

CHAPTER ONE

The Halls of Law occupied real estate that the merchants' guild salivated over every time discussion about tax laws came up, and for that reason, if no other, Private Kaylin Neyla was proud to work in them. The building sat in the center of the city, its bulk overshadowed by three towers, atop which—in the brisk and heavy winds of the otherwise clear day—flags could be seen at the heights. It was the only building, by Imperial decree, which was allowed this much height; the Emperor considered it a personal statement. She would probably have been slightly prouder if she'd managed to make Corporal, but she took what she could get.

What she could get, on the other hand, could be a bit disconcerting on some days. She approached the guards at the door—today Tanner and Gillas were at their posts—and stopped before she'd passed between them. They were giving her funny looks, and she was on time. She'd been on time for four days running, although one emergency with the midwives' guild had pulled her off active duty in the middle of the day, but the looks on their faces didn't indicate a lost betting pool.

"What's up?" she asked Tanner. She had to look up to ask it; he was easily over six feet in height, and he didn't slouch when on duty.

"You'll find out," he replied. He was almost smirking.

The problem with coming to the Hawks as an angry thirteen-year-old with a lot of attitude was that the entire force felt as if they'd watched you grow up. This meant the entire damn force took an interest in your personal business. She cursed Tanner under her breath, and left his chuckle at her back.

It was only about ten feet from her back when she ran into Corporal Severn Handred. Who just happened to be loitering in the Aerie, under the shadows of the flying Aerians, who were practicing maneuvers that no other race on the force could achieve without a hell of a lot of magic, most of which would require postmaneuver paperwork that would keep them grounded for weeks. The Emperor was not a big fan of magic that wasn't under his personal control.

Kaylin, her wrist weighted by a few pounds of what was ostensibly gold, knew this firsthand. The bracer—studded with what were also ostensibly gemstones, and in and of itself more valuable than most of the force on a good day, which would be a day when their Sergeant wasn't actively cursing the amount of money being wasted employing their sorry butts—was also magical. It was older than the Empire.

No one knew how it worked—or at least that's what was claimed—but it kept random magic neutralized. Kaylin had been ordered to wear it, and on most days, she did.

Severn looked up as she approached him. "You're on time," he said, falling into an easy step beside her.

"And the world hasn't ended," she replied. "Betting? It's four days running." It was a betting pool she'd been excluded from joining.

He grinned, but didn't answer, which meant yes, he was betting, and no, he hadn't

lost yet.

“If you win, you can buy me lunch.”

He raised a brow. “You’re scrounging for lunch this early in the month?”

“Don’t ask.”

He laughed.

“Instead,” she continued, “tell me why you’re here.”

“I work here.”

“Ha, ha. You don’t usually loiter in the Aerie waiting for me to walk by.” In fact, if it was something that was a matter of life or death, or at least keeping her job, he was more proactive: he’d show up at her apartment and throw her out of bed.

“Loitering and waiting are not considered—”

“Tanner was smirking.”

Severn winced. “An official courier came by the office this morning.”

“Official courier?”

“An Imperial Courier.”

“Please tell me it had nothing to do with me,” she said, without much hope.

“You want me to lie?”

She snorted. “Is Marcus in a mood?”

“Let’s just say he didn’t seem overly surprised.” Which wasn’t much of an answer if the one you wanted was No.

Teela was in the office and at her desk, which was generally a bad sign. She was also on break, which meant she was lounging on a chair that was balanced on its back two legs, and watching the door. Tain was somewhere else, which meant Kaylin only had to deal with one of the Barrani Hawks she sometimes counted as friends. On this particular morning, she couldn’t remember why, exactly.

The fact that Teela rose—gracefully, because it was impossible for a Barrani not to be graceful—the minute she laid emerald eyes on Kaylin made it clear who she’d been watching for. The fact that she was smiling as she sauntered across the usual chaos of the office meant she was amused. This didn’t mean that the news for Kaylin was good, on the other hand.

“Good morning, Private Neya,” the window said. “It is a bright and sunny day, but rain is expected in the late afternoon. Please dress accordingly while you are on duty.”

Teela took one look at Kaylin’s raised brows and laughed out loud.

Kaylin said a few choice words in Leontine.

“Please be aware that this is a multiracial office, and the terms that you are using might give offense to some of your coworkers,” the same window chided.

Kaylin’s jaw nearly hit the floor.

“Apparently,” Teela said, as her laugh trailed off into a chuckle, “the mage that designed the window to be a cheerful, talking timepiece, was not entirely precise in his use

of magic.”

“Which means?”

“Off the record? Someone tampered with Official Office equipment.”

“This is worse. The old window didn’t greet us by name. What the hells were they trying to do?”

“Get it to shut up without actually breaking it.”

“Which seems to be almost impossible. The breaking-it part.”

“So does the shutting-it-up part, if it comes to that.” Teela grinned. “We’ve started a new betting pool.”

“Hell with the pool—we should just make the Hawklord stay in this damn office. The window would be gone in less than a week.” She started to head toward her very small desk.

“Private Neya,” the window said, “you have not checked today’s duty roster. Please check the roster to ascertain your current rounds.”

Teela burst out laughing because Kaylin’s facial expression could have soured new milk. She did, however, head toward the roster because she couldn’t actually break the window, and she was pretty damn certain it would nag her until she checked said roster.

Elani street had been penciled, in more or less legible writing, beside Kaylin’s name. Severn was her partner. There were no investigations in progress that required her presence, although there were two ongoing. The shift started in half an hour. She took note of it as obviously as possible, and then returned to her desk, by way of Caitlin.

“Good morning, dear,” Caitlin said, looking up from a small and tidy pile of papers.

Kaylin nodded, and then bent slightly over the desk. “What happened to the window?”

The older woman frowned slightly. “We’re not officially certain, dear.” Which meant she wouldn’t say. “Sergeant Kassan is aware that the enchantment on the window is causing some difficulty. I believe he is scheduled to speak with the Hawklord.”

“Thank god,” Kaylin replied. The window, during this discussion, was in the process of greeting yet another coworker. “Does it do this all day?”

Caitlin nodded. “You weren’t here yesterday,” she added. Her frown deepened. “It not only greeted the employees by name, it also felt the need to greet every person who walked into—or through—the office in the same way.”

“But—”

Caitlin shrugged. “It’s magic,” she finally said, as if that explained everything. Given how Kaylin generally felt about magic, it probably did.

She tried to decide whether or not to ask about the Imperial Courier. Caitlin was the best source of information in the office, but if she felt it wasn’t important or relevant to the questioner, she gave away exactly nothing. Since she was bound to find out sooner or later—and probably sooner—she held her tongue.

“Private Neya!” The low, deep rumble of Leontine growl momentarily stilled most of the voices in the office. Marcus, as she’d guessed, was not in the best of moods. “Caitlin

has work to do, even if you don't."

"Sir!" Kaylin replied.

"He's in the office more than anyone else who works here," Caitlin whispered, by way of explanation. "And I believe the window likes to have a chat when things are quiet."

Kaylin grimaced in very real sympathy for Old Ironjaw.

"In particular, I think it's been trying to give him advice."

Which meant it wasn't going to last the week. Thank god.

"Oh, and dear?" Caitlin added, as Kaylin began to move away from her desk, under the watchful glare of her Sergeant.

"Yes?"

"This is for you." She held out a small sheaf of paper.

Kaylin, who had learned to be allergic to paperwork from a master—that being Marcus himself—cringed reflexively as she held out a hand. "Am I going to like this?"

"Probably not," Caitlin said with very real sympathy. "I'm afraid it isn't optional."

Kaylin looked through the papers in her hands. "This is a class schedule."

"Yes, dear."

"But—Mallory's gone—"

"It's not about his request that you take—and pass—all of the courses you previously failed, if that's helpful. The Hawklord vetoed that, although I'm sorry to say Mallory's suggestion did meet with some departmental approval."

It was marginally helpful. "What's it about, then?"

Caitlin winced. "Etiquette lessons. And I believe that Lord Sanabalis has, of course, requested that your magical education resume."

"Is there any good news?"

"As far as we know, nothing is threatening to destroy either the City or the World, dear."

Kaylin stared glumly at the missive in her hands. "This is your subtle way of telling me not to start doing either, isn't it?"

Caitlin smiled. "They're just lessons. It's not the end of the world."

"So," Severn said, when she joined him and they began to head down the hall, "did you speak with Caitlin?"

"Yes. Let me guess. The entire office already knows the contents of these papers."

"Betting?"

"No."

He laughed. "Most of the office. How bad is it?"

"Two days a week with Sanabalis."

He raised a brow.

"With *Lord* Sanabalis."

“Better. Isn’t that the same schedule you were on before the situation in the fiefs? You both survived that.”

“Mostly. I think he broke a few chairs.”

“He’d have to,” Severn grinned. “Gods couldn’t break that table.”

It was true. The table in the West Room—which had been given a much more respectful name before Marcus’s time, which meant Kaylin had no idea what it was—was harder than most sword steel. “Three *nights* of off-duty time with the etiquette teacher.”

“Nights?”

She nodded grimly.

“Is the teacher someone the Hawks can afford to piss off?”

“I hope so.”

“Who’s teaching?”

“I don’t know. It doesn’t actually say.”

“Where?”

She grimaced. “The Imperial Palace.”

He winced in genuine sympathy. “I’m surprised Lord Grammayre approved this.”

Kaylin was not known for her love of high society. The Hawklord was not known for his desire to have Kaylin and high society anywhere in the same room. Or city block. Which meant the dictate had come from someone superior to the Hawklord.

“It’s not optional,” Kaylin said glumly. “And the worst part is, if I pass, I probably get to do something big. Like meet the Emperor.”

“I’d like to be able to say that won’t kill you.”

“You couldn’t, with a straight face.”

He shrugged. “When do you start?”

“Two days. I meet Sanabalis—*Lord* Sanabalis—for Magical Studies—”

“Magical Studies? Does it actually say that?”

“Those are the exact words. Don’t look at me, I didn’t write it—in the afternoon tomorrow.” She dropped the schedule into her locker with as much care as she generally dropped dirty towels.

Elani street was not a hub of activity in the morning. It wasn’t exactly deserted, but it was quiet, and the usual consumers of love potions and extracts to combat baldness, impotence, and unwanted weight were lingering on the other side of storefronts. Remembering her mood the last time she’d walked this beat, Kaylin took care not to knock over offending sandwich boards. On the other hand, she also took the same care not to read them.

“Kaylin?”

“Hmm?” She was looking at the cross section of charms in a small case in one window—Mortimer’s Magnificent Magic—and glanced at her partner’s reflection in the glass.

“You’re rubbing your arms.”

She glanced down and realized he was right. “They’re sort of itchy,” she said.

He raised one brow. “Sort of itchy?”

The marks that adorned most of the insides of her arms were, like the ones that covered her inner thighs and half of her back, weather vanes for magic. Kaylin frowned. “It doesn’t feel the way it normally does when there’s strong magic. It’s—they’re just sort of itchy.”

“And they’ve never been like that before.”

She frowned. She’d had fleas once, while cat-sitting for an elderly neighbor. The itch wasn’t quite the same, but it was similar.

She started to tell him as much, and was interrupted midsentence by someone screaming.

It was, as screams went, a joyful, ecstatic sound, which meant their hands fell to their clubs without drawing them. But they—like every other busybody suddenly crowding the streets—turned at the sound of the voice. It was distinctly male, and probably a lot higher than it normally was. Bouncing a glance between each other, they shrugged and headed toward the noise.

The scream slowly gathered enough coherence to form words, and the words, to Kaylin’s surprise, had something to do with hair. And having hair. When they reached the small wagon set up on the street—and Kaylin made a small note to check for permits, as that was one of the Dragon Emperor’s innovations on tax collection—the crowds had formed a thin wall.

The people who lived above the various shops in Elani street had learned, with time and experience, to be enormously cynical. Exposure to every promise of love, hair, or sexual prowess known to man—or woman, for that matter—tended to have that effect, as did the more esoteric promise to tease out the truth about the future and your destined greatness in it. They had pretty much heard—and seen—it all.

And given the charlatans who masqueraded as merchants on much of the street, both the permanent residents and the officers of the Law who patrolled it knew that it wasn’t beyond them to hire an actor to suddenly be miraculously cured of baldness, impotence, or blindness.

Kaylin assumed that the man who was almost crying in joy was one of these actors. But if he was, he was damn good. She started to ask him his name, stopped as he almost hugged her, and then turned to glance at the merchant whose wagon this technically was.

He looked...slack-jawed and surprised. He didn’t even bother to school his expression, which clearly meant he was new to this. Not new to fleecing people, she thought sourly, just new to success. When he took a look at the Hawk that sat dead center on her tabard, he straightened up, and the slack lines of his face tightened into something that might have looked like a grin—on a corpse.

“Officer,” he said, in that loud, booming voice that demanded attention. Or witnesses. “How can I help you on this fine morning?” He had to speak loudly, because the man was continuing his loud, joyful exclamations.

“I’d like to see your permits,” Kaylin replied. She spoke clearly and calmly, but her voice traveled about as far as it would have, had she shouted. It was one of the more useful things she’d learned in the Halls of Law. She held out one hand.

“But that’s—that’s *outrageous!*”

“Take it up with the Emperor,” Kaylin replied, although she did secretly have some sympathy for the man. “Or the merchants’ guild, as they supported it.”

“I am a member in good standing of the guild, and I can assure you—”

She lifted a hand. “It’s not technically illegal for you to claim to be a member in good standing of a guild,” she told him, keeping her voice level, but lowering it slightly. “But if you’re new here, it’s really, really *stupid* to claim to be a member of the *merchants’* guild if you’re not.” Glancing at his wagon, which looked well serviced but definitely aged, she shrugged.

“I am *not* new to the city,” the man replied. “But I’ve been traveling to far lands in order to bring the citizens of Elantra the finest, the most rare, of mystical unguents and—”

“And you still need a permit to sell them here, or in any of the market streets or their boundaries.” She turned. Lifting her voice, she said, “Okay, people, it’s time to pack it in. Mr.—”

“Stravaganza.”

The things people expected her to be able to repeat with a straight damn face. Kaylin stopped herself from either laughing or snorting. “Mr. *Stravaganza* is new enough to the City that he’s failed to acquire the proper permits for peddling his wares in the streets. In order to avoid the *very* heavy fines associated with the lack of permit, he is now closed for business until he makes the journey to the Imperial Tax Offices to acquire said permit.”

Severn, on the other hand, was looking at the bottle he’d casually picked up from the makeshift display. It was small, long, and stoppered. The merchant started to speak, and then stopped the words from falling out of his mouth. “Please, Officer,” he said to Severn. “My gift to a man who defends our city.” He even managed to say this with a more or less straight face.

Severn nodded and carefully pocketed the bottle. As he already *had* a headful of hair, Kaylin waited while the merchant packed up and started moving down the street. Then she looked at her partner. “What gives?” she said, gesturing toward his pocket.

“I don’t know,” was the unusually serious supply. “But that man wasn’t acting. I’d be willing to bet that he actually thinks the fact that he now has hair is due to the contents of this bottle.”

“You can’t believe that,” she said, voice flat.

Severn shrugged. “Let’s just make sure Mr. Stravaganza crosses the border of our jurisdiction. When he’s S.E.P., we can continue our rounds.”

The wagon made it past the borders and into the realm of Somebody Else’s Problem without further incident. Kaylin and Severn did not, however, make it to the end of their shift in the same way. They corrected their loose pattern of patrol once they returned to the street; as the day had progressed, Elani had become more crowded. This

was normal.

Some of the later arrivals were very richly clothed, and came in fine carriages, disembarking with the help of their men; some wore clothing that had been too small a year ago, with patches at elbows and threads of different colors around cuffs and shoulders.

All of them, rich, poor, and shades in between, sought the same things. At a distance, Kaylin saw one carriage stop before the doors of Margot. Margot, with her flame-red hair, her regal and impressive presence, and her damn charisma. Margot's storefront was, like the woman whose name was plastered in gold leaf across the windows, dramatic and even—Kaylin admitted grudgingly—attractive. It implied wealth, power, and a certain spare style.

To Kaylin, it also heavily implied fraud—but it wasn't the type of fraud for which the woman could be thrown in jail.

The doors opened and the unknown but obviously well-heeled woman entered the shop. This wasn't unusual, and at least the woman in question *had* the money to throw away; far too many of the clientele that frequented Elani street in various shades of desperation didn't.

Severn gave Kaylin a very pointed look, and she shrugged. "She's got the money. No one's going hungry if she throws it away on something stupid." She started to walk, forcing Severn to fall in beside her. Her own feelings about most of Elani's less genuine merchants were well-known.

She slowed, and after a moment she added, "I know there are worse things, Severn. I'm trying."

His silence was a comfortable silence; she fit into it, and he let her. But they hadn't reached the corner before they heard shouting, and they glanced once at each other before turning on their heels and heading back down the street.

The well-dressed woman who had entered Margot's was in the process of leaving it in high, high dudgeon. Margot was—even at this distance—an unusual shade of pale that almost looked bad with her hair. Kaylin tried not to let the momentary pettiness of satisfaction distract her, and failed miserably; Margot was demonstrably still healthy, her store was still in once piece, and at this distance it didn't *appear* that any Imperial Laws had been broken.

"Please, Lady," Margot was saying. "I assure you—"

"I am *done* with your assurances, *Margot*," was the icy reply. The woman turned, caught sight of the Hawks, and drew herself to her full height. "Officers," she said coldly. "I demand that you arrest this—this woman—for slander."

"While we would dearly love to arrest this woman in the course of our duties," Kaylin said carefully, "most of what she says is confined to private meetings. Nor is what she says to her clients maliciously—or at least publicly—spread."

"No?" The woman still spoke as if winter were language. "She spoke—in public —"

"I spoke in private," Margot said quickly. "In the confines of my own establishment —"

"You spoke in front of your other clients," the woman snapped. "When my father

hears of this, you will be *finished* here, do you understand? You will be languishing in the Imperial jail!”

It was too much to hope that she would climb the steps to the open door of her carriage and leave. She turned once again to Kaylin; Severn was, as usual, enjoying the advantage of having kept his mouth shut. It was a neat trick, and Kaylin wished—for the thousandth time—that she could learn it. Or, rather, had *already* learned it.

“You will arrest this—this charlatan *immediately*.”

“Ma’am, we need to have something to arrest her *for*.”

“I’ve already told you—”

“You haven’t told us what she said,” Kaylin replied. Given the heightening of color across the woman’s cheeks, the fact that this was required seemed to further enrage her.

“Do you know who I am?”

It was the kind of question that Kaylin most hated, and it was the chief reason that her duties were not *supposed* to take her anywhere where it could, with such genuine outrage, be asked. “No, ma’am, I’m afraid I haven’t had the privilege.”

Her eyes rounded, and out of the corner of her eye, Kaylin saw that Margot was wincing.

“Who, may I ask, are you?” The woman now said.

“Private Neya, of the Hawks.”

“And you are somehow supposed to be responsible for safeguarding the people of this fair city when you clearly fail to recognize something as significant as the crest upon this carriage?”

Kaylin opened her mouth to reply, but a reply was clearly no longer desired—or acceptable.

“Very well, *Private*. I will speak with Lord Grammayre *myself*.” She spoke very clear, pointed High Barrani to her driver, and then stomped her way up the step and into the carriage. Had she been responsible for closing its door herself, it would have probably shattered. As it was, the footman did a much more careful job.

They watched the carriage drive away.

“I suppose there’s not much chance that she’s just going to go home and stew?” she asked Severn.

“No.”

“Is she important enough to gain immediate audience with the Hawklord?”

Margot sputtered before Severn could answer, but that was fine. Severn’s expression was pretty damn clear. “She is Lady Alyssa of the Larienne family. Did you *truly* not recognize her?”

Larienne. Larienne. Like most of the wealthy families in Elantra, they sported a mock-Barrani name. Something about it was familiar. “Go on.”

“Her father is Garavan Larienne, the head of the family. He is *also* the Chancellor of the Exchequer.”

Kaylin turned to Severn. “How bad is it going to be?”

“Oh, probably a few inches of paper on Marcus’s desk.”

She wilted. “All right, Margot. Since I’m going to be on report in a matter of hours —”

“Hour,” Severn said quietly.

“What the hell did you say that offended her so badly?”

“I’d prefer not to repeat it.”

Kaylin sourly told her what she could do with her preferences.

“So let me get this straight. Lady Alyssa comes to you for advice about her love life —”

“She is Garavan’s only daughter.” Margot was now subdued. She was still off her color. “And she’s been a client for only a few months. She is, of course, concerned with her greater destiny.”

“I’m not. What I’m concerned with is the statement Corporal Handred has taken from some of your other clients. You told Lady Alyssa that her father was going to be charged with embezzlement, and the family fortunes would be in steep decline? *You?*”

Margot opened her mouth, and nothing fell out of it. Kaylin had often daydreamed about Margot at a loss for words; this wasn’t *exactly* how she’d hoped it would come about.

“I—” Margot shook her head. “I had no intention of saying any such thing, Her father’s business is not her business, and she doesn’t *ask* about him.”

“Then what in the hells possessed you to do it now?”

“She—she sat in her normal chair, and she asked me if—if I had any further insight into her particular situation.”

“And *that* was your answer? Come *on*, Margot. You’ve been running this place—successfully—for too damn many years to just open your mouth and offend someone you consider important.”

“That was my answer,” was the stiff reply. “I felt—strange, Private. I felt as if—I could *see* what would happen. As if it were unfolding before my eyes. I didn’t mean to speak the words. The words just came.” She spoke very softly, even given the lack of actual customers in her storefront; she had sent them, quietly, on their way. Apparently, whatever it was that was coming out of her mouth was not to be trusted, and she was willing to lose a full day’s worth of income to make sure it didn’t happen again.

“So. A cure for baldness that worked—instantly—and a fortune-teller’s trick that might *also* be genuine.”

“I’d keep that last to yourself.”

She shrugged. “I think it’s time we visited all of the damn shops on Elani, door-to-door, and had a little talk with the proprietors.”

Severn, who didn’t dislike Margot as much as Kaylin, had been both less amused at her predicament and less amused by the two incidents than Kaylin. Kaylin let her brain catch up with her sense of humor, and the grin slowly faded from her face, as well. “Come

on," she told him.

"Where are we starting?"

"Evanton's. If we're lucky, that'll take up the remainder of the shift, and then some. I'm not looking forward to signing out tonight."