

“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 fief lord. 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.”