Kaylin cringed.

“Private?” Marcus growled.

Kaylin cleared her throat. “She doesn’t like to be referred to as Lady Bellusdeo.”

“And given her position at the moment, that is understandable. I will endeavor not to cause her the hardship of appropriate Elantran title in future,” Lord Grammayre said. “However.”

Sanabalis’s eyes had shaded to a pale copper. Kaylin wasn’t certain what color her eyes would be if human eye color shifted at the whim of mood; given that she was standing near an angry Leontine, an annoyed Dragon, and an unhappy Aerial, it probably wouldn’t be good.

“What is Private Neya’s involvement?”

The Leontine glared at the Hawklord. The Hawklord pretended not to notice either the glare or the question. “The usual method of paying in Imperial currency for information was rejected; the information, however, was deemed necessary.”

“And?”

“The information offered to us came via Lord Nightshade of the fief of Nightshade.”

Copper shaded toward orange in the Dragon Lord’s eyes. “He offered the information first?”

“Of course not. But he offered some of the information to indicate the importance of the offer.”

“And the information he did offer was not sufficient for our investigators?”

“No; if we attempted to investigate thoroughly, we would almost certainly be detected, and any proof of criminal activity would vanish.”

“What was the tidbit he dangled?”

“The Office of the Exchequer has been working in conjunction with two highly placed Arcanists. Both,” he added, “are Barrani, and both might be in possession of some of the embezzled funds.”

Kaylin did not, through dint of will, whistle. She did sneak a glance at Sanabalis; his eyes hadn't gotten any redder, which was a positive sign. On the other hand, Marcus's hadn't gotten any less orange, which was not, given that Marcus now turned the full force of his glare on her. She felt this a tad unfair, given that she'd already warned him what Nightshade would demand in return for the information; she was not, however, feeling suicidal enough to point this out.

“Were you aware, Private, that the leave of absence requested in return for this information would be extensive?”

“...how extensive?”

“The fief lord is asking for a minimum of six weeks, if we provide the transport, and a minimum of eight weeks if we do not.”

She blinked. After a moment, she said, “Eight weeks?” thinking, as she did, of her rent.

“Eight weeks.”

“I can't take eight weeks off!”

For some reason, this seemed to improve Marcus's mood. “When you agreed to Teela's offer of aid during your leave of absence, did it ever occur to you

to look up a map of the Empire?"

"...No."

Sanabalis lifted a hand. "Why is a leave of eight weeks required?"

"She's to travel to the West March."

"A map wouldn't have done you any good, Private," Sanabalis now told Kaylin. "The West March is not technically part of the Empire. It is a remote stretch of forest of some significant size. It is not, however, the size of the forest that makes it worthy of note."

This was not exactly a comfort. "What makes it noteworthy?"

"The trees contained in the heart of that forest are not considered... entirely safe."

"What does that mean? They don't burn when you breathe on them?"

Sanabalis's answering silence was glacial.

"Given Teela's offer, she will also be missing for eight weeks. It's a good damn thing Nightshade specifically demanded that you go without any other Hawks, or we'd probably have to do without Corporal Handred as well."

Kaylin was still stuck on the eight weeks. "Minimum?" She finally managed to say.

"Minimum. There is the possibility of poor weather and impassable roads, and Lord Nightshade wished to make clear that eight weeks might not suffice."

She shook herself. "The information was useful?"

"The information," Lord Grammayre replied, before Marcus could, "may finally crack the case for us. It is more than simply useful, but we wasted some

time in negotiations for your release, and we are only now in dialogue with the Lord of Wolves.”

The Wolves.

“How bad is this going to be?”

No one answered, which was answer enough.

“You agreed to the leave of absence?”

The Hawklord nodded. Kaylin desperately wanted to ask if this absence involved pay, because she’d have nowhere to live if it didn’t. On the other hand, the right person to ask was Caitlin, not Marcus, and certainly not Marcus in this mood.

“When does this leave start?”

“Teela will be able to better inform you of the actual dates of import; I suggest you speak with her, because she’ll also be able to inform you of expected dress, weather, and, apparently, colorful wildlife. Lord Nightshade, however, is likely to be in touch with you shortly; you are to leave in five days if we are not to provide the transport he’s asking for.”

“And if you do?”

“We’re not.”

“But—”

“Yes?”

“The midwives. And the Foundling Hall. And the—the etiquette lessons—”

“Lord Sanabalis will, of course, evaluate the information once you’ve left, and discuss it with the Imperial Court. In a strict currency evaluation, eight weeks of your time is far less than we might be expected to pay for information of this nature; it will save money at a time when finances are—”

Sanabalis coughed loudly.

“Now,” Marcus growled, “get lost.”

Teela was loitering at the bottom of the stairs, her hands behind her back, her shoulders at a slant against the slight curve of the wall. She glanced up when she heard Kaylin's steps. Given that Kaylin wasn't exactly attempting to move silently, this wasn't hard.

"You've heard the news?" she said, as Kaylin took the last step and drew level with her, in a manner of speaking. Teela, like all Barrani, was tall; she probably had seven inches on Kaylin when Kaylin was standing at her straightest. Teela wasn't even trying at the moment.

"Yes."

"Don't look so glum. Have you ever been outside the City?"

"No."

Teela whistled. "Well, this will be an adventure for you, then. It's a useful experience; you can't stay cooped up behind the City walls for all your life."

"Why exactly not?"

"In this case? Because Nightshade had a very important piece of information and you happened to mention his offer to Marcus."

"I didn't think I'd be gone for eight weeks!"

"Eight is, in my opinion, optimistic."

Kaylin's jaw momentarily unhinged. Teela reached out and pushed it shut. "Don't fret. It'll be fun."

"That's not making me feel a whole lot better, Teela. I know what your definition of fun is."

Severn was waiting for Kaylin in the office when she at last reached her desk; she knew this because he was sitting in her chair. He looked up when she

tapped his shoulder.

“Bad news?” he asked, as he moved to let her sit. He reached into the pack at his feet and pulled out the bracer which prevented her from using magic. She’d thrown it over her shoulder on the run, because she knew it would return to Severn. It always did. “Midwives?”

She took the bracer, slid it over her wrist and closed it. “Two in the morning.”

“And I heard that I should offer congratulations on the candle.”

The triumph of a lit candle had evaporated. She sat and folded her arms across her desk in a type of lean that implied her spine was melting. “They took Nightshade up on his offer,” she said, speaking to the wood grain and the interior of her elbows.

“Did you expect them to do anything else?”

“...No.”

“Then?”

“...I’ll be absent for eight weeks. Teela thinks it’ll actually be longer.” She lifted her head and turned to look at Severn. “You’re not coming, either.”

He shrugged; it was a fief shrug, and it was a tense one.

“So you’ll be out patrolling with some other Hawk, not me, and gods know if they won’t decide that you’re more effective working with someone else. Marcus might give my beat away.”

“Marcus won’t—”

“And the midwives won’t be able to call me. They’ve had four emergencies in the last two weeks. If those had been part of the eight, at least four people would have died.”

“At least?”

“I think they could have saved two of the babies.”

“But Nightshade’s information may well crack the Exchequer case.”

“May well? It had better tie it up in expensive cloth with bows on top.” She lowered her chin to the desk again. “But putting the Exchequer in prison—or under the ground—wouldn’t save the lives of those mothers. I’m hard put to see which lives it would save. Besides the Hawks.”

Severn tactfully steered the topic away from her visions of mortality. “Teela’s going with you?”

“Yeah. She’s a Lord of the Barrani Court, and apparently whatever this jaunt to the West March is about, it’s ceremonial. She’s got an invitation to go.”

“Well, keep an eye on her.”

Kaylin almost laughed. “Me and what army? You know Teela.”

Severn didn’t have a chance to answer. Bellusdeo appeared at his elbow. “They’ve finally let me out,” she said, in accented but reasonable Elantran. She frowned. “You don’t look very happy. The magic lesson didn’t go well?”

“No, the lesson went very well.”

“This is how you react to a good lesson?”

Kaylin snorted, but pushed herself off her desk and out of the chair. “No. It’s how I react to bad news.”

When Bellusdeo’s brows rose, Kaylin could almost hear them snap. “What bad news?” she asked, in almost entirely the wrong tone of voice.

“The Barrani have some sort of ceremony out in the West March, and I’m obliged to attend it.”

“Why? You’re not Barrani.”

Kaylin's mouth stopped flapping as her brain caught up with it. She glanced at Severn for help, but he had nothing to offer. "I can't really talk about it," she finally said. "Not without having my throat ripped out."

Bellusdeo, however, knew that this wasn't literal. It had taken her a couple of days to figure that out, because Marcus was still his usual suspicious and unfriendly self when dealing with Dragons. "I almost think I will apply for a job in the Halls," she said, her voice cool. "I've heard that the Hawks are very multiracial, and they've even had a Dragon as a member before."

"Marcus would be your boss," Kaylin replied quickly.

"Yes. I'll admit that is a deterrent. Are you ready to go home?"

Kaylin had been ready to go home an hour ago, which would have been during the meeting with the Hawklord, Sanabalis, and Marcus. She nodded, looking out the window, which was silent for the moment. "We have time to grab something to eat—and get changed—before we head to the palace and the charming Lord Diarmat for tonight's personal torture session."

The streets wouldn't be empty for hours yet, but they weren't quite as crowded as they had been on the way in, and Kaylin couldn't be late, in a career-detrimental way, to enter her own apartment. She could, however, miss the few remaining farmers in the market, so she hurried to that destination, Bellusdeo in tow. Bellusdeo had a few questions

about food acquisition, but in the main, the worst of them had been answered on their first foray into the market, much to Kaylin's frustration and the bemusement of the farmers.

It was helpful to have Bellusdeo here, on the other hand, because the baskets in which food was generally carried home were still in said home. They made their way back to the apartment; by this point, Bellusdeo had no difficulty finding it.

The Dragon practiced her Elantran in the market, and she practiced it in the street. Kaylin tried—very hard—to elide all swearing from her commentary and her answers to Bellusdeo's questions, and only in part because it was slightly embarrassing to have to explain what the rude words meant.

But she was hungry and slightly discouraged as she made her way to the apartment, her thoughts mostly on the midwives, Tiamaris, and the total lack of privacy one room afforded.

She unlocked the door, entered her room, and made a beeline for the mirror; when it showed a total lack of calls, she relaxed. She let her hair down, literally, and tried to put the stick where she could easily find it in the morning. She then went to the kitchen for a couple of plates. There was still water that was potable, and the food she'd bought for the evening didn't require anything as complicated as cooking.

Bellusdeo took a seat on the bed, which was fair; the chair was a clothing repository at the moment, and Kaylin wasn't so exhausted that she needed to fall over and sleep. The bed, however, creaked ominously as it received Dragon weight, and while it hadn't yet

collapsed beneath Bellusdeo, the sound reminded Kaylin of the unhatched egg that now resided beneath her. She quickly shoved the remainder of a hard, smooth cheese into her mouth and tried not to look like she was diving in a panic for the box that contained the egg.

Bellusdeo snorted. Kaylin had the grace to look a little embarrassed as she unwound the various bits and pieces of cloth that served as poor insulation for the egg during her absence.

The egg was a pale shade of purple in her hands.

“It wasn’t that color earlier,” Bellusdeo observed, leaning back on her hands and stretching.

“No, it wasn’t. Tomorrow, if it hasn’t hatched, I’m going to bring it with me to the office.”

“Oh, your Sergeant will love that, I’m certain.” She frowned and looked up at the shutters of the window as they popped open.

Kaylin, still holding the egg, winced and rose. “Sorry about that,” she said, because the shutter had narrowly avoided the back of Bellusdeo’s head. “They’re warped. I keep meaning to see about getting them replaced—”

“When you say ‘replaced,’ do you mean you intend to build new ones?”

“Hells, no. I couldn’t make new shutters that would be half as good as these, and these are no good. Let me tie them together.”

Bellusdeo, however, was looking at something in her lap. She rose, her expression freezing solid. It wasn’t her expression that was the problem: it was the color of her eyes. They’d shifted from lazy gold to a deep, deep red without stopping for anything else in

between. “Kaylin,” she said, moving toward her, and toward the door as well. “The shutters—”

But Kaylin didn’t need to hear more, because something flew in through the open window.