

CHAPTER 1

The major disadvantage of being host to over a dozen people who had no need for something as trivial as sleep was that there was no real private time in the house. There was often silence, but it was full of people. The majority of Kaylin's current guests could speak among themselves without ever opening their mouths. But they did so while taking up space, their eyes flashing blue or green as words Kaylin couldn't hear were exchanged.

It wasn't the quiet that was lacking; it was the alone time. The privacy. It said something about her current life that she felt she had more of it in the *office*. Case in point: when she headed for breakfast before fleeing to the Halls of Law, the cohort were arguing.

They weren't arguing silently, which meant they either intended to involve Kaylin, who wasn't even in the room yet, or Bellusdeo, who was.

Kaylin knew it was going to be bad when discussion banked the minute she entered the dining room. All eyes turned toward her. A chair—located conveniently nearest the door by which she could make her escape—appeared in front of a plate that had food on it. Given the looks she was getting,

her appetite dwindled to almost zero. She could, however, eat regardless, and proceeded to take the empty chair to do exactly that.

“Chew,” Teela said, “before you swallow.”

Teela’s voice appeared to be a signal for discussion to resume. Discussion, however, did not.

“You’re heading into the office today?” Kaylin asked the Barrani Hawk. It was her first day reporting since the battle in the High Halls.

“I am.”

Oh. She thought she understood what the cohort had been arguing about. Kaylin exhaled. “Bellusdeo has Imperial permission to attend me when I work as a Hawk. No one else does.”

“I’ve gone,” Mandoran immediately said.

“You have, but that wasn’t the result of Imperial permission.”

“Then permission doesn’t matter, right?”

Helen coughed.

“Permission in this case simply means Imperial Command, dear. The Emperor has essentially ordered the Hawks to accept that Bellusdeo will accompany Kaylin on her duties.”

“The Leontine doesn’t seem all that fond of her,” Mandoran admitted.

“Marcus isn’t fond of Dragons,” Kaylin replied.

“He’s not fond of anything.”

“Nothing in the office. He’s fond of his children. And his wives. But he’s grown to appreciate Bellusdeo. And there’s no force on earth that will get the Emperor to issue an Imperial Command that Barrani civilians be allowed to accompany Imperial Hawks anywhere they happen to go.”

“So we just have to get the sergeant’s permission, right?”

“There are eleven of you. There is no place where eleven extra Barrani on patrol aren’t going to be a traffic hazard.”

“We don’t have to be seen—”

Kaylin turned to look at Teela, whose lips were compressed enough that they appeared to be almost white. The only small silver lining on this particular cloud was that it wasn’t Bel-lusdeo who was angry.

Hope coughed. So did Helen.

It was Sedarias who broke the silence that had followed Mandoran’s cut-off sentence. “We have been invited to attend the High Halls as Lords of the High Court,” she said in a voice that was both regal and simultaneously disgruntled. “We are the guests of honor.”

“I don’t envy you,” Kaylin replied.

At this, Sedarias’s expression shifted into a sly smile. “You shouldn’t. But on the off chance—that’s correct, yes?” At Kaylin’s nod, she continued. “On the off chance that you do, you’ll be delighted to know that you are *also* invited to attend.”

“What?”

“Apparently, the High Lord has summoned the High Court. Every High Lord will be present.”

“Every High Lord?”

“Every single one. This would, of course, include you and Lord Severn.”

Kaylin muttered a few choice Leontine words. Mandoran laughed. Even Annarion chuckled.

“We’ve been asked,” Sedarias continued, “if there are any significant allies—those are the exact words—that we would like to honor with an invitation. Invitations of that nature are, of course, free to be declined.”

Unlike Kaylin’s, which was not an invitation so much as a royal command.



As one, all eyes—even Teela’s—turned toward Bellusdeo.

“You can’t be serious,” Kaylin snapped.

“It will take time for the Lords to gather,” Sedarias replied. Terrano, at the same time, said, “Of course we’re serious.”

The collision of words appeared to stop neither of them.

“The gathering will not, therefore, occur for some months.”

“Without her, we wouldn’t have made it out of the West March.”

“You weren’t trapped,” Sedarias then said—to Terrano. “We were.”

Terrano snorted and rolled his eyes—which were a shade of blue that only the cohort could achieve.

Kaylin dared a glance at Bellusdeo. Her eyes were orange. The mortal Hawk shoved food into her mouth at record speed before escaping the breakfast table.



“You are such a coward,” Bellusdeo said when they’d reached the relative safety of the street. The roads in and around Helen were sparsely populated at the busiest of times, which this wasn’t. They would soon join roads that were crowded at the slowest of times, but Kaylin was dressed for the office. The Hawk emblazoned on her tabard encouraged people to make space.

Had Bellusdeo hit the streets in her Draconic form, she’d have cleared far more of it—but some of that space would be created by panic, and panic could cause both accidents and the type of traffic congestion that caused the Swords to investigate. Also, it was illegal.

“It’s not cowardice,” Kaylin replied, scanning the windows of the buildings above ground level.

“What would you call it?”

“Wisdom.”

“Oh, please.”





“There’s no point in arguing with them now. Sedarias thinks it’ll be months before this ridiculous command performance occurs. We have months to attempt to talk her out of—”

“Out of expressing any appreciation or gratitude?”

Ugh. “You know they’re grateful. This isn’t about gratitude. It’s about rubbing that gratitude in the faces of the Barrani who attempted to brand you a—an army. An attacking army.”

“I believe the term you want is Flight.” Bellusdeo’s eyes were orange.

Hope squawked at the Dragon. Kaylin didn’t understand what he was saying. Bellusdeo did, but her eyes didn’t get any lighter.

“You know as well as I do,” Kaylin said, emboldened by Hope’s entry into the discussion, “that this is not the time to visit the High Halls. I’m not sure the Emperor has ever been a guest there.”

“We visited the Halls—more or less—when they came under attack, and the Barrani needed our help.”

“From the *outside*. No one invited the Dragon Court *in*.”

The chorus of Barrani voices that sometimes offered entirely unasked for opinions on the inside of her head maintained their silence for half a beat. The first person to break that silence was the fieflord. His words were tinged with amusement.

You cannot expect that the cohort would suddenly cease to cause any difficulty, surely?

I’m almost certain that the cohort understands why inviting a Dragon—any Dragon—to attend the High Halls would be a disaster.

For the Dragons?

For everyone.

I believe some of the more conservative High Lords might be surprisingly supportive of such an invitation.



Of course they would. It would be their best shot at killing Bellusdeo. If Bellusdeo died, there would be no new Dragons. No hatchlings.

There's no way the Emperor would give her permission to attend.

Nightshade concurred. *In his position, I would not. But I would be prepared, should I refuse to grant that permission, for all-out war. My brother has grown inordinately fond of her; living with you has made him reckless.*

He's not—

He has known Bellusdeo for even less time than you. He is willing to trust her in a fashion no one older would. And do not cite the Consort, please.

Kaylin hadn't intended to. *The Consort seems to like her.*

Kaylin, the Consort "likes" me. But she does not trust me.

She does.

"Stop making that face, or it will freeze that way."

Kaylin reddened.

I understand that you are attempting to avoid the Emperor's ire. I consider this wise on your part. It is not, however, the ire of the Emperor that will be your most significant problem; he will do nothing to harm Bellusdeo.

I know that.

It is the ire of the High Lords. Sedarias is, I believe, genuinely grateful for Bellusdeo's intervention. She does wish to honor her. But gratitude can be expressed privately—and in most cases, it is. Only rulers feel obliged to make that expression public because the public expression elevates those to whom one feels gratitude. It makes clear to witnesses that the aid tendered—in whatever fashion—is important and significant. The Emperor has codified such significance in public ceremonies and public titles, has he not?

Kaylin shrugged.

For Sedarias, however, genuine gratitude is not an impediment to political displays. She can be genuinely grateful and simultaneously,

extremely political. She wishes to highlight Bellusdeo's aid and import to Mellarionne. Why do you think this is?

Kaylin thought about this. After a long pause, she said, *She wants to thumb her nose at the rest of the High Lords, many of whom weren't helpful at all?*

Nightshade's silence was one of encouragement.

Bellusdeo's a Dragon. So...her presence means that even Dragons—with whom you've had a war or two—

Three.

Fine, a war or three, were more helpful, or at least more of a genuine ally, than any of the Barrani.

Yes. I believe that is some part of Sedarias's intent.

That's not going to help Mellarionne any.

Perhaps, perhaps not. She will do so as An'Mellarionne. It would be considered a very bold move—but there are those who would assume that Sedarias is confident in her own power, and they would hesitate to challenge her.

"If you are speaking about me," Bellusdeo said, her voice almost a whisper of sound, "I must insist that you include me."

Hope squawked.

"Well, yes, that could cause some difficulty," the Dragon replied. "But I dislike Kaylin's worry. She is mortal." Squawk. "The marks of the Chosen don't matter. She's mortal. I may be a displaced person in these lands; I may no longer have a home or lands of my own. But I am a Dragon."

"I'm not exactly worried about you," Kaylin said. When one golden brow rose in response, she added, "Not about you specifically. But—there's no way for Dragon and High Halls to combine that isn't political. Explosively political. On your own, you can survive more than any of the rest of the cohort—or me. But you won't be on your own. The cohort won't abandon you."

It was the Dragon's turn to snort.

Kaylin reconsidered her words and chose better ones. “Most of the cohort wouldn’t abandon you. Annarion wouldn’t. Mandoran wouldn’t. I don’t believe Allaron would either, from what I’ve seen. And you know what the cohort is like. The minute one of them enters combat to save you, they’re all going to rush in. It doesn’t matter if they’re there for your sake or their friends’; they’ll be there. But this is political, and anything political is far above my pay grade.”

“You don’t seem to find this insulting.”

“I consider it one of the biggest advantages of my rank. Which is the lowest rank I could be given and still be called a Hawk.”

“One of? What’s another one?”

“I’m not in command. I don’t need to make decisions that might cost the lives of other Hawks. No matter what happens in an action, large or small, I won’t have their deaths on my hands.”

“But you don’t like being a private.”

“Well, I could be a corporal, and it would still be mostly true. And the pay is higher.”

“It’s not much higher,” a familiar voice said. It was Mandoran’s. Of course it was. Kaylin didn’t miss a step.

“I don’t suggest you try to enter the Halls of Law looking like that.”

“Like what?”

“Like thin air.”

“Oh. That.” Mandoran caused other people some consternation as he materialized to the side of Kaylin that Bellusdeo wasn’t occupying. To be fair, most of the street didn’t notice; people always had their own problems and their own schedules. “I was going to follow Teela into the office, but Teela’s not heading there directly.”

“So you followed us?”

“Not most of the way, no. I decided to head straight here to wait, but I caught up because you’re doing the Hawk-walk.” He glanced at Bellusdeo. “For what it’s worth, I think insisting on your presence on the inside of the High Halls is suicidal.”

“Oh?” The Dragon’s voice was cool. “For who?”

Mandoran grinned. “Mostly Kaylin.”

Kaylin watched as flecks of gold appeared in Bellusdeo’s eyes. Mandoran had, once again, managed to set Bellusdeo at ease. Kaylin wondered if that was why he’d chosen to speak when he had. He never treated the Dragon with respect; had the Emperor been present for most of their spats, she wasn’t certain Mandoran wouldn’t be a pile of bleeding ash. Well, ash, because ash didn’t bleed, but still.

“You left the rest of the cohort behind?” Kaylin asked.

“We had a vote, and Helen decided it was safest to send me.”

“She was the tie-breaker?”

“Ah, no. She didn’t consider the first choice viable. But—we can all see what I see anyway, so unless there’s an attack, having more than one person here is superfluous. If Teela had been coming directly to the office, someone would have followed Teela.”

“Not you?” Bellusdeo asked.

“I had to live with Tain for a few years. Compressed into a few weeks, I might add. He’s stuffy and remarkably straightforward. Also, he hates fun.”

“He hates *mess*,” Kaylin said, as they approached the stairs that led into the Halls of Law.

“Define *mess*. No, wait, don’t. The problem with Tain—at least for me—is that Teela might actually kill us if we’re indirectly responsible for his death. He’s not like the rest of us; we can’t speak to him without shouting, and even if we can, he doesn’t listen half the time. So...it’s a lot less safe to tail Tain.”

“I imagine it’s safer to tail Tain than it is to tail Kaylin if you’re worried about Teela’s reaction,” Bellusdeo said, frowning slightly.

“You need a better imagination.”

It felt like it had been so long since Kaylin had seen Marcus’s furry face she wanted to run up and hug him. She wanted to keep her job more, but it was surprisingly close. His eyes were a blend of orange and gold, but they shaded mostly to gold as Kaylin approached the desk. Bellusdeo had stopped at Caitlin’s desk. Mandoran had wandered over to Teela’s.

“I’m happy to see you remember you still have a job, Corporal,” the Leontine sergeant growled. He pointed to the duty board.

Kaylin made it halfway there and then suddenly wheeled. “Did you say corporal?” She glanced at the roster. She and Severn were expected to resume their Elani beat. She then almost raced across the room to stand in front of Marcus’s desk. His eyes were pure gold now. He smiled.

To people unfamiliar with Leontines, smiles looked a lot like bared fangs, never a good sign. Kaylin was familiar with Leontines. “Do I make mistakes when it comes to rank?”

She tried not to bounce on the spot.

“He just wants to be able to bust you down a rank when you screw up,” someone farther into the office shouted. Joey, she thought.

“You’ve handled yourself well in a fraught situation for some time. You have been, by necessity, an ambassador for the Hawks.” Although Marcus spoke, Kaylin highly doubted the words were his. “Your reaction upon hearing this news has lost a few people some money.”

“What were they betting? Less dignity on my part, or more?”



“Less.” The smile deepened. Clearly Marcus had not lost money if he’d bet at all. “The Hawklord, however, wishes to speak with you before you leave for Elani.”

At this very moment, the Emperor himself could demand to speak with her, and it wouldn’t put a dent in her mood.

Severn was already in the Hawklord’s tower when Kaylin arrived. Her breathlessness had nothing to do with the climb up the stairs, but she was breathless as she entered the office. She struggled to find the appropriate rigidity and failed.

He doesn’t look happy, Hope said.

She was still startled to hear her familiar speak actual syllables. He did sound kind of like a bird, though. Hope’s eyes were clearly better than hers; at this distance, she couldn’t quite make out the color of the Hawklord’s eyes. But he couldn’t be entirely unhappy; his wings were in the rest position.

Severn was standing at ease and turned to face Kaylin as she made her entrance.

“Visit the quartermaster before you leave for Elani,” the Hawklord said.

This dimmed her enthusiasm somewhat. But of course, she needed to visit said quartermaster, who still held a grudge about a damaged dress. She was a corporal now. She needed to bear the insignia of that rank.

She saluted smartly, standing at attention in front of the Aerial who ruled the Hawks.

The Hawklord nodded to acknowledge this, and she lowered her arm. “It is my hope,” he said, “that you will be able to pursue your normal duties for some time.” Something about his tone implied that he doubted this would be possible. It wasn’t the weary not-this-again tone, either.

“At the moment, you have Lord Bellusdeo by your side.”



She nodded.

“The Emperor has made clear to me that Lord Bellusdeo will continue to—what was his word?—observe. He was not best pleased when that observation led you to the West March. The Arkon has requested some use of your time, as well. The Emperor wishes to prioritize this.”

The Hawklord didn’t. His eyes were gray. Not ash gray, just gray. It was the equivalent of orange in the Leontine gaze. “You are the only two Hawks currently on the roster who have extensive experience in the fiefs.”

Kaylin glanced at Severn. Severn nodded. He seemed calm, but it was always hard to tell whether or not he was surprised.

“I know that your experience is centered around the fiefs of Nightshade and what is now Tiamaris. Corporal Handred, have you ever entered Candallar?”

“Yes.”

“Have you encountered the fieflord?”

Severn nodded. “Never within the boundaries of his fief.”

“He has been spending some time in the warrens, according to your report. Kaylin’s written report has failed to reach the sergeant’s desk. I expect this to be remedied.”

The Hawklord did not dismiss them, which Kaylin half expected. He walked to the tall oval mirror that stood to his left. “Records.”

The surface of the mirror rippled as if the silver were liquid. The ripple extended from the center of the mirror and spread, changing silver into a multitude of colors as it traveled. “The Emperor does not require a written report of your activities in the High Halls.”

That was something.

“I believe, however, that the Arkon does and will. You are not required to obey his request, by law.”

Theoretical law vs. angry Dragon. Not much of a choice.

She kept her eyes on the mirror that had become a Records conduit. The whole of Elantra, the city she protected and policed, appeared. The edges were gold. The center was red. Where river passed around that center, it was blue; the walls that served as a dividing line when the river deviated were also blue.

One of the red fiefs became a bright purple. Candallar.

“We have received some assurance that Candallar, and his crimes, fall within the laws of exemption.”

“Meaning we’ve been told to leave it alone?”

“As we do not serve the Barrani Court, no, not in so many words.”

“The Emperor?”

“Understands the use of the laws of exemption.”

“They won’t apply to Candallar, though.”

“Oh?”

“He’s outcaste. If they want to smack us with the exemption, they’re going to have to repatriate him. Even if they did,” she continued, frowning, “I doubt he’d allow himself to be culled behind the screen of those laws. He understands Elantran laws. If he’s dead, it’s going to be impossible for us to investigate that death if it occurs on this side. The Barrani are going to call in the laws of exemption, and as he won’t be able to speak for himself—being dead and all—we’re going to knuckle under.

“But if he’s injured, I think he might come directly here.”

“To the Halls of Law.”

She nodded.

“I dislike any attempt to wield the Halls as a political tool.”

His eyes shaded to blue—the same blue as angry Barrani eyes.

“We are aware that some of the political difficulties of the very recent past might have involved either the fief lord of Candallar or the fief he rules. The Emperor will not allow the laws

of exemption to stand if his actions have endangered the city or any member of any race that calls it home.

“In my opinion, they’ve indirectly endangered the entire city.” Even speaking, she hesitated.

“But?”

“But if it weren’t for his intervention, I’m not sure we’d have a city. What he allowed to be brought out of the heart of the fiefs—we’re pretty sure it was transported through Candallar—was necessary to communicate with the High Halls.”

“Ah. You are perhaps aware of the changes in those halls?”

Kaylin glanced at the mirror. She wanted to know, of course, but the Hawklord hadn’t yet moved the mirror’s image from the fief of Candallar. She nodded because she was aware of some of those changes, and she was pretty certain she could easily fill in the rest—or at least the parts the Halls of Law knew—on her own time.

“Very well. The Emperor was concerned, but his advisors were less so.” The Hawklord frowned, and the mirror image shifted instantly, as if it were a card that could be flipped.

A building Kaylin did not recognize filled the mirror.