

## CHAPTER ONE

On the second day after her return to Elantra, the city she policed as a groundhawk, Private Kaylin Neya fell out of bed, daggers in hands, knees bent. After one confused moment, she sheathed her daggers, took a brief look around the otherwise empty royal guest chambers that served as her temporary home, and let loose a volley of Leontine curses.

The small, translucent winged lizard that habitually slept above her head squawked in protest; she'd swept him out of the way without a second thought. He hovered in front of her face as she cursed; she didn't, at the moment, have anything left over for groveling apologies.

Leontine wasn't the usual language heard in the halls of the Imperial Palace. Nor was it generally heard in the function rooms, and when it was, it wasn't the particular phrasing she now indulged in. On the other hand, the thunderous sounds that had driven her from sleep pretty much guaranteed that no one who'd care could possibly hear her words. Kaylin could scream until she was blue in the face, with the same results. Anyone in the palace halls could, at the moment.

Dragons were having a discussion.

When she'd first heard Dragons converse in their native tongue, she'd thought of earthquakes or tidal waves. Distinguishing individual voices had been less important than covering both her ears in the vague hope she'd preserve some of

her hearing. A couple of weeks in the palace with Bellusdeo for a companion had changed that. She could pick out three loud—painfully loud—voices in the crash of distant thunder: Diarmat’s, Bellusdeo’s and...the Emperor’s. While she generally enjoyed the arguments between Bellusdeo and Diarmat, she had zero desire to ever interrupt—or witness—any argument which also contained the Emperor. Even mention of the Emperor was probably career-limiting.

It was dark, but the storm of sound in progress didn’t seem like it would die down any time soon, and sleep was pretty much impossible—at least for Kaylin. The rest of the Dragon Court was probably in hiding, but Immortals didn’t need anything as petty as sleep.

The minute—the *second*—she had the time to find a new place, she was *so* out of here.

The small dragon landed on her shoulders. She’d named him Hope, but felt self-conscious actually calling him that, and she hadn’t had time to come up with a name that suited him better. He yawned, folded himself across her shoulders like a badly formed shawl, and closed his eyes. Clearly, Dragon shouting didn’t bother him in the slightest.

Then again, he probably understood what they were saying.

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The palace was never dark. Individual rooms had lighting that responded to the needs of the guests who occupied them, but the halls—the grand, wide, towering halls—were always fully lit. The Imperial Palace guard also adorned those halls, standing like statues in a stiff, grim silence that suited their pretension.

They didn’t stop Kaylin as she walked past them, heading to one of the only places that she was certain was somewhat soundproof. They knew her on sight, and if they’d had no issues treating her as one step up from a convicted felon in the past, she was now roommate to the Empire’s only female Dragon. The Emperor didn’t want anyone to piss Bellusdeo off.

Anyone, Kaylin thought glumly, but the Emperor himself. Dragons had never been famously good at sharing.

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When she reached the tall and forbidding doors of the Imperial Library, she had second thoughts. It wasn't that the Imperial Library was home in all but name to the Arkon, the oldest member of the Dragon Court. It wasn't that the doors were closed; they were almost always closed. It wasn't even his extreme dislike of being interrupted.

It was the door ward that straddled them.

She'd woken to the sounds of angry Dragon, which pretty much defined Bad Day. Having to place her palm against this particular ward took Bad Day and made it worse. At the best of times, Kaylin's allergy to magic made door wards uncomfortable—but this ward could raise so much noise it might just interrupt the Dragons. One of whom was the Emperor.

There was no other way to open them. Kaylin briefly considered knocking. With her head. Before she could—and it was late enough, or early enough, that she might have—the doors surprised her by gliding open. No one stood between them.

At this hour, the library desk—the publicly accessible library desk—was unmanned. The display cases and the rows upon rows of standing files were shadowed. The robed clerks who kept the library spotless were conspicuous by their absence—but that was no surprise. No one sane visited the library at this hour.

As the doors rolled closed at her back, the sound of Dragon anger diminished.

The Arkon made his way toward her from the back of the large room, which surprised Kaylin; she'd expected to find him holed up in one of the many, many rooms that comprised his personal collection—none of which the public was invited to peruse.

"Thank you for opening the doors," she told him.

"I felt it best to avoid interrupting the ongoing discussion. No one involved in it is likely to be amused by the sudden need to attend to intruders."

"I live here, at the moment."

"Indeed. I imagine the only person present who might find a disaster of your making remotely convenient is Lord Diarmat."

"Who doesn't deserve it."

“You give him too little credit.”

“Do I?”

The Arkon’s smile was lined. It was also sharp. “Perhaps I will beg the Emperor’s indulgence.”

In theory, this sounded good. Given the way the day had started, it couldn’t be. “How?”

“I might ask permission to teach you the rudiments of our language.” His smile deepened as her eyes rounded and her brows rose.

“I’ll go deaf!”

“Yes. Follow me, please. You interrupted me,” he added.

“I don’t know how you can work with that ruckus going on in the background.”

“It is difficult. I do not have the concentration I once possessed in my youth.”

“So, what are they arguing about exactly?”

“Bellusdeo’s status at court, at the moment; the argument has touched on many subjects.” The Arkon’s eyes were a steady shade of orange, which wasn’t a good sign, in a Dragon.

“What about her status? She’s a Dragon, so she’s technically a Lord of the Court.”

“That is true only in mortal terms. She is not—as Diarmat has been at pains to point out—a Lord of *this* Court. She has not offered the Emperor an oath of fealty; nor has she agreed—in a binding fashion—to abide by the laws he hands down.”

“She spends most of her free time with *me*,” Kaylin replied. “I’m a groundhawk. She probably knows the law better than anyone who isn’t.”

“You misunderstand. Humans are not, of course, required to take such a binding oath—I believe they would not survive it. Bellusdeo has not been required to do so. Lord Diarmat correctly points out that she therefore poses a risk to the Court.” He stopped at a smooth, flat wall. It was unadorned; Kaylin suspected it was actually a door.

The Arkon barked a sharp, harsh word and proved her suspicion correct; a part of the wall simply faded from sight. What lay on the other side of it was a disaster. It made Kaylin’s

desk at its worst look pristine and tidy. Hells, it made Marcus's desk look well-organized, which Kaylin would have bet was impossible.

The Arkon noted her hesitation. "Is there a difficulty?"

"Just how important is all the paper—that is paper, isn't it?"

"Parchment. Some paper. There is also stone and a few shards of smooth glass. I trust that you will disturb nothing while you are here."

"How?"

He raised a brow; his eyes didn't get any more orange, which was a small mercy.

"There's stuff all over the *floor*. There's stuff all over the chairs. I probably can't put a foot down without stepping on something."

"Then do not, as you put it, put a foot down." He gestured.

The hair on Kaylin's arms and the back of her neck rose in instant protest.

"Do not," he said, in a more severe tone of voice, "make me regret my foolish and sentimental decision to take pity on you and provide you some form of refuge."

Folding her arms across her chest, she walked into the room; her feet touched nothing. Neither did the Arkon's.

"Not to be suspicious or anything," she began.

"You do not think me capable of either sentiment or pity?"

"Not much, no. Not for me."

His smile deepened. "As you point out, Private, Bellusdeo did spend most of her free time in your presence. You have not, however, been in the city for the past month and a half. She has therefore had no anchor. No friends, if you prefer. In the last two weeks of your absence, she has spent a greater portion of her time in the fief of Tiamaris, speaking with the refugees there. When she chooses to enter the fief, she is met by one of the *Norannir*."

"That would be Maggaron."

"The Emperor does not consider Maggaron to be a suitable guard in the fiefs; Lord Tiamaris, however, is. She has

accepted—with poor grace—the Emperor’s wishes in this regard.”

“What happened?”

“She has taken to flying in the restricted air-space above the fief of Tiamaris.”

“It’s not Imperial land.”

“No. She has pointed this out—at length. You might have recognized one or two of the words she used, if you were paying attention. She has, however, come close to the borders of the fief once too often for the Emperor’s comfort.”

“The *Norannir* live on the borders.”

“Indeed. She has taken pains to point this out as well.”

“He’s going to isolate her! The *Norannir* are the only other friends she has in this city!”

The Arkon’s smile was softer, and infinitely more pained. “They are not her friends, Kaylin. They were once her subjects. She is not merely a Dragon to them; she is akin to a living god. Bellusdeo has her vanity. She has her pride. But she, like any Dragon, understands her role in their lives. She does not go to them for their sake, but her own. They remind of her who she once was.

“There is altogether too much in the Palace that reminds her of what she now is.”

Kaylin’s arms tightened. “And what, exactly, is that?”

“A displaced person. She is very much the equivalent of the *Norannir*. You think of her as a Lord of the Court, and you have some rudimentary understanding of the political power that title might give her. She lives in the Palace, and not in the mean streets of the fiefs that border *Ravellon*. She has food, should she desire it, and clothing; she has money. But the *Norannir* have more freedom than Bellusdeo now does.”

“Why are you telling me this? Why not say this to the Emperor?”

“Do you think I have not?” His eyes shaded to a color that was more copper than orange. Kaylin couldn’t remember what it meant, she’d seen it so rarely. In fact, she’d seen it only once: in Bellusdeo’s eyes. “I have told the Emperor that Bellusdeo cannot

live in a cage. He does not intend to cage her—but regardless, he does. She is too valuable to risk. We have already seen how close to disaster we came.”

“Arkon—” Kaylin froze, and only in part because the muted draconic voices had risen in volume. “Please tell me this argument has nothing to do with my moving out.”

“You are not, that I recall, fond of unnecessary dishonesty.” He took a seat. It was the only seat in the room that seemed to have enough exposed surface to sit on. “If Bellusdeo can be said to have one friend in the Empire, it is you. She found your absence far more difficult than either she—or you—had imagined she would.”

“She said this?”

“Of course not.” He winced; it took Kaylin a couple of seconds to realize it wasn’t because of anything she’d said. Unlike her, he could understand every word that was being said. Or shouted. “You have made it clear to Bellusdeo that life in the Imperial Palace does not suit you.”

“Not in those exact words, no.”

“Refrain from repeating the exact phrasing.”

Because Kaylin loved her job on most days, she did.

“You intend to find another domicile?”

“Yes. As soon as I can.” When he lifted a brow, she thought of the job she loved—none of which included pandering to annoyed Dragons. On the other hand, survival often did. “Look, there are people who would kill to live in the Palace. I’m certain of it. But they’re the people the Hawklord goes out of his way to prevent me from meeting. Everything in my Palace rooms—everything—costs more than the clothing on my back. I feel like I should bathe *before* I step foot through the door.

“I can’t leave or enter without an inquisition. I have to deal with Imperial Guards on a daily basis for no other reason than that I live here.”

“They are there for the protection and security of our guests.”

“Fine. But I don’t want to *be* a guest in my own home. I want to be able to *live there*. Bellusdeo is a Dragon. When she dons Court dresses, they fit her *and* look good. She understands the

powerful. She *has* power. I'm a groundhawk. I can barely make ends meet on my cruddy pay. I'm not in her class—and I know it.

"I came from the fiefs. I work on the streets. I don't belong here, and I can't be happy where I don't belong."

"You are a Lord of the High Court."

"The Barrani High Court, and you know damn well I don't have to live in the High Halls."

"You have visited them before."

"I visited them with *Teela*."

"And the difference?"

She grimaced. There was a difference. She wasn't certain what it was. "Teela's a Hawk."

"And Bellusdeo is not."

"Bellusdeo would never swear the oath the Halls of Law require."

"No. Lord Teela did?"

"Lord Teela doesn't give a damn about non-binding oaths. They're just words, as far as the Barrani are concerned. There is no way Marcus would ever allow Bellusdeo to join the Hawks."

"Ah yes. Your Sergeant's famous mistrust of my kind." His eyes, however, shaded toward gold. He clearly found Marcus amusing. "Your Teela understands the High Court, and she avoids it where possible. But if you enter that world, she enters it beside you—and she warns others, by presence alone, that there are consequences to any actions they might take against you. Bellusdeo cannot do that, here. And she is aware that she lacks that ability; the Palace is not her home. It is not an environment with which she is familiar, or over which she has ultimate control.

"Still, she tries. She targets Diarmat with the full brunt of her outraged disdain. Her outrage," he added, "is genuine. She feels your marks are not accorded the respect they are due. She does not fully consider the advantage in being underestimated—and I will say, now, that there is a distinct advantage to you, in my opinion. She feels a debt of gratitude to you."

“I didn’t do anything for her gratitude. I did it because...because...”

“Oh, do continue. I’m certain it will be fascinating. You did it because that’s what anyone would do?”

Kaylin shrugged. It was a fief shrug. Fief shrugs, on the other hand, were not a language with which the Arkon chose to be familiar.

“You grew up in the fiefs. You are aware that you are lying. Even if you aren’t, there are very few—I can think of almost no one—who could do for Bellusdeo what you did. She would have died there.” His gaze slid off hers. “I am not certain, at this moment, that fate would not be preferable in her mind. Yes, the discussion in progress—and to my mind it will be some hours before it is done—involves both your residence and hers.” He closed his eyes. “She is in pain, Kaylin. She is grieving. For us, the grief is long past; it exists only in echoes, when we turn our thoughts to the past.

“For Bellusdeo it is new. It makes her reckless. More reckless,” he added, as if this were necessary. “You see her as a Dragon, which is fair. You will age, you will die; she will live forever. She is favored by an Emperor we still consider it wise that you never meet; she is given leeway that would be granted no one else. All of this is true. It is not, however, the only truth.

“I understand that the loss of your home was due to her presence. Believe, Kaylin, that she understands this as well. If you do not resent her for the loss—if you do not speak against her companionship—she will go where you go.”

“You...want me to move out with her.”

“No. I feel it prudent to advise you that her presence *will* make your life far more difficult than it might otherwise be. I want *her* to move out with *you*. I am of the opinion—at the moment—that the benefits that accrue will go in one direction; I am aware—as you are—of the risks that move entails. If Bellusdeo does accompany you, the Imperial treasury will cover a large portion of your rental costs.”

Kaylin’s arms tightened, but she said nothing. She’d been able to afford her one room apartment, even with Bellusdeo as a

roommate. She wasn't so flush with money that money itself was irrelevant. But...she really didn't like the idea. At all. "She hasn't even asked me, you know."

"I know. She will not ask if she cannot argue the Emperor around; it would be too humiliating."

And having a screaming fight that an entire *palace* had no choice but to hear wasn't? "I don't want my home surrounded by bloody Imperial Guards."

The Arkon raised a white brow.

"I mean it. I don't want home to be a jail."

"Bellusdeo will have a security detail."

"I apparently have a security detail, if by that you mean Imperial spies. I can't stop them from watching my every move. I just want to *pretend* that they don't."

"Why?"

Dragons. Ugh.

"And your other demands?"

Kaylin had none. She felt guilty, because one of the things she'd been so looking forward to was having a place of her own again. She'd had nothing when she'd come from the fiefs. But she'd had hope for the future—with the Hawks, within Elantra. What hope did Bellusdeo now have that was similar?

"Yes," she heard herself say.

"You will consider it?"

She nodded. The small dragon, silent as cloth for most of the interview, raised his head and batted the side of Kaylin's cheek with it.

"Good. I now have work to do."

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"Midwives' guild?" Clint asked, as Kaylin trudged up the stairs of the Halls of Law.

"Dragons," was her curt reply. If the midwives had kept her awake through the small hours of the night, she'd've had something useful to show for the lack of sleep.

"If you don't want to see Dragons," Tanner told her, "I suggest you avoid the office for the next couple of hours."

"Why?"

“Bellusdeo is there.”

She hadn’t been in the apartments they shared at the palace when Kaylin had dragged her butt out of her rooms in the morning.

“Alone?”

“No. Lord Sanabalis is with her. So are six of the Imperial Guard. The color of Barrani eyes in the office is almost midnight blue.”

Could this day get any worse? “Thanks for the heads-up.” Kaylin considered turning tail and finding breakfast, but she didn’t have much money on hand.

“You’re going in?”

“Trouble’ll find me when I leave the office if I don’t; I might as well get paid for enduring it.”

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The Imperial Guard always set the office, as a whole, on edge. Caitlin didn’t mind them, but they were so stiff, so officious, and so smugly superior, Caitlin was an island in the Halls. Bellusdeo was standing to one side of Marcus’s desk as Kaylin entered the office. Kaylin glanced, once, at the duty roster, saw her name—beside Severn’s—on the Elani beat, and allowed herself to relax. She wasn’t late. Yet.

She didn’t, however, see Severn.

Sanabalis was standing to one side of Bellusdeo; his eyes were a very clear orange, and if Dragons didn’t physically require sleep, he looked like he could personally use a week of it. The Imperial Guard were like breathing statues.

“Private,” Marcus growled. His sense of smell had probably alerted him to Kaylin’s presence, as there were too many tall people between them for her to even see him, seated as he was at his desk, and behind the perpetual stacks of paper that girded it. She couldn’t see the color of his eyes, but the tone of her rank pretty much gave it away. The Imperial Guard moved to allow her through.

She stood at attention in front of his desk and—as expected—his very orange eyes. She saw that he had reflexively gouged a

few new runnels in the surface of that desk. Clearly, it hadn't been a pleasant interview, whatever its subject.

"Your services are apparently being seconded by the Dragon Court."

Standing at attention didn't allow for the usual facial tics or gestures that indicated dismay. It was the only good thing she could say about it.

"You are apparently not content living at the Palace."

It also didn't allow for nuanced commentary, which was fine; surrounded by Imperial guards, she didn't feel particularly nuanced.

"Well?"

"No, sir."

"And you intend to find other accommodations?"

"Yes, sir."

"With a Lord of the Dragon Court."

She didn't hesitate; not with Marcus in his current mood. "Yes, sir."

"The Dragon Court feels that such a search should not be an after-hours affair. Cognizant of the difficulties Lord Bellusdeo encountered the last time she chose to live outside of the Palace, they've taken it upon themselves to assure that your search for a new domicile is secure. You are therefore relieved of your regular duties until that search is completed. To Imperial satisfaction."

"That is not," Bellusdeo said, speaking for the first time since Kaylin had entered an otherwise raptly silent office, "what was said." She stepped forward, until she was standing shoulder to shoulder with Kaylin, who, at attention, couldn't otherwise turn to look at her. "Private Neya's sense of responsibility to the Halls is quite strong; she understands the city far better than I, a recent refugee." She used the Elantran word for refugee. Kaylin almost cringed to hear it. "If, in Private Neya's considered opinion, such a search can be effectively conducted outside of her working hours, that is acceptable to *all* concerned." The swish sound her hair made clearly indicated that Bellusdeo was pinning someone—or several someones—with a glare.

Sanabalis cleared his throat. In the silence of the office, it sounded like a distant earthquake. “Bellusdeo wishes to accompany Private Neya on her rounds, as she did before the private was sent out of the city to the West March.”

Great.

“Private,” Marcus barked. “At ease.”

As if. She did, however, relax her posture slightly. “Permission to speak freely, sir?”

Her sergeant snorted. In general, there was nothing but free speech in the office.

“I’m not going on my rounds with a half-dozen Imperial Guards as escort. Members of the Hawks *don’t* require baby sitters, and we don’t want to imply they do; it’ll hurt the force. If the guards come with Bellusdeo and can’t be separated, I’ll take the time to find a new apartment. If they can be detached, I can find us a place to live on my own time.”

For some reason, this answer didn’t appear to please Marcus, although he clearly agreed with it.

“Is Lord Bellusdeo a Hawk?” a familiar voice asked. Kaylin couldn’t see the speaker, but cringed anyway. It was a Barrani voice. Mandoran’s. She hadn’t even *seen* him in the office, which answered her question about the day getting worse; clearly it could. A Barrani from the West March, frozen in time in the Barrani version of puberty, was now in the Halls of Law. She hoped Teela was standing on his feet.

“I am not,” was the frosty, Draconian reply.

“I was under the impression,” Mandoran continued, moving around the back side of Marcus’s desk with care to avoid the now-bristling Leontine that occupied it, “that tourists were not allowed to accompany on-duty Hawks.”

Marcus was either breathing heavily or trying to stifle a growl. Kaylin put money on the latter, and would have refused to bet on his chances of continued success.

“Lord Bellusdeo,” Sanabalis said, “is a member of the Dragon Court—the governing body that advises the Eternal Emperor. It is well within her purview to ask for—and receive—permission

to inspect the forces assembled within the Halls in light of those duties.”

“Whereas I am merely a Barrani Lord visiting your fair city, and therefore have no responsibilities and no duties?”

Kaylin risked a glance at Sanabalis’s eyes. He was annoyed, but not yet angry.

Mandoran, having navigated the desk, came to stand beside Kaylin. He was grinning, and his eyes were almost green. Certainly greener than Barrani eyes generally were in this office. He winked at her. This did not make the Leontine sergeant any less bristly.

“I see Teela hasn’t strangled you, yet,” she said, in as quiet a voice as she could.

“Why would she want to do that? At the moment, she’s not bored.”

“She is,” Teela said, “considering the concept of boredom with more deliberate care.”

Mandoran’s grin didn’t falter.

“Where is Corporal Handred?” Kaylin asked, hoping to stem the tide of this particular conversation.

She’d’ve had better luck with a tidal wave. “He’s closeted with the Wolford,” Teela replied. “The duty roster hasn’t been updated, but apparently you and I are now covering Elani street.” She turned and offered a correct bow to Sanabalis. Unfortunately, Kaylin now recognized it as a correct bow for the Barrani High Court. “I ask that you overlook any impertinence from my guest. He is in a situation very similar to Lord Bellusdeo’s; the Empire—and the Eternal Emperor—did not exist when last he walked these lands.”

Bellusdeo frowned. “I was not aware that the Barrani could voluntarily enter the long sleep.”

“I’m certain there are many things that would surprise you about the Barrani,” Mandoran replied. His voice, however, had taken on both edge and chill, and his eyes had darkened to blue.

This predictably caused unrest among the Imperial Guard, subtle though it was; it caused Sanabalis’s eyes to shade toward a brighter orange, and it caused Teela’s eyes—Teela, who had

made her way to the other side of Mandoran—to narrow. They were, on the other hand, already as blue as they could safely get.

Bellusdeo, however, lifted a brow; her eyes were no longer slightly orange. They were gold. She was amused.

Mandoran wasn't.

Bellusdeo then turned to Teela. “If you have now had cause to reconsider your attitude toward boredom, I have not been so fortunate. Even for the Immortal, time can pass incredibly slowly. I believe I will find the patrol of great interest on this particular day.” She turned to Mandoran and added, “as a visitor to the city that is my current home, I bid you welcome. I am certain you will do nothing to disgrace yourself or your Court should you be forced to accept the company of a Dragon for an afternoon, and I am certain the sergeant will relax his rules enough that you may join us.”

## CHAPTER TWO

Although Bellusdeo had the last word, there were several hundred other words—thankfully none of them in native Dragon—before it. Kaylin thought it unfair when Sanabalis asked for a private word with her before she could leave the office.

The lack of justice didn't notably ease when he marched her to the West Room in which her magic lessons were taught, and practically shut the door on her shoulder blades—without bothering to touch it. He did, on the other hand, activate the door ward with his own hand.

“What,” he asked, in Elantran, “do you think you're doing?”

“I *thought* I was going on patrol in the Elani district.”

His eyes darkened a shade. “If there is ever a time to play games with a Dragon, Private, it is not now. The Emperor is not pleased by the current state of events.”

“Not even I could have missed that.”

He grimaced, and his eyes lightened a shade. “He has granted Bellusdeo his very reluctant permission to leave the Palace. He is placing the fate of the race in your hands.” And clearly, while Sanabalis held Kaylin in some affection, he didn't consider her the appropriate receptacle for that responsibility.

She stared at him. She remembered to close her mouth after the first few seconds. “The same Emperor who initially thought I should be destroyed because I presented too great a risk?”

“We have not notably changed rulers in the interim.” His eyes gained more gold as he studied her face. “Tell me about this new Barrani. He is a recruit?”

She started to say no, stopped, and shrugged. “I don’t know. He’s a friend of Teela’s. An old friend.”

“He is to my eye one of the Barrani young.”

“She’s known him practically all her life,” she replied, trying to dodge the question he hadn’t yet asked.

“And you trust him?”

Did she? “I don’t know him well enough to trust him.” That was true. “But I trust Teela.”

“Teela is a Barrani High Lord. She owes her loyalty to—”

“She’s a *Hawk*, Sanabalis.”

Sanabalis was silent for a moment. “Kaylin, you have been the most difficult student I have ever accepted. The rewards are few; the frustration is legion. But you are not—as I’m certain Bellusdeo will tell you—boring. In my fashion, I have grown accustomed to your eccentricities. My opinion carries some weight at court. It will carry exactly *none* if Bellusdeo comes to harm.” He lifted a hand as Kaylin opened her mouth. “Yes, I am aware that she is not a child. So, too, is the Emperor.

“But you have told anyone who will listen that you are no longer a child, either. The Emperor therefore wishes you to understand what is at risk for you. Bellusdeo has a home in the Palace. She will be as safe there as she would be—”

“In a grave.”

Silence.

Kaylin watched the color of Dragon eyes closely; she’d folded her arms and widened her stance without conscious intent. But if Sanabalis felt insulted, it didn’t anger him; the color remained a constant, pale orange.

“You do not understand the politics of the Dragon Court.”

“Then I recommend better information be taught in racial integration classes.” She exhaled through clenched teeth and forced herself to relax. “Look, Sanabalis, I don’t understand the problem. The Arkon had no objections. He doesn’t think Bellusdeo *can* be happy in the Palace. Not right now.”

“The Arkon is being astonishingly sentimental for one of our kind.”

“No, he’s just being perceptive. I don’t know what went down at the end of all the wars. I don’t know what choices the surviving Dragons were given—but I’m guessing that many of the Dragons didn’t survive to make that choice. I don’t know what choice Bellusdeo has been offered—but I’m guessing almost none. She’s the only female Dragon. She’s not being asked to choose between death and eternal servitude.” He started to speak, and she held up one hand. “She understands what’s at stake. She has a sense of responsibility. But she’s not a piece of property. The Emperor already *has* a hoard.”

“No choice has been demanded of Bellusdeo.”

“That’s not the way Diarmat sees it.”

One pale brow rose into an equally pale hairline.

“...Lord Diarmat.”

“Lord Diarmat is concerned for the rule of law. The Emperor’s law. He is younger than the Arkon, and he is aware that female Dragons are not an entirely different species.”

“They’re not technically a different species at all.”

“Exactly. Lord Diarmat is the only member of the Dragon Court who will risk open hostility to make that point. Bellusdeo is a Dragon, but she is not accorded the responsibilities that exist, for Dragons, in the Empire.”

“Meaning she’s not forced to swear the same oath the rest of you swore.”

“Yes.” Sanabalis fell silent. He did not, however, give Kaylin permission to depart, and she was very much aware, given the turn of the day’s events—or at least the evening’s prior—that permission was required. “She is not happy,” he surprised her by saying.

Kaylin waited.

“It may come as a surprise to you, but her happiness is of some concern to the Emperor; he balances it with a desire for her safety that is second only to his desire for the safety of his hoard. If you will not take the detachment of guards, I will have them

dismissed. Go on your patrol. I will arrange a suitable escort for your...apartment hunting.”

“Who would that be?”

He ran his hand over his eyes. “In all likelihood, Private Neyla, me. I may attempt to saddle Lord Emmerian with that duty; he has not, to my knowledge, offended Bellusdeo in the last several weeks. Largely,” he added, with a more toothy grin, “because he has avoided her entirely.”

\*

“Why,” Teela said, in the clipped, cool voice that implied annoyance, “are you sulking?”

“I’m not sulking.” Kaylin did not kick a stone, which took effort.

Mandoran grinned. “You don’t look like you’re sulking to me—but I’m not as conversant with mortal expressions. Why exactly do your eyes stay that fixed color?”

“Human.”

“Doesn’t it make the other mortals wonder if you’re not just animals that talk?”

“Frequently.” She reached out and caught Bellusdeo’s elbow as the Dragon drew breath; it was the kind of slow, heavy breath which sometimes preceded fire. “Either that or it makes them suspicious, because clearly we’re hiding something. Or we’re insane.”

“Well, I won’t argue *that*,” he replied. He was looking at the buildings that lined the streets, the people that walked them, the stray cats and dogs, and the clouds that scudded overhead, as if everything was both new and fascinating. It probably was. He had spent the last many centuries trapped inside the green, which had a tenuous understanding of physical form. At best. His eyes were a shade of blue-green, and he kept to the side of Teela that happened to be farthest from the Dragon. Kaylin had inserted herself between Teela and Bellusdeo, which meant Mandoran and Bellusdeo were as far apart as they could be while still heading in the same general direction.

They both turned heads, though.

Mandoran wasn't encumbered by the regulation tabard that Teela wore, and Bellusdeo looked far more like a Lord of the Dragon Court—by dress, at least—than the average pedestrian. Most women who could afford to dress the way she did didn't walk anywhere—they took carriages, and usually stayed behind their guards and footmen.

Kaylin grimaced. She almost wished Bellusdeo were in one of those carriages, because Elani street was the home of wheedling, enterprising frauds, most of whom could happily accost anyone that appeared to have money.

They were usually better behaved when their victims had Hawks as escorts. Mandoran, on the other hand, didn't appear to understand that he *was* a victim. He responded to the offers—in this case, fortune-telling—with unfeigned curiosity and quick delight.

Teela raised a brow. Mandoran stiffened. Neither spoke out loud. They didn't have to, if they wanted their conversation to be private; they knew each other's true names. It had been centuries since either had had call to use them, if one ignored the past few weeks.

"Teela," Mandoran said, "doesn't want me to have fun here."

"She's working. You'll add to the paperwork if you do."

"Yes, that seems to be one of her fears. The other is attempting to throw me into...jail if I misbehave?"

"I imagine that would be a lot of fun," Kaylin replied.

"I've offered to visit the High Halls instead of the city streets," was his cheerful counter. "There, it won't matter if foolish or stupid people die; it's considered a form of suicide, and it isn't Teela's job to prevent that."

"Why did we think this was a good idea?" Kaylin asked her fellow Hawk.

"I never thought it was a good idea, if I recall. I merely pointed out that compared to your induction into the Hawks, Mandoran was far less likely to be in danger. Or to indirectly cause it. I was perhaps optimistic about the latter."

Mandoran snorted. So did Bellusdeo.

"I thought you were here to keep an eye on Annarion."

At that, Mandoran's smile dimmed. The color of his eyes shifted, but not into the midnight blue that generally meant upcoming injury or death. He glanced at Teela; Teela was studying the occupants of Elani street as if they were fascinating, dangerous, or both.

"You will have to tell me," Bellusdeo said to Kaylin, "exactly what did happen on your pilgrimage. It seems you've acquired companions."

"They're Teela's companions, not mine. And there are—at the moment—two of them in the city. You've met Mandoran. He's the outgoing, friendly one with the questionable sense of humor."

"It seems a fairly standard Barrani sense of humor, if less subtle than rumored."

"He's young for his age."

"Not so young," Mandoran cut in, "that he enjoys being talked about in the third person."

"And not so mature," the Dragon countered, "that he doesn't enjoy talking about other people present in the same way."

He grinned. His eyes were still a wary blue. "Fair enough." He spoke Elantran. Kaylin doubted a similar phrase existed in Barrani.

"Where is Annarion, anyway?"

"Kitling."

Mandoran raised a black brow. "He's visiting his brother."

Nightshade.

"And no, before you ask, it's not going well."

"Why didn't you go with him?"

"I wasn't invited. Or rather, I was specifically *not* invited. Lord Calammenne was willing to entertain Teela, but for some reason, Teela didn't choose to accept his invitation."

"I am uninterested in playing games of power with Nightshade."

"But Annarion—"

"Is not in danger. Whatever else Nightshade intends in future, the death of his youngest brother is no part of his plan. It is safe for Annarion to rage only in the absence of witnesses. Nightshade didn't invite me because he was concerned for

Annarion's safety; he wished to confine Annarion's wrath. I," she added, with a slender, sharp smile, "did not." She glanced pointedly at the mark Nightshade had left on Kaylin's cheek. It was just so much skin to the younger Hawk, but it never failed to annoy Teela.

"Heads up. Margot on the prowl," Teela added.

Margot was possibly the person on Elani street Kaylin disliked the most, not that there was any shortage of rivals for that position. She was a tall, gorgeous redhead, and she made the color look natural. She was statuesque, her skin was fair, her eyes striking, and she could milk money out of stone by oozing wisdom and charm.

Neither of which Kaylin privately believed she had.

"She won't come here," Kaylin replied. "She's seen me."

If Kaylin played the least-favorite game, so did Margot. Kaylin was on the top of the Hawk's list, and possibly near the top three across the board. She still blamed Kaylin for the loss of one of her most lucrative clients, which cost Kaylin no sleep at night, ever.

"Pretty," Mandoran said, which didn't help. Margot was not an idiot, whatever else one could call her; she cast an equally appreciative look at Mandoran, but kept her distance. Barrani affairs were seldom safe for mortals, and attempting to bilk a Barrani out of money was a mug's game; it required stupidity and overbearing ego, and Margot only had one of the two. She pretty much failed to see Kaylin as Kaylin sauntered past.

"She is attractive," Teela said—which was obviously meant to irritate Kaylin, because there wasn't any other reason to say it out loud.

Bellusdeo shook her head. "By mortal standards, perhaps, but there's a brittle edge to the line of her mouth I find unappealing."

"Guys," Kaylin snapped. "A little less ogling and a little more patrolling."

"I'm not patrolling," Mandoran chuckled.

"Technically, you're not here."

He laughed. “You know,” he said, “I think, when you have a place of your own, I’m going to be visiting a lot. You really are much less stodgy than Teela’s become.”

“Teela is *no one’s* definition of ‘stodgy.’”

“Kaylin will not be living on her own, and I don’t do drop-ins,” Bellusdeo pointed out. Her eyes remained golden. Mandoran’s had edged toward green, but a stubborn streak of blue persisted. If he eventually chose to be comfortable around a Dragon, it wasn’t going to be today.

He shrugged. “From the sound of it, you’re not going to find much of a place of your own anyway.”

“I can find a place,” Kaylin said. “And Bellusdeo, despite appearances, doesn’t require something palatial or even regal, given where we were living before.”

“Oh, it’s not your friend that’s going to be the problem.” He glanced at Teela’s expressionless face, and added, “on the other hand, it could be worse for you. You could be living with Tain.” His grimace looked nothing like a Barrani expression.

Teela cleared her throat. Loudly.

“You’re living with Tain?”

“If you can call it living, yes. For some reason, he doesn’t seem to want me to see much of your fair city. I want,” he added, “to visit the Leontines I hear you have living here. I didn’t even know they could function in cities. But your sergeant seems fine wearing clothes.”

Bellusdeo glanced at Kaylin. Kaylin turned a tight-lipped stare on Teela, who shrugged. “Surely you expected this?” The Barrani Hawk asked. “You know he hasn’t lived in a mortal city before; he certainly hasn’t lived in this one.”

“The Leontines,” Kaylin told Mandoran, in chilly Barrani, “are not animals. Nor are the humans. The Aerians are not birds. This is a *city*, not a zoo—and none of its inhabitants are here to be stared at through cage bars.”

“Kitling.”

Mandoran chuckled. “My apologies, Lord Kaylin. I seem to have touched a sensitive spot.”

“You’ve reminded me of all the things I hate about Immortals. I don’t know if you’d consider that a sensitive point or not.” She didn’t much care, either. The small dragon lifted a head and squawked. When Kaylin, still tight-lipped, ignored him, he nipped her ear.

“What?” She turned to glare at him, and he avoided her by leaping off her shoulders to hover in the air. When she still failed to understand whatever it was he was trying to tell her, he added sounds to the flap of wings, and when she failed to get *that*, he flew, head first, toward a window. A storefront window.

Kaylin ran after him, arms outstretched, while people in the street stopped to stare. She hadn’t been patrolling on Elani for almost two months; the small dragon was still a novelty. Some of the gawkers were no doubt assigning a monetary value to him; she pitied anyone foolish enough to actually try to grab him and carry him off. Actually, scratch that. At the moment, she’d probably enjoy it.

It was only as she reached up for small and squawky that she recognized which window he’d threatened: it was Evanton’s.

The door, habitually shut, now swung open; a wizened, bent old man was standing on the other side of the frame, his frown bracketed by a decade’s worth of lines. “Don’t stand there gawking,” he said, matching tone of voice to expression. “Come in. I put tea on ten minutes ago.”

\*

Evanton didn’t actually drink tea. He made it for guests. Given his current mood, those guests might as well have been tax collectors. Bellusdeo entered his store, her eyes rounding. If she’d been mortal, Kaylin would have assumed she was surprised at the clutter and the occasional moving cobweb. She wasn’t. She turned to Evanton, in his apron, his jeweler’s glass hanging on the edge of a tarnished silver chain, his white hair in wisps above the crown of his head.

And she bowed.

This seemed to mollify the old man. “You must be Bellusdeo,” he said. “Rise, Lady. While I have a home here, you will always be a welcome, and valued, guest.” His voice was

deeper than usual, and to Kaylin's ear, stronger; it rumbled as if he were almost a Dragon. "I do not know who named you, or from whence they took the name, but it is yours in its entirety. I am honored."

Kaylin remembered, belatedly, to close her mouth. She stared at Bellusdeo. Bellusdeo's eyes were a luminous gold, and her lips were turned up in a gentle, almost reverent smile. "You have the advantage of me in many ways," she said.

"Ah, forgive me." He turned a far less reverent gaze on Kaylin. "Private, introduce us."

"Sorry. Bellusdeo, this is a friend of mine. He's called Evanton, around these parts; if he has a family name, he's never shared. The young man hiding in the kitchen is Grethan, his apprentice."

Bellusdeo frowned.

"Kaylin is, like the rest of the inhabitants of Elantra, very informal," Evanton said. He was, however, smiling in his slightly pained way.

"And you allow this?"

"Lady, she has twice saved my garden. In ignorance, she's borne the responsibility that has been the entirety of my adult life. She has never demanded reward greater than tea and snacks—and if I am to be honest, she doesn't so much demand as help herself if I am slow. I am willing to accept informality from her; formality would be so unnatural the awkwardness would likely kill one of us."

"Kaylin, do you understand who Evanton *is*?" Bellusdeo demanded.

"Yes. He's the Keeper."

"And do you understand what that means?"

"He—he stops the elements from destroying each other. And incidentally the rest of us, although I don't think they'd notice that as much." She hesitated and then said, "How did you know what he is if you didn't recognize who he is?"

Bellusdeo now turned to Teela. "Have you never explained?"

"Teela brought me here, the first time. When I wanted practical enchantments."

Evanton winced.

“Practical?”

“My daggers don’t make a sound when I draw them.”

The Dragon looked scandalized.

Evanton looked even more pained. “We all, as Kaylin likes to say, need to eat.”

“I should have expected no better from an Empire that so denigrates the Chosen.” Bellusdeo’s eyes were now a deeper than comfortable orange.

“I am content, Lady,” Evanton said, voice grave. “If the current Empire does not treat me with the regard or respect you now offer, it is a far less lonely place than it once was. Grethan,” he added, his voice developing the gruffness and irritability of age. “You are being rude to a guest.”

Grethan’s stalks appeared from the left side of the door frame; they were followed, slowly, by the rest of his face. He didn’t look comfortable. He was Tha’alani by birth, but although he had the characteristic racial stalks protruding from his forehead, they were decorative. He couldn’t join the Tha’alaan. He couldn’t speak to his own people the way they spoke among each other unless one of them touched him and entered his thoughts. The deafness had, in the parlance of the Tha’alani, resulted in insanity. In normal human terms, he’d been angry and isolated, and that anger and isolation had almost caused the death of a Tha’alani child.

A child whose life Grethan had, in the end, saved.

Evanton had taken him in; Kaylin often wondered if what had seemed an act of forgiveness and mercy wasn’t just one long, extended punishment. But the only thing Grethan seemed to fear now was Evanton. He certainly wasn’t afraid of Kaylin, Teela or Bellusdeo.

“Grethan,” Kaylin said. “It’s good to see you’re still alive. Evanton seems to be in a bit of a mood today.”

Bellusdeo’s eyes almost popped out of her head. Kaylin made a mental note not to visit Evanton with Bellusdeo in tow.

The small dragon squawked and landed on Grethan's shoulder. Grethan looked at least as surprised as Kaylin felt. She recovered first. Grethan seemed entranced.

"So why is Evanton so cranky today?"

"Unfair, Private," Evanton replied. "Your tea is getting cold. And you've failed to introduce me to your other companion—although I suppose you could rightly attribute that lack of manners to Lord Teela."

"If she were unwise," Teela replied, her eyes an easy green. "Evanton, this is Mandoran. He has just returned to our lands after a long absence, and everything in them is new, except perhaps rudiments of our language. Mandoran, this is Evanton, the current Keeper."

"Mandoran?" Evanton frowned. It was a very peculiar frown; his eyes narrowed. In the dim light of the storefront, they seemed momentarily blue, although Evanton's didn't, as a general rule, change color. He extended a hand. Mandoran hesitated before extending one of his own. "Come, join us. Grethan, if you can detach yourself from Kaylin's companion, I would ask that you move refreshments to the Garden."

Grethan's eyes widened.

"The kitchen, while suitable for a private of the Hawks, is nowhere near suitable for Lady Bellusdeo." The official title was Lord, but Kaylin didn't bother to correct him. "We will therefore repair to the Garden."

\*

"What he is up to?" Teela whispered. She was at the back of the line, because Evanton's rickety halls were at best one person wide. She had maneuvered into the position in front of Kaylin, who had pulled up the back, and had merely stopped walking until everyone else was far enough ahead.

Kaylin shook her head. "I don't know." She accepted Teela's suspicion because she felt some of it herself. "How did Bellusdeo recognize him as the Keeper? Did you, when you first met him?"

Teela exhaled. "Yes."

"How?"

“Mortals don’t have true names, unless they’ve done something technically questionable.”

“Meaning me.”

“Meaning you, yes. No one is certain what having a name means for a mortal, and given you are—theoretically—mortal, you aren’t considered enough of a threat that an answer must be found. The answer itself would take longer than the rest of your life to obtain.”

“And that’s relevant how?”

“Evanton doesn’t have a name, per se. Not the way Immortals do. But if we meet his eyes for any length of time, we can see four words in their depths. They are names, they are linked to him, and they cannot be used to control him. It is the way the Keepers make themselves known to those who might otherwise intend them harm. If you look, you might be able to make out two of those names—but you might not. I’m not certain Evanton would stand still for long enough.”

“He’s not exactly fast on his feet.”

“No, but in his fashion he knows how to intimidate. I’ve never noticed you engaging in staring contests with him.”

“I’m not the one who does that, Teela.”

Teela chuckled, but her eyes remained an alert blue. “I hate the Garden,” she murmured, squaring her shoulders.

“It can’t be any worse than paperwork.”

\*

Stepping through the narrow, rickety door at the end of an equally narrow, rickety hall was always a bit of a shock. Evanton’s storefront couldn’t, by any stretch of the truth, be called well lit, and the contrast between his work spaces and the garden’s brilliant, full-on sunlight made Kaylin’s eyes water.

There was a roof, a domed high ceiling that would have fit right in in the Imperial Palace. There were no obvious glass ceilings or windows, and the roof, unlike the Hawklord’s tower, didn’t appear to open to the sky, so sunlight was in theory impossible. But nothing about this room conformed to what she knew of reality, and Kaylin had long since given up attempting to make sense of it.

She made her way across the flat-stone path laid into grass that would have made pretentious merchants weep with envy, pausing by the still, deep pool that sat, untouched by the breeze that moved almost everything else, in the Garden's center.

It was the heart of the elemental water, made small and peaceful. Beyond it, burning in a brazier that might have been used for incense, fire. Only in Evanton's Garden could the elements exist so close to each other in peace.

Beyond them was the small stone hut in which Evanton entertained the few guests he was willing to allow into this space.

"I don't think it's because of Bellusdeo that he moved tea," Kaylin said to Teela, as she made her way to the hut.

"No."

"I really hope Mandoran doesn't do anything stupid."

"He's not Terrano," Teela replied. "Terrano was the only one of us likely to throw his life away on a whim."

He was the only one of the twelve who had not chosen to come home. Somewhere in the spaces that mortals couldn't occupy, he was racing around the incomprehensible landscape discovering worlds and having fun. Kaylin fervently hoped he stayed there.

"Do you notice anything different about Mandoran? I mean, from before?"

Teela didn't answer.

\*

When they reached the hut, the door swung open. Like any building of note in magical space, the interior didn't fit with the exterior; it was far larger than it had any right to be, for one. The floors were no longer rough stone; they were a gleaming marble, more suitable to a grand foyer than a parlor.

There were chairs of a style Kaylin had never seen in the Garden, and a low flat table that was the rough stone one expected to find outdoors. Tea, in Evanton's ancient, chipped tea set, was on the table, and steam rose from the spout of the pot. There were four cups, straight, tall cylinders absent handles. Kaylin didn't understand why cups made for hot liquid were ever

without handles, but on the other hand, Bellusdeo was unlikely to burn *her* hand when picking them up.

The Dragon looked up as Kaylin entered the room; her eyes were golden. Clearly, the Keeper's abode suited her.

It suited her far more than the Palace.

"The Keeper was just regaling us with details of your first meeting," she said.

Mandoran, whose back was to the door, swiveled in his chair.

"It wasn't the first meeting," Evanton said, gently correcting her. "That was far less remarkable, although I remember thinking her unconscionably young to be keeping company with the Barrani Hawks."

"No talking about me as if I weren't in the room," Kaylin replied, taking the chair closest to Bellusdeo.

"You weren't in the room at the time."

"Here, now. Did small and squawky stay with Grethan?" The apprentice was nowhere in sight. Neither was Kaylin's most constant—and annoying—companion.

"No. He's in the fireplace." Bellusdeo nodded toward the fire in question. It was set into the wall, but reminded Kaylin—once again—of the Palace. Even the pokers looked like they were made of brass. And shiny.

"There's a fire in the fireplace," Kaylin quite reasonably pointed out.

"He doesn't take up a lot of room, and it's not like fire burns him. You can go and poke the fire if you want—he's there." Bellusdeo's expression made clear that if Dragons of any size didn't burn, mortals of any size did.

"I hope he puts himself out before he lands on my shoulders again." Kaylin turned back to her tea.

*Squawk.*

Mandoran grinned. "I have to say, I've never met a mortal a tenth as interesting as you are. I can almost understand why Teela is so attached to you."

"Teela," Teela said, "dislikes being spoken of in the third person even more than Private Neya. She is also far more effective at discouragement."

Mandoran laughed. “So she is. I don’t know where you found the private, but I’d hold on to her, if I were you. Honestly, I wish everyone had descended on this strange, smelly, crowded place. Sedarias is beside herself with envy at where I am. In the Keeper’s Garden!”

“It’s not that exciting,” Evanton said, his usual crankiness asserting itself.

“It is—she’s the only one of us who’d met the Keeper. Not you,” Mandoran added, as if that were necessary. “And Teela doesn’t count. Can I talk to the elements?”

“Perhaps another day,” Teela said, before Evanton could reply.

“But I hear the water,” Mandoran said, his eyes green, his expression both familiar and strange. It took Kaylin a few minutes to understand why: it was very similar to the hesitant joy that the foundlings sometimes showed. She’d never seen anything remotely similar on a Barrani face before.

Evanton rose. “With your permission, Lord Teela, I believe the water wishes to converse with Mandoran. I will lead him there, and return.”

Mandoran was out of his chair before Evanton had finished speaking.