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Corporal Kaylin Neya understood exactly why Bellusdeo, her Dragon roommate, had never really called the Arkon by his title. She had always used his name: Lannagaros. At the time, Kaylin assumed this was because Lannagaros was a name that had sentimental value to Bellusdeo, when so little else did.

Facing Lord Sanabalis—the former Lord Sanabalis—she revised that belief. Sanabalis was now the Arkon. Kaylin was expected to use his title. This had caused some minor embarrassment, and reinforced the notion that Dragons could get away with breaking the social rules when normal people couldn't.

“I’ve called you Sanabalis—Lord Sanabalis—for the entire time I’ve known you. I’m sorry. I’ll get it right.”

Sanabalis’s eyes were orange, but his smile was genuine. “As you were, Private.”

“I’m a corporal!”

“You’ve been a private for the entire time I’ve known you.”

Point to the Dragon.

Luckily Kaylin could save a little bit of face because the discussion in progress occurred in the very soundproof west



room in which Kaylin had, months ago, taken the magical lessons mandated by the Imperial Court.

Those magic lessons had, in theory, resumed as of today. The bracer meant to restrict the magical power of the marks of the Chosen sat on the desk to one side of the hated candle that once again occupied pride of position on the otherwise empty great table that stood in the center of the room. In theory, she had to wear it All The Time. In practice, its weight had become almost unfamiliar in the past few weeks. If anyone had reported this to the Emperor, he'd decided the lack of bracer was worth the risk. She didn't know and she wasn't about to ask.

The Dragon who was now called the Arkon—this was going to be so confusing—had taken his normal chair. He wore the normal robes. Nothing about his appearance had changed. Even the color of his eyes was the familiar orange, flecked with gold.

“We hear,” he said, “that Bellusdeo has been somewhat restless of late.”

Kaylin glared at the candle.

“The Emperor is concerned.”

She concentrated on fire, on the name of fire, the shape and heat of it. It wasn't hard at the moment.

“Corporal.”

She exhaled. She hadn't been looking forward to a resumption of magical classes, but they were mandatory—at Imperial convenience. Imperial convenience meant she hadn't had a lesson in a long time.

She fixed as neutral an expression as she could on her face and turned toward the new Arkon. “If you have something to say to Bellusdeo, you should say it *to* Bellusdeo.”

He said nothing.

“I have to live with her. I know you have to live with the





Emperor, but he can't actually kill you when he loses his temper."

"It is my belief that he can," Sanabalis—no, *the Arkon*—replied. "It has not been tested, however."

"Bellusdeo *can* kill me."

"I highly doubt your house would allow it."

This was true. Helen, her house, was sentient, and disliked the idea of her guests murdering either each other or their host.

"When you say 'we,' do you mean 'him?'"

"Him?"

"His Imperial Majesty, the Eternal Emperor."

"No. He is one of the concerned people, yes, but the concern is not entirely his. We would like to know where Bellusdeo has been going in the past two weeks."

"You spy on her. How can you not know?"

"Spy?" Sanabalis snorted. With smoke, because he was a Dragon. "We *monitor* her for reasons of safety, which even you must fully understand."

Even you. Kaylin attempted not to take this personally, or to at least look like she didn't. This involved keeping her hands from becoming fists. "I don't monitor her for reasons of safety. I can't treat her like a child—she's older than me, for one, and she'd turn to me to ash, for two. There's nothing I can face that she can't face, and pretty much nothing that can kill me could kill her."

"This is not true. I assume you are saying this because you believe it, but your observational skills are lacking."

Kaylin revised her opinion of the new Arkon as he exhaled. If he didn't look older, he did look tired.

"Bellusdeo," he said, when he chose to speak again, "was fond of Lannagaros. They shared a history she does not share with the rest of us. But Lannagaros will no longer reside in the palace. I am not certain he will visit it as often as Lord Tiamaris does."





“Her attachment to the former Arkon caused her to be more considerate in her responses to the rest of the Dragon Court. The Emperor is included in that.”

“It’s only been two weeks,” Kaylin began.

“She has been restless and impatient. I am Arkon, but it was not because of his position that she chose to be considerate of Lannagaros, and he was part of the Imperial Court. I cannot gently nudge her across a boundary she’s overstepped. She did not respect his title or his position. And I am, frankly, Arkon in a world with very few Dragons.

“Were there more, someone else would have taken the mantle.”

“You can’t be certain of that.”

“I can. I understand what was involved in Lannagaros’s promotion.” He inhaled, which seemed to go on forever, but still somehow left air in the room for Kaylin to breathe. “Show me what you have been studying and practicing since we last sat in this room.”

“Is it even okay for you to be teaching me now, Arkon?”

One brow rose. “That is a deplorably incompetent attempt to get out of magic lessons.”

“I take it that’s a yes.”

It wasn’t that Kaylin didn’t understand the new Arkon’s concerns.

For the past two weeks, Bellusdeo had chosen to stay with Helen instead of accompanying Kaylin to the Halls of Law. This made Marcus happier, but it was clear that the gold Dragon was doing *something* with her day—something that Kaylin couldn’t see. Given Bellusdeo, there was zero guarantee that what she was doing was actually safe. Helen said that Maggaron, Bellusdeo’s eight-foot-tall Ascendant, had accompanied her. Maggaron was mortal, true, but he’d been trained





and raised to both fight for and serve Bellusdeo. Nothing about losing his entire world had changed his core duties.

But Maggaron had been her Ascendant when the position had had actual meaning, and he had served during the war against Shadow—a war that Bellusdeo and her people had lost.

He'd had very little to do in Elantra since their arrival in the city. The rest of his people—the few who could be saved—now lived on the borders of the fief of Tiamaris. The borders that most people did their utmost to avoid. The Norranir watched the Shadows. They watched *Ravellon*. They drummed warnings.

They also killed Ferals; it was like they were a permanent patrol.

Severn caught her elbow and jogged her to the left of a sandwich board sign. It was necessary because the sign practically occupied the entire sidewalk; to avoid it, one had to either get close to the road or too close to the shop the sign advertised.

It was Margot's shop.

"Don't," he said.

"I wasn't going to kick it over. I was going to move it."

"Iron-jaw has three separate complaints from Margot on his desk."

"Can't have been that important if they're still there."

"No. But she has clients who are louder and harder to ignore, and no shortage of people who will step up for her."

"While she fleeces them." Kaylin glared at the window in which she could see her reflection as a shadow. Margot was not immediately visible—and she was very hard to miss.

"She's not holding them up at knifepoint, and that's the only reason for Hawks to interfere with her business."

"Lying should be illegal."

"And when it is, we'll be understaffed, overworked, and fielding complaints about talking pumpkins and man-eating cats."



“We get those anyway.”

“We’ll get more. Come on.” As they continued their patrol beat, Severn added, “What are you worried about now?”

“Sanabalis.”

“The Arkon.”

“Fine. The *new* Arkon. I hate titles. Why do we need to have fifteen different ways of calling a person?”

Severn shrugged. “I didn’t create the rules.”

“No. I want to have a few words with the idiots who did, though.”

“You won’t get to finish the first one—they were all Dragons. Besides, you’re Kaylin, Kaylin Neya, Lord Kaylin Neya, Corporal Neya or just Corporal. You’ve got more than one. You were saying?”

“The Arkon’s magic lesson was mostly about Bellusdeo.”

“Why?”

“He expects me to know what she’s doing when she’s not with me.”

“Not a good bet.”

“He’s my superior. He doesn’t have to bet.”

“No, he doesn’t. They should have some sense of her movement, though.”

“That’s what I said! Sanabalis—sorry, the Arkon—wasn’t amused.”

“You called him a spy?”

“No! But—I might have used the word *spying*. Look, it’s descriptive, okay?”

Severn was smiling as he shook his head. “Are you trying to make sure you never have to talk to anyone above your pay grade?”

Kaylin shrugged.

“You’re worried about Bellusdeo.”

The shrug was tighter. After a long pause, she said, “Bellusdeo’s worse than Teela. I worry at her, she’ll probably bite



a limb off. One of mine,” she added, in case this wasn’t clear.

“I think they both find it insulting.”

“Dragon and Barrani. We’re mortal.”

“But I have the marks of the Chosen!”

“Which you don’t really know how to use, yes.”

“Aren’t you worried?”

“No. I don’t live with Bellusdeo, and the Emperor hasn’t tasked me with any part of her safety. She’s a better fighter than most of the Dragon Court, though.”

“How do you know that?”

“I’ve watched them. What do you think she’s doing?”

“I haven’t been thinking. Much. Helen won’t tell me,” she added.

“Helen does tend to protect privacy, yes.”

“Not mine.”

“You’re unlikely to try to kill people if they know what you’re actually thinking. It’s never really far beneath the—”

“Thief! Thief! *Help!*”

Both of the Hawks dropped the discussion as they pivoted and turned in the direction of the shouting. At least it was something *normal*.

Kaylin had already come to a decision by the time she reached home. Talking to Bellusdeo was out. Talking to Helen about Bellusdeo—or about what Bellusdeo was thinking or doing—was also a no-go. Kaylin didn’t even consider approaching Maggaron, and not just because of his height.

She was, however, living with a host of other people, two of whom were set to move out at any minute. This had caused a bit of a ruckus, but not an unhappy one; more of a frenzied one. Serralyn and Valliant had applied to the new Academia, and they had both been accepted. The chancellor had interviewed them personally. While they had very little experience





with Dragons that didn't involve the immediate deaths of all Barrani in sight, they were determined to go through with it.

They were slightly surprised by their encounter. Although they had met the chancellor before—most recently when Sedarias had volunteered the entire cohort as movers between the palace and the Academia—his interaction at that time had been pinched, orange-red-eyed and snappish.

The pinched part, according to Serralyn and Valliant, remained, but his eyes were almost gold when he invited them into his office, and almost the same color when he saw them to the office door. That he didn't then demand to see them to the front doors and shut them in their faces was a bonus.

Because the two had been accepted as students of the Academia, they were expected to live on campus. They were the first of the visiting cohort to actually leave.

Part of their discussion had been negotiations about communication. The Academia interfered with their ability to talk to the other members of the cohort. The chancellor had agreed not to limit the communications, with the clear understanding that visitors—the rest of the cohort—were required to, as he called it, sign in when they visited the campus.

Kaylin was glad; she was half-certain they wouldn't agree to leave without that concession. Well, no. She was certain they'd leave, but equally certain that one of the cohort—likely Terrano—would find some way of communicating regardless. Permission was better. Or at least safer. Probably.

Moving out in the next week was therefore in the cards, and it showed. Had Helen not been sentient, the household would have been in a frenzy of panic and excitement. As it was, panic was never allowed to fully take hold.

But it distracted the cohort and it distracted Helen.

Sedarias would remain based within Helen, but she had begun to make visits to the High Halls as An'Mellarionne. Annarion, Eddorian, Karian and Allaron accompanied her as





her personal guards, although they were Lords of the High Court themselves.

From this, Kaylin assumed that Sedarias was the first of the cohort to attempt to establish herself as a more traditional power, and the rest of the cohort had eternity, being immortal, to establish themselves as powers in their own right. It wasn't a surprise that Sedarias was the current priority, though; the resources of Mellarionne were in danger of being subsumed by Mellarionne allies—or former allies who had yet to be swept away in the investigation that had followed the transformation of the High Halls.

Not that it had taken a great amount of investigation. The High Halls was, once again, a fully functional, sentient building. Barrani lords disliked being exposed to sentient buildings; they wanted to keep their thoughts and secrets to themselves. But rooms in the High Halls were a visible sign of rank and power. To abandon them was not as easily done as avoiding the interior of a waking Hallionne.

The cohort had the advantage, there. They had spent almost the entirety of their lives as “guests” of a sentient building. They had no fear of their thoughts being known. Sedarias could move far more freely, far more comfortably, in the reconstituted High Halls than most of the Lords of the High Court.

The cohort had been prisoners, but they had had each other, and the prison had become home. Kaylin was almost certain the Hallionne Alsanis missed them. Their life plans had been interrupted, not ended, although not all of Sedarias's friends planned to take their rightful places among the High Court. They had landed on their feet after a very rocky start.

Watching them, Kaylin finally accepted that Bellusdeo hadn't.

The Dragon was alive, yes. She was a friend. Where per-





mitted by Imperial dictate, she had accompanied Kaylin into unpredictable danger. And thank gods for that.

But everything beneath her feet now, to belabor the metaphor, was not her ground. Helen. Kaylin. The former Arkon, who was the only solid reminder of the home she had lost, had left the Imperial palace for good.

Bellusdeo carried the future of her entire species in both hands. But that wasn't who or what she was, either. Kaylin wondered if—hoped that—Bellusdeo's daily jaunts toward the fiefs were visits to the former Arkon. That would be for the best.

Which is why Kaylin couldn't quite make herself believe it. It was too convenient, and that wasn't how their life worked.

"Helen, where's Mandoran?"

"I believe he and Terrano are in the training room."

Ugh. "Since that's usually not all that safe, can you ask him to come up to the dining room?"

"I can. You'll probably get Terrano as well." The sentence wasn't a question, but the last few words tailed up as if it were.

"That's fine."

Kaylin didn't just get Terrano. She also got Fallessian and Torrisant. There were four members of Teela's cohort of twelve that had remained almost entirely silent for their stay. Two had gone with Sedarias to the High Halls. Two remained with Helen, and had apparently also been in the training room with Mandoran and Terrano. It wasn't likely to kill them.

Teela, of the twelve, had a job she wanted to keep. She had offered to accompany Sedarias to the High Halls—but at hours that didn't conflict with that job. Had she been afraid for Sedarias, she would have taken a leave of absence. She hadn't.

"Karian didn't want to go," Fallessian said, speaking as if he was recovering from a terrible cold. Kaylin couldn't re-



member hearing him actually speak before, so the cold was unlikely the problem.

“Didn’t want to go where?” she asked; she assumed the information had been offered to her because otherwise there was no point in speaking out loud.

“The High Halls,” Terrano said.

Kaylin shook her head and waited while Fallessian found exactly the same words Terrano would have used. “Sedarias was in a mood. Frankly, I’d find out where she was going and go in the opposite direction.”

This pulled a glimmer of a smile from the still silent Torrisant.

“Why did Karian go?”

“Karian is the direct bloodline heir to Illmarin.”

“Illmarin still exists, right?”

“Yes. But it was tightly bound in fortune—and outcome—to the previous head of Mellarionne. Karian can, with Sedarias’s backing, take the line; he can become An’Illmarin.”

“...and he doesn’t want that.”

“It’s an ongoing discussion,” Mandoran said, before the more careful Fallessian could reply.

“That means *no*,” Terrano added. “So—why did you call for us?”

“I wanted him.” Kaylin pointed at Mandoran.

“Then you got lucky—we come in a set.”

“Believe that I’ve noticed that. You don’t have Serralyn or Valliant, though.”

“Thank the Lady,” Terrano then muttered under his breath.

“You have no idea—”

“She does, dear,” Helen interjected. Helen didn’t bother to bring her Avatar into the dining room; she just used her voice.

“Fine. Why did you want to speak to Mandoran?”

Kaylin wasn’t comfortable with either Torrisant or Fallessian, but felt that was unfair. Clearly she tended to privilege



noise—speech in this case—over other forms of quiet near-invisibility. Anything she asked Mandoran would be heard by all twelve of the cohort, no matter where they were or what they were doing. There was no such thing as a private discussion.

Exhaling, Kaylin said, “Where has Bellusdeo been going in the past couple of weeks?”

“Why should we know that?” Terrano demanded.

Kaylin folded her arms and met what might have been an annoyed gaze. She didn’t answer the question.

Silence ensued, and it was broken by Mandoran. “You know what they say about Dragons, right?”

“Which part?”

“Do not get involved in the business of Dragons.”

“Was there a why beyond the obvious?”

“Yes, but it’s old Barrani and I didn’t study enough of it.”

“Did anyone?”

“Serralyn. She can come downstairs and enlighten you, if you want. But—there wasn’t a lot *to* study in Alsanis. Helen understands some of the Old Barrani, but—”

“I understand only fragments. Old Barrani, unlike High Barrani, was considered a language for children, for children’s stories; High Barrani was the language of power and war.”

“Is Serralyn going to the Academia to learn more?”

“You can ask her.”

Serralyn appeared in the open doorway. “It’s one of the things I want to study, yes. But—” and here, her eyes were a green so bright Kaylin almost couldn’t acknowledge the color as belonging to Barrani eyes “—there’s not a lot more to the old saying. I mean: Dragons. We’re Barrani. They were stories told to children. Dragons don’t like people messing with their stuff. Don’t mess with their stuff. That kind of thing.



“But the language *wasn't* just used for children's stories. I'm certain that it was an entire functional language at one point.”

“But I thought—”

“I know. I think it was, in part, the language of the Ancestors.”

“The ones that look like Barrani but cause way more trouble?”

Serralyn grimaced. “Yes, them.”

“And...if that's true, it's considered a language for *children* how?”

Serralyn actually laughed. Kaylin had never heard her laugh before. “How do you say it? I know, right?”

“That's what I'd say, yes. You're really looking forward to joining the Academia.”

“I *really* am. It—” She shook her head. “I want to say it's the dream of a lifetime, but that's just not strong enough. The chancellor let one of the students—Robin—take us on a tour of the facilities. They had to pick me up and drag me out of the library!” She laughed again and added, “One of the librarians, Starrante, did all the heavy lifting. He's a—”

“Spider,” Kaylin supplied.

“I don't think that's the accurate word for his race.”

“I'm not sure I could *pronounce* the accurate word. Or that I even heard it.”

“It's another language that would be considered lost.”

Kaylin's enthusiasm for dead languages was minimal. Her enthusiasm for any learning that wasn't demonstrably practical was equally minimal. She understood that there were people for whom this wasn't the case, but had seldom seen someone as all-out excited as Serralyn.

It almost made her reconsider her own position.

Mandoran cleared his throat. “If you want to talk about dead languages and learning, that's fine—but we're trying to practice and you don't need us here for that.”

“Oh, right. Sorry.” Kaylin pulled her gaze away from Ser-ralyn’s radiantly happy face. “I want to know where Bellusdeo has been going when I’m at work.”

“Or at the midwives’ guild?”

“She went out then?”

Terrano and Mandoran exchanged a glance. Terrano said, “Why would you think he’d know? You could just ask Helen.”

“I have. She cited guest privacy and told me exactly nothing.”

Terrano snickered. “Why would you think we’d know?”

“Because you’re already bored. It’s been two weeks since anything has tried to kill you—or us—and you’re fidgeting all the time. There’s no way Bellusdeo could sneak out of this house without one of you following her. It’s either you or Mandoran, but I’m betting on Mandoran—”

“With real money?”

“With *my own* money. I’m betting that one of you followed her.”

“It’s not safe to follow a Dragon.” This was Fallessian again. She learned he could keep a perfectly straight face, because he did.

Terrano couldn’t. His glance slid off Mandoran, who was grinning broadly.

“Don’t take that bet,” he told Terrano. His eyes were green, his expression verging on smug. Kaylin wanted to kick him.

“Where is she going?”

“Tiamaris.”

The fiefs. “Is she staying in Tiamaris?”

“Harder to say.”

“By harder you mean?” Kaylin frowned. “You can’t follow her without being detected. Tara can see you.”

“Pretty much.”

“Were you trying to practice moving without being detectable? Is that why you’re in the training room?”



Mandoran grinned. “Terrano can sometimes slip by undetected—but it’s work. He has to kind of walk sideways.”

Terrano snorted.

“What? I’m trying to explain it to someone who can’t do it and has never seen it.”

“If she’d seen it, it would mean we failed.”

Kaylin exhaled and managed to keep words out of it. “So, as far as you know, she’s just heading into the fief of Tiamaris?”

More silence.

“Guys, I’m getting pressure from the new Arkon, and I do not want the follow-up to be ‘concerned’ Emperor.”

“She’s a Dragon, in case you forgot. There’s precious little that can actually kill her, and anything that can will flatten the rest of us, starting with you. She’s not a hatchling. She’s got an eight-foot-tall giant as a trained puppy.”

Kaylin did kick Mandoran then. He dodged.

“—and she sure as hell doesn’t need us.”

“And you’re following her because you’re bored.”

The Barrani shrug was almost a fief shrug; clearly Mandoran had spent too much time with Kaylin. “Mostly bored.”

“Mostly?”

He now looked distinctly uncomfortable.

Kaylin folded her arms. She couldn’t actually hurt Mandoran—or any of the cohort—without Helen’s help, and Helen was disinclined to give it.

“Because you don’t really want to hurt him, dear,” Helen’s voice said.

“You wouldn’t let me even if I did.”

“I feel that you’d regret it, yes.”

“Eventually. Spill.”

“She’s been avoiding you,” Mandoran finally said. “She’s come down late to breakfast every morning; she won’t enter the dining room until you’ve run out the door. She comes home late for dinner, if at all. She’s been in a terrible mood—”



“She hasn’t been angry,” Helen added, skirting the edge of her rules about privacy. “I would say she’s been unsettled since Lannagaros took the chancellorship of the Academia.”

“Has she been visiting him?”

No answer.

“Is she doing anything dangerous?”

“I’m sorry,” Helen said. Her apologies always sounded genuinely regretful. “If you want to know, you will need to discuss that with Bellusdeo.” She hesitated. Kaylin marked the hesitation.

“Bellusdeo’s ignoring me.”

“She’s avoiding you, which is not the same thing.”

“What aren’t you saying?”

It was Terrano who answered. “I think you might have a visitor. Well, not *exactly* a visitor.”

“Make up your mind. And don’t think I’ve forgotten the original question.”

“I think the person who’s generally supposed to be watching Bellusdeo—for her own safety—is actually standing across the street.”

“Across the street isn’t part of Helen,” Kaylin very reasonably pointed out. “And you, and all the rest of your cohort, are standing inside of Helen’s boundaries.”

“And?”

“I believe she wishes to know how you could know that, dear.”

“Oh. That? That’s easy. Sedarias.”

“Sedarias.”

“She’s almost at the door.”

Kaylin did not want to run out into the admittedly emptier, upscale streets on which Helen stood. She wanted to hear about Sedarias’s day at the High Halls, and wanted to know



whether or not any of her cohort companions had actually had reason to, oh, draw their swords in an attempt not to die.

None of the cohort, however, was willing to amble across that street unless they went in their full number, minus Teela, who had returned to her usual living quarters, which weren't part of Helen. Kaylin thought sending twelve people, eleven of whom were Barrani, to address one observer was overkill. It would send the wrong message.

"Sedarias thinks it'll send exactly the right message," Ter-rano said.

"I do," Sedarias said, joining the conversation that was already in progress.

"I don't," Kaylin replied. She gave the five members of the cohort a brief but intense once-over; none of them appeared to be bleeding and all of their clothing seemed to be in the same state of repair it had left in. "Given the day you've probably had, I want to avoid the *right message* like the plague. If there's an observer stationed outside, he means the cohort no harm. And frankly, Bellusdeo won't appreciate it." The latter was far more relevant, and not even Mandoran could argue that she would.

Kaylin therefore rearranged Hope, who had been snoozing across her shoulders like a shawl made of scales, and headed toward the front door. "Can you see who it is?" she asked her house.

"Yes. I do not believe it will cause you any problems."

Kaylin could see the lone figure on the other side of the road from her open door. This would be because the fence line—and it was a pretty impressively solid fence—*was* part of Helen's domain, and she'd decided to change some of the posts to lamps.

The observer who was now in the glow of radiant and over-done lights—in Kaylin's opinion—didn't seem to be both-



ered by them. His hands were by his sides, and clearly free of weapons. His clothing was dark, but it was the dark of implied sobriety, not storybook assassins. His eyes were almost gold.

Kaylin exhaled as Hope sat up on her left shoulder and let out a squawk.

“Well met,” Lord Emmerian replied.