

Chapter Two

It took all the self-control Kaylin had ever mastered not to crumple the document into a ball and throw it. She couldn't even read it, although her eyes grazed the words, recognizing dates and familiar names.

"So," Diarmat said in his cool, clipped voice. She forced herself to meet his gaze—or she tried. He wasn't looking at her face; he was staring, inner membranes fully extended, at her wrist. She glanced at it. The gems on the bracer she wore were flashing brightly enough that they could be clearly seen through layers of clothing.

The lights cut through her anger as if they were a cold, cold dagger.

Get a grip, she told herself. *It's a piece of paper. It's just another damn piece of paper.* It's not like all the *rest* of the reports didn't make clear that the Court had followed every damn move she'd made for years; why would she expect they'd somehow miss her visits to the Foundling Hall? She took a slow, deep breath—the type of breath she'd learned to take when she'd been injured and she was in pain.

The lights on the bracer began to dim, but they dimmed slowly.

Only when they were no longer visible did she turn to face Diarmat, the reports shaking in her tightened hands. Without a single word, she handed them back to him. He waited for a minute before nodding and retrieving them. "That will be all."

She turned and made her way toward the doors, but stopped before she touched them and turned back. "They're my hoard," she told him quietly. She didn't have to shout; Dragons, like Leontines, had a very acute sense of hearing.

His eyes were a pale shade of copper. "You are mortal," he replied with no hesitation whatsoever. "Mortals neither have, nor understand, the concept. The word *hoarding*," he added with genuine distaste, "is possibly as close as your inferior race can come."

She turned instantly on her heel and pushed the doors open; words were burning the insides of her mouth, and she couldn't let them out in his earshot. But when the doors were halfway open, he said, "Private."

Human hearing *was* inferior, and he hadn't raised his voice; he wasn't speaking his native tongue. She pretended not to hear him, and escaped into the hall.

She was halfway down that hall—her guide having failed to materialize—when she ran into Sanabalis. Sadly, head down, body tilted in that particular forward angle that was a fast walk threatening to break into an all-out run, it was literal. She bounced; he didn't budge. A half-formed apology slid out of her mouth as she righted herself and looked up.

"I see your first class ended early."

She nodded.

"Join me." It wasn't worded as a request, and he didn't actually wait to see if she was going to treat it as one; he turned and began to walk down the hall. Since this implied that he knew where he was going—and since she didn't—she fell in behind him. He led her from the unfamiliar halls to ones she'd walked through often enough that she could find her bearings.

He walked, not surprisingly, to his rooms, opening the door and holding it while she entered—as if he half suspected she'd turn and bolt for the exit if he wasn't watching. Since it happened to be true, she didn't begrudge him the suspicion. There was no food in the room, but the comforting set of impressive windows still looked out at the three towers of the Halls of Law, and even though it was now evening, they could be seen clearly in the moon's light, reminding her, at a remove, of why she was here at all.

She drew a deep breath, and the line of her shoulders sagged when she exhaled. But she faced the towers, not the Dragon Lord, as they did.

"The lesson?" Sanabalis asked quietly.

She shrugged. It was stiff, and she felt her shoulders bunching up around her neck again. "I survived."

"Did you walk out?"

"No. I was dismissed."

She heard Sanabalis exhale. “Lord Diarmat does not generally teach—when he is given to do so—in his personal quarters.”

“No? Does he do it in an abattoir instead?”

She felt the brief heat of his snort, and turned. “The Palace Guard has several open yards, and a handful of enclosed rooms, for the purpose of training.”

“He’s not training me to be an Imperial Guard.”

“No.”

“What, exactly, is my relationship to Lord Diarmat in the Hierarchy, anyway?”

“What is your relationship to the Human Castelord?”

“Pardon?”

“I believe you heard the question.”

She thought about it for a bit, and then said, “I don’t have one. He presides over the Caste Court. He meets with the Emperor on matters of governance. I owe him nothing; he owes me nothing.”

“Unless you choose to take refuge in the Caste Court.”

It was never going to happen. “I don’t understand the question.”

“No. You don’t. Lord Diarmat is part of the Dragon Court. In theory, you owe the Dragon Court itself no fealty; your oath of office is to the Emperor’s Law, and not directly to the Emperor himself. The Emperor is, however, your Commander, in a strictly technical sense. The titles the Dragons are given are a sign of public respect, no more.

“You would not, however, sneer publicly at your caste lord.”

“No.” She would never, if Marcus or the Hawklord had anything to say about it, *meet* the human caste lord.

“In a like fashion, you tender Diarmat the respect that is his due as a councilor of the Emperor. He is not, however, your Commander; the line of command for the Halls of Law passes from the Emperor directly to the Lords of Law. You are not therefore required to offer him any of the narrow range of salutes or obeisances taught in the Halls. He is not, technically, your superior, where in this case, technically means legally.”

“Which means?”

He smiled. His eyes were gold, and his lower membranes, unlike Diarmat’s, were entirely lowered. “It means that legally you owe him no deference. Legally, you owe the Lord of the High Halls and his Consort no deference, either.”

“I’m technically a Lord of the High Court.”

“Believe that I am conversant with your history in the High Court. You are, however, not *required* by Imperial law to comport yourself according to the dictates of the High Court, outcaste exception laws notwithstanding.”

“I’m not breaking any laws if I cease to breathe, either.”

“Indeed. You see my point.”

She could barely see his point, and begrudged the comprehension.

“The very deliberate and complicated social structure of the High Court evolved, in part, for what reason?”

“Sanabalis—”

“I have done you the courtesy of holding our classes in abeyance. If, however, it is necessary, I will rescind that courtesy.”

“Those are *magic* lessons!”

“Indeed. But what one learns in one discipline can be applied to others in unpredictable ways; education is a process.” He folded his arms across his chest, and waited.

Sanabalis’s meeting room was littered with chairs; the walls contained shelves with glass doors, and a mirror lurked in one of them. Kaylin availed herself of a chair, sitting heavily as she did. Lowering her face into her hands, she forced herself to think about what she knew of the High Court; it didn’t take all that long.

“The Barrani tend to kill each other as an idle pastime.”

“So it’s been rumored.”

“Barrani crimes are *all* confined to the Barrani Caste Court. They don’t reach the Imperial Court,

ever.”

“So the Barrani commit no interracial crimes?”

She snorted. “Of course they do. But if there’s any chance we’ll *catch* them and they’ll be forced to trial in the Imperial Courts, the criminals wind up conveniently and messily dead. And often on our doorstep, because gods know the Barrani have more important things to do than clean up their own mess.”

Sanabalis actually chuckled at that. “An interesting digression. The rest of your answer?”

“There is no court of last resort among the Barrani. There are no Hawks or Swords that any *sane* Barrani will use. The Barrani are part of the City, but the only way they seem to really interact involves commerce. If I were Barrani, I would therefore have to live and act as if anyone—anyone at all—could be planning to assassinate me. Or if anyone could decide it was necessary if I somehow offended them.

“I could, if I felt powerful enough and secure enough, afford to offend the less powerful with impunity. I’m not sure I’d consider it wise. But...on the other hand, I suppose if I *did* behave that way, it would give people second thoughts about attempting to take *me* down.”

“Does this sound familiar?”

“Yeah.” She shrugged. “It sounds like any other sort of thug law. But it’s got more money behind it.”

“Good. The way in which it is clothed is crucial to its execution, but it is, in essence, something you do understand. It does not require your approval; survival has often been its own imperative.”

“You’re trying to tell me that the same is true of the Dragon Court.”

“No. The Emperor *is* your Commander.”

“Then what was your point?”

“Lord Diarmat is not. He is, however, dangerous in precisely the same way the Barrani are dangerous. He is not above the law—but if he chooses to break the law, the Emperor may grant him dispensation if he feels such extremes were merited.”

“And total lack of respect—”

“For a Dragon of his stature? I leave you to draw your own conclusions.”

“I’m sworn to uphold his laws. Saying that you killed someone because they annoyed you isn’t codified as acceptable, by those laws, anywhere that I’m aware of.”

“You are clearly not looking carefully enough.” He let his arms drop to his sides. “How did the lesson go?”

“He didn’t attempt to *teach* anything. I thought I’d get a list of things that were no-go around the Emperor. You know: don’t burp, don’t swear, don’t scratch your armpit, don’t wear green.”

“Green?”

“Or whatever color he doesn’t like. I thought he’d give me a list of acceptable ways to address the Emperor. With, you know, titles, and gestures—how to salute, how far down to kneel, whether or not you *ever* get to stand on your feet in his presence.”

“And?”

“He made me stand in front of his desk for half an hour without saying a word while he wrote a letter to the Hawklord.”

“I...see. And you did?”

“I work for Marcus. When Marcus is ticked, you stand in front of his desk at *attention* for as long as it damn well takes. I can do it for hours. I’m not *great* at it, and I don’t *enjoy* it, but that’s never mattered much.”

Sanabalis said crisply, “Good.” He smiled, but it was slender, and there was a trace of edge in the expression. “After the half hour?”

“He handed me a bunch of papers. I assumed they’d be the class transcripts from the Halls, which *every* prospective teacher seems to pore over. Even you.”

“They were not.”

“No. They were—” She sucked in air and almost pushed herself out of her chair. Or his chair. “Reports.”

“Ah.” He nodded. “They displeased you.”

“No one’s *pleased* to find out that every single thing they’ve ever done has been spied on, Sanabalis.” She did push herself out of the chair then. “But the last report—or the last one I looked at—was the Foundling Hall report.”

Sanabalis’s inner membranes rose. “Your reaction?”

“I sat on my reaction,” she told him, pacing around the chair. “But...the bracer started to light up.”

The Dragon Lord lifted a hand. “You did not speak?”

“No.”

“Bad,” he told her grimly. “But it will have to do. The class was ended at that point?”

“More or less.”

“I will attempt to augment your lessons with some of the material you expected to be handed. I am busy,” he added more severely, “but I will take the time to compose a list. You will not, however, be short of work.”

“I’m working on the outside desk at the moment. You’ve got a way to get me back in the streets?” It was the *only* possible bright spot in a day that had left her with the nausea that comes in the aftermath of fury.

“So to speak. I, too, have a letter which I wish you to deliver to Lord Grammayre. I guarantee that its contents will differ somewhat radically from those of Lord Diarmat’s.”

Kaylin went home in the dark. Not that it was ever completely dark in Elantra, and certainly not close to the Palace, where magic had been used the same way stones had: it made the streets passable. Kaylin was all for useful magic; she usually felt that there wasn’t *enough* of it.

Severn wasn’t waiting outside for her, which was a good sign. It meant he trusted her to more or less survive a lesson with Diarmat intact. But she missed his company on the way home, because she was, in fact, still fighting fury, and it helped to have someone she could both shout at and not offend while she did. There were no muggings, and nothing that looked as though it demanded legal intervention. There were, on the other hand, a few people who’d already spent too much time or money in a tavern.

She could unlock the front door of the apartment building in her sleep; unlocking it in the dark wasn’t much of an issue. Navigation in the dark only involved the narrow steps, and they were worn and warped enough that they creaked in a totally predictable way as she climbed them. It wasn’t late yet. She’d eaten, and if she was hungry, she wasn’t starving. Hunger could wait until morning.

Her door was locked. It often was, but enough of her friends had keys that it wasn’t a guarantee; if Teela or Tain were totally bored, they’d show up and hang around. Tain was a bit more circumspect than Teela, who would often lounge strewn across the narrow bed while she waited. Severn, if worried, would also show up, but like Tain, he generally waited in her one chair.

Unlike Tain, he often tidied while he waited.

But he wasn’t waiting now, and the room was its usual mess. None of that mess generally caused her to trip and injure herself in the dark, as it was mostly clothing. There were, of course, magical lights that one could buy to alleviate the darkness—but those cost money, and Kaylin was chronically short of funding. She hesitated in the open door and glanced with trepidation at the mirror on the wall; she relaxed when she saw that it was, like the rest of the room, dark. No messages meant no emergencies.

No emergencies meant sleep.

Before she could sleep, she opened the shutters to her room and let the moonlight in. It wasn’t bright enough to read by; it was bright enough for navigation. There was one thing she had to check before sleep was a possibility. Kneeling beside the bed—and shucking clothing into the rough and very spread-out pile she’d, in theory, wash Any Time Now—she pulled a smallish box out from beneath its slats and removed the lid.

Nestled among scraps of cloth that were used mostly for cleaning in the midwives’ hall, was an egg the size of two fists. Well, two of hers at any rate. It had been born during the inexplicable magical upheaval that had left the City with thousands of newcomers, and no place to house them before Tiamaris had volunteered his fief. Other children had been born during that time, and in the magical zone—but they’d been children with unusual features: extra arms, extra eyes, full speech. No

one in the guildhall had any idea what was in the egg.

Nor did Kaylin. But when Marya had handed her the box—at the grieving and shocked father’s insistence that the egg be disposed of—she had dutifully picked it up and carted it home. It didn’t weigh much. She’d meant to mention it to someone who specialized in magical theory, such as it was, but she didn’t really want to hand it over to the Dragon Court, the Imperial Mages, or the Arcanum. This left a much smaller pool—of one—and her desk duty had kept her off her current beat. Which was, sadly, where the single person she had in mind lived and worked.

The egg’s shell had started out almost soft to the touch, but it had grown harder and stronger. She wasn’t sure if this meant the egg actually had something living in it, because she wasn’t sure if whatever it was could be sustained without magic. Which she didn’t have. At least, not on purpose.

And thinking that, she carefully removed the bracer she wore as a matter of course throughout most of her working days. Laying it to one side of the box, she lifted the egg out, set it on the bed, swaddled it in her own blankets, and curled around it protectively to keep it warm.

Morning happened, and judging from the fall of sunlight, she wasn’t late yet. Her sleep had, to her surprise, been untroubled, which did happen a handful of days each year. She had time to fish food out of the magical basket that Severn had given her. Of all the magic she’d seen, this one was the most quietly impressive: it preserved food. Even bread. She wasn’t certain for how long, because food didn’t generally last long in her apartment; she’d have to test it one day.

She then dressed, snapping the bracer back into place on her wrist and rooting through the clothing she’d thrown on the floor the night before to fish out the two letters she’d been handed by two entirely different Dragon Lords. The forlorn and unhatched egg went back into its box, and back under the bed.

The walk to work ended with Clint and Tanner at the doors. Clint nodded, and Tanner said, “You keep arriving at work on time and people are going to start worrying.”

“Oh? Who?”

“The ones who are losing money.” He laughed.

She grimaced. “They’ve started a different pool.”

“I haven’t heard about a new one.”

“It’s called the end-of-the-world pool, but if you don’t like the odds, there’s one about the next call from the midwives.” They’d pulled her out of work during the day for the last three births; it meant she was on time for work, but still short hours.

Tanner chuckled and they stepped out of the way to let her pass. She ran a hand along Clint’s wings as she cleared the door, and heard his friendly curse at her back.

Caitlin was at her desk. “You’re early, dear. How did yesterday’s lesson go?”

“I’m still alive.”

“You don’t sound particularly happy about it at the moment.”

“Not at the moment, no. It only means I have to go back in three days.”

“That bad?”

“Bad enough that I now consider any other teacher I’ve had to be friendly and put upon.”

Caitlin raised a brow. “And that made you early?”

“No. Early,” Kaylin replied, removing the two sealed letters from her side pouch, “was for these. I have hopes that one of them will get me out of desk duty.”

“Kaylin...”

“And hopes that the other one won’t be an immediate call for my execution. They’re for the Hawklord.”

“Were they urgent?”

“They were delivered by Dragons. One of them, at least, was written by Diarmat.”

Caitlin winced. “Then at least one is urgent, for your sake.”

“The Hawklord’s busy?”

“Yes, dear. He and most of the Barrani Hawks are closeted in the Tower discussing the difficulties with the investigation into the Exchequer’s suspected embezzlement.”

Which meant he wasn't going to take any interruption well.

"Head up to his office and speak with his secretary. My guess is he'll interrupt the Hawklord, at least briefly."

Kaylin shrugged. "My job was to deliver the letters; it wasn't to stand over the Hawklord's shoulder making certain he reads them."

"Take them to his office, dear."

The Hawklord's office wasn't actually the Tower, although that's where he held most of his meetings; it was vastly more convenient for Aerians to reach, as the dome in the roof opened. He did, however, have an office, with a secretary whose function was similar to Caitlin's, albeit for a single man and not an entire office full of Hawks.

She liked the office better than the Tower for a variety of reasons. Chief among these was the fact that the Hawklord's office doors had no door wards. They barely had working hinges, on the other hand. Hanson sat behind his customary desk watching the door's progress. Magic wasn't needed for protection here; no one could sneak into this office through those doors.

"He's not here," Hanson said when she'd mostly managed to get the doors open.

"I know. He's in the Tower with the Barrani Hawks."

"Yes. And an expert who calls himself a Forensic Accountant." Hanson grimaced.

"A *what?*"

"Don't ask me. I just work here."

Kaylin, who also just worked here, nonetheless tried to wrap her thoughts around the title, and gave up. "I have two letters I was told to deliver to him in person."

"Do either of the sendees have any reason to want you dead or fired?"

"Not yet."

Hanson held out a hand. It was large, square, and belied the rather bookish clothing he generally wore for office work. Too many calluses, for one. "Let me have them."

She would normally have been more than happy to pass them off as his problem, but this time she was torn. She had hopes for the contents of Sanabalis's letter, and pure dread about the contents of Diarmat's. It didn't matter, though. Hanson lifted one gray brow and said, "I'm not opening either," in a flat tone of voice. "I recognize *both* seals. Were you told, in either case, to wait for a report?"

"No."

"And you are absolutely *certain* you did nothing to offend Diarmat?"

"Nothing besides breathing."

"Take a chair," Hanson said, rising as he made his decision. "Take any chair in my office *except* the one behind my desk."

Kaylin had been a bit of an explorer when she'd first been brought to the office. Hanson's chair wasn't entirely unfamiliar to her, even though she'd only sat in it a couple of times. Unfortunately, the last of those times had involved a rather irate citizen of great import to his Caste Court, an absent Hanson, *and* an absent Hawklord. It had *not* gone well.

She wasn't thirteen anymore in any case; she took a chair by the wall nearest the desk and waited. Hanson came in maybe a quarter of an hour later; the windows here weren't enchanted, so asking them for the time indicated a lower level of sanity or observation than the Hawks ideally liked in their employees.

"The Hawklord will see you. Now."

"Is he pissed off?"

"He was not entirely pleased by the interruption, no. I don't believe he holds it against you, on the other hand."

"How badly is the investigation going?"

"It is not going well, and the Emperor is not pleased."

Kaylin winced. "Thanks for the heads-up."

The Hawklord's Tower was empty when she arrived; she could see this because the doors

were—thank the gods—already open. The landing in front of his Tower, on the other hand, was occupied. Teela was lounging against the height of the rails as Kaylin trudged up the stairs. She raised one dark brow in acknowledgment. “I saw Hanson. Two official letters, from actual Dragons, no less. Why were you at the Palace?”

“Etiquette lessons, if you must know.”

Teela frowned for a second, and then nodded. The fact that she’d asked at all meant the investigation was going *very* badly; normally, she would have known exactly where Kaylin had been the previous day. Teela had taken to office betting pools like fish take to water.

“You didn’t offend Diarmat, did you?”

“I believe my inferior existence is offense enough,” Kaylin replied, sliding into very clipped and precise High Barrani.

Tain chuckled. “He’s old school, Kaylin.”

“Meaning?”

“You’ll find out. Hawklord’s waiting,” he added. “And we’re not allowed back in until you’ve finished.”

Lord Grammayre’s eyes were an unfortunate shade of blue; his wings were at full height, but at least they were only partially extended. He held what appeared to be two letters in one of his stiff hands, and he looked up when Kaylin entered. He didn’t even tell her to close the doors; he gestured and they pretty much slammed shut at her back. Had she been Barrani, they would have closed on her hair. Or maybe not. Barrani hair never got in the way of anything.

“I have two completely conflicting requests, and I have very, *very* little time in which to reply. Are you aware of what either of these letters contain?”

“No, sir,” she said truthfully. She did snap a salute, and she did stand pretty much at rigid attention.

Lord Grammayre looked peaked. Had she been Caitlin, she might have asked him if he’d been sleeping at all; as she wasn’t, she didn’t dare. “Since *neither* request has anything at all to do with the Human Caste Court or the Exchequer, I almost consider the interruption a favor. Sadly, it is not a favor I can indulge in for much longer.

“Lord Diarmat, after an hour of extracurricular lessons, has decided that things would work more smoothly with a cocurricular schedule.”

Kaylin tried to make sense of this, and failed. “Cocurricular?”

“Yes. He would like your etiquette lessons—and his involvement in the same—to be more—” he glanced at the paper “—*comprehensive*. He feels that there is some danger you will take the lessons far too casually otherwise.”

“I’m still stuck on cocurricular.”

“Ah. The lesson schedule would become far more intensive, and the classes would be integrated into your duties to the Halls of Law. Your paycheck—and possible promotion, and yes, that’s also on my desk—would depend on your success. He feels that separation of his lessons and your duties are not—” again he glanced at the paper “—*a strict advantage*.”

Kaylin had drifted off the topic of cocurricular and Lord Diarmat, and latched onto the fact that a request for promotion—for her!—was on the Hawklord’s desk.

He lifted a pale brow, and then his eyes narrowed; they were still blue. He’d seen Kaylin almost daily since she was thirteen years old, and if she wasn’t that child anymore, he’d also become familiar with all the incremental changes time had made. He knew what she was thinking. “If,” he said, pinching the bridge of his nose, “I might actually *have* your attention for the next five minutes?”

“Yes, sir!”

“Good. Lord Diarmat’s vision of cocurricular would see you at the Imperial Palace for three days of each week, duty cycles notwithstanding. He specifically states some concern with your overall martial training and your deplorable self-indulgence; he wishes all trace of these deficiencies to be dealt with immediately.”

Three days of *each* week? “What about my beat?”

“You would obviously not be patrolling for the duration.”

“And the duration?”

“That was not specified, although I believe the implication is that his lessons will last until he is satisfied.”

“Or I’m dead?”

“If you feel that’s more likely.”

Almost ashen, Kaylin grasped at straws. “And the—the other letter?”

“There is apparently some miscommunication among the members of the Dragon Court; given the relocation of the refugees and the absence of Lord Sanabalis from the Palace for much of each day, that is understandable.” He glanced at the second letter. “Breathe,” he said without looking up.

She tried.

“Lord Sanabalis apologizes for any inconvenience his request might cause the Hawks, but his request is, for Lord Sanabalis, quite urgently stated.”

The Hawklord wasn’t known for either his kindness or his cruelty. Kaylin was privately wondering about the latter. While it was true she’d interrupted a critical meeting at a very bad time, it was also true that the interruption wasn’t her doing.

“He would like to see you seconded to the Imperial Court as an attaché.”

“A what?”

“I believe he means a general aide of unspecified expertise. His request, however, would clash badly with Lord Diarmat’s.”

“Why?”

“He wants you as a full-time aide for an unspecified length of time. You would not report to Sergeant Kassan; you would report directly to Lord Sanabalis.” The Hawklord lowered the hand that held the letters, and his irritation receded; the color of his eyes, however, was almost cobalt. “Your duties to the Court at this time would take you directly into the fiefs.”

“The fiefs? But—”

“There have been some issues with the resettlement.”