



Cast in Peril (The Chronicles of Elantra Book 8)

By Michelle Sagara

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Editorial Review

Review

"Readers will embrace this compelling, strong-willed heroine with her often sarcastic voice."

-Publishers Weekly on Cast in Courtlight

"The impressively detailed setting and the book's spirited heroine are sure to charm romance readers as well as fantasy fans who like some mystery with their magic."

-Publishers Weekly on Cast in Secret

"Along with the exquisitely detailed worldbuilding, Sagara's character development is mesmerizing. She expertly breathes life into a stubborn yet evolving heroine. A true master of her craft!"

-RT Book Reviews (4 ½ stars) on Cast in Fury

About the Author

New York Times bestselling author Michelle Sagara writes as both Michelle Sagara and Michelle West; she is also published as Michelle Sagara West. She lives in Toronto with her long-suffering husband and her two children, and to her regret has no dogs.

She can be found @msagara on Twitter or <http://msagarawest.wordpress.com>

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The worst thing about having a roommate, in Kaylin's opinion—and admittedly after only two weeks—was morning. The fact that this particular roommate was a Dragon didn't help. Bellusdeo was clean, tidy, and ate very little. She didn't actually require sleep, and for the first couple of nights, that had seemed like a good thing because Kaylin's apartment only had one bed. It only had one room.

But around morning number four, which had come on the heels of an urgent mirror message from the Guild of Midwives and a hideously touch-and-go birth, the "good thing" developed the preceding words "too damn much of a..."

Ten days—which included three more emergency calls—later, Kaylin struggled out of bed when the shadows in the room were far too short, and came face-to-face with someone who looked refreshed and annoyingly cheerful. She always looked refreshed and cheerful, but the annoying part had grown with time and familiarity.

It was far too late for breakfast, in part because Kaylin hadn't managed to get to the market the previous day and there was no food in the apartment. So she scrounged for clean clothing, taking what little time she had to tend to the large un-hatched egg she slept wrapped around.

"Kaylin, I think the egg has changed color," Bellusdeo said. She stared at the egg but didn't actually touch it.

She did, however, help Kaylin gather the cloth she kept wrapped around it when she left it for the day.

Kaylin, who was still bleary from sleep and fatigued by the work of the previous night, squinted. "Maybe. Do you think—do you think that means it's going to hatch?"

"I don't know. I don't recognize the species of egg."

Kaylin pressed her ear against the shell. She could almost hear something moving within it—but the sound was so faint it might have been due to hopeful imagination. She considered taking the egg into the office with her, remembered that it was magiclesson day, and decided to take the risk of leaving it untended for the afternoon. It was afternoon by this point, so it would be a shorter absence than usual.

Bellusdeo then accompanied Kaylin into work.

Kaylin accepted the barrage of amused mockery her hour of arrival caused with less than her usual grace. She had managed to go almost three weeks without being late. Admittedly on two of those days she'd perambulated around the office like someone doing a good imitation of the walking dead—but she'd been timely walking dead, damn it.

"If you dislike the mockery," Bellusdeo told her as she walked gracefully by Kaylin's side, "why don't you just arrive on time?"

"I need to sleep."

"You don't have to go to the midwives' guildhall."

"If I miss a few hours here in the morning, Marcus snarls at me and I expose my throat for a few minutes. I also win someone some money in the betting pool. If I miss an emergency call from the midwives' guild, someone dies. Guess which is more important?"

Bellusdeo nodded. "We have an etiquette lesson this evening," the Dragon added. It was true. It was also a subtle reminder that Bellusdeo did make Kaylin's life a little easier, because while Lord Diarmat pretty much despised Kaylin, he couldn't openly treat Bellusdeo with contempt, and Bellusdeo had an uncanny knack for asking the direct questions that would have caused mortal offense had they come from Kaylin's mouth. In this case, mortal was accurate.

Kaylin grimaced and straightened up. "I have a magic lesson in half an hour."

"With Sanabalis?"

"The same." Kaylin hesitated and then added, "Do you think you could call him Lord Sanabalis?"

"Why? You don't. If you don't, I can hardly see that it will make much difference if I fail to do so."

"It won't make much difference to you. It'll get me in less trouble." She headed toward the reception desk, where Cait-lin was watching their progress down the hall. The mirror dutifully announced the time the minute Kaylin's foot had crossed the threshold. At least it hadn't called her by name.

"Good afternoon, dear," Caitlin said, rising from her chair. "The midwives called you in last night?"

Kaylin nodded. "Marya woke me at two in the morning."

"It was bad?"

"It was very bad; I almost didn't make it in time."

"Did you eat anything before you came here?"

"Yes."

Bellusdeo lifted a lovely golden brow but said nothing. Not that words actually had to be spoken around Caitlin, who pursed her lips.

"Lord Sanabalis is waiting for you."

"Of course he is."

Bellusdeo didn't actually join her for magic lessons; as a member of the Dragon Court—albeit on a technicality—she didn't require them. She did, however, go to Elantran language lessons in the East Room for the duration; the Imperial Palace had ordered two linguists to work with her during that time. What the linguists made of Bellusdeo, Kaylin didn't know; she was just grateful for the few moments in which Bellusdeo was someone else's problem.

"I admit I'm surprised to see you on time, Private," Sanabalis said as she cringed her way through contact with the room's door ward and entered.

"Oh?"

"Given the time at which you left your dwelling last evening, I assumed you would be at least an hour late."

Kaylin sat and folded her arms across her chest. "You're having my apartment watched at two in the morning?"

Sanabalis didn't answer the question. Instead he said, "How is Bellusdeo adapting to life in the City?"

"She hasn't changed much since I spoke to you about it two days ago."

"And have you reconsidered the Emperor's offer to house you in a more suitable location?"

Sadly, she had. On offer was a much, much larger apartment. It was, however, farther from the office, and Kaylin still held on to the faint hope that Bellusdeo would get tired of living in a run-down, single-room apartment with no privacy and choose to move out on her own.

So far, Dragon stubbornness was running neck and neck with human stubbornness. It seemed unfair that only the human was suffering. If they had a larger dwelling, Kaylin could have an entire room to herself, and they would have room for Bellusdeo's Ascendant, a Norannir who would only barely fit through Kaylin's current door—if he crouched. Mag-garon could keep an eye on Bellusdeo, and Kaylin might actually have a day—at work—in which she didn't have the Dragon as her constant companion. As it was, that Ascendant, Maggaron, had been exiled to the Tower in the fief of Tiamaris, and he was very, very glum about the

separation.

What she said, however, was "No. We're doing fine." Kaylin's biggest fear was that she would move, lose her small—but affordable—apartment, and have nowhere else to go when Bellusdeo finally decided to move out. Severn had suggested that she pay her rent while staying in the Imperial building, but it galled Kaylin to spend that much money on something she wasn't even using.

She glared at her nemesis, the candle.

Sanabalis folded his hands on the table's surface; it had been newly oiled and waxed, and the Dragon's reflection stared back up at him. "Your etiquette lesson is tonight."

"I know."

"You seem to have survived the previous lessons."

"Yes. So did Diarmat and Bellusdeo."

Sanabalis winced, but he chuckled, as well. "I believe Lord Diarmat is on the edge of repenting his decision to teach you; he may well ask the Arkon to undertake that duty instead."

"But he won't fall over that edge until we've suffered at least as much as he has?"

"Ah, no. I believe he would be more than willing to continue to teach you, but he feels that Bellusdeo is an impediment to your effective absorption of necessary knowledge." Sanabalis nodded at the candle. "Begin."

* * *

The entire department heard her shriek.

Only half of them left their desks to see what had caused it—or at least only half of them were visible when Kaylin threw the door open and tried to run through them into the office. She was bouncing.

"Teela! Tain! I did it!"

"Whatever you did, kittling," Teela replied, "you broke the silence spell that usually protects us from your cursing during class." She glanced pointedly at the warded door. "What do you think you did?"

Kaylin spun and pointed.

The candle's wick was actually burning. She'd been staring at it every class for what felt like years—but couldn't have been more than a couple of months in objective time—and had even cut it in half in a foul mood. Not once in all those months had the damn thing done what it was supposed to do.

But today?

Today she'd almost felt the warmth of fire; she'd grasped and visualized its name. It had taken the better part of an hour to accomplish that much, because it was a large name and parts of it kept sliding out of her grip. It didn't matter; this was the first class she'd had with Sanabalis that hadn't ended in total, frustrating failure.

Lord Sanabalis rose, and Kaylin hesitated, losing a little of her bounce. "You didn't do it, did you? It was me?"

"It was you, Private Neya. And because you've succeeded—once—I will consider today's lesson complete. If you will accompany me?"

"Pardon?"

"I believe Lord Grammayre and Sergeant Kassan would like a few words with you. They did want to speak with you earlier, but I felt the matter could wait until after your lesson."

Yes, because Lord Sanabalis was a Dragon and Lord Grammayre and Sergeant Kassan were only the men responsible for signing off on her pay chit.

Lord Grammayre and Marcus were waiting in the Hawk-lord's Tower. Kaylin, torn between panic at the length of time they'd been made to wait and worry about the topic of discussion, went up the stairs at a brisk clip, as if rushing to her doom. Dragon knowledge of the effective chain of command in the Halls of Law was pretty simple: the Dragon Court's desires took precedence over everything. It was hard to get that wrong. Their knowledge of the finer details, on the other hand—and in particular Kaylin's place in the food chain as a private—left a lot to be desired, especially since their pay and their rank weren't ever going to be at risk. She tried not to resent this as Sanabalis, curse him, practically crawled.

The Tower doors were open, which was a small mercy. Kaylin approached them, the sound of her steps on stone drawing two pairs of distinctive eyes—Leontine and Aerian. Marcus's facial fur was standing on end, and his eyes were orange. The Hawklord's wings were slightly extended, and his eyes were a gray-blue. Had she been a flower, she'd've instantly wilted under that much dry heat. Angry Leontine Sergeant, angry Aerian Commander in Chief, slightly bored Dragon, and panicked human—you could practically call it a racial congress, with humans in their usual position.

Marcus was in such a bad mood that he didn't even mention how late she was; he wasn't in a bad enough mood not to growl when she hesitated in the doorway. She crossed the threshold quickly and offered Lord Grammayre a salute. It was as perfect as she could make it—and if two weeks under the Draconic Lord Diarmat had given her nothing else, it had certainly improved the quality of necessary gestures of respect, not that she was required to salute a member of the Dragon Court.

Lord Sanabalis, as a member of said court, wasn't required to offer a salute to anyone in the Halls of Law. Kaylin wasn't certain what formal gestures of respect he offered the Eternal Emperor, because thankfully she'd never seen the Eternal Emperor—at least not yet. She'd seen the rest of the Dragons interact with each other, and while they were polite and formal when nothing important was being discussed, they didn't spend all day bowing, saluting, or speaking full titles. She now even knew what their full titles were.

"At ease, Private." If an order could be guaranteed to make her feel less at ease, she didn't want to hear it. The Hawklord's tone of voice had enough edge to draw blood. She nodded stiffly and dropped her arms to her sides.

"Lord Sanabalis," the Hawklord continued, "we have news of some import to relay to the Imperial Court."

"Good. Does it involve the current investigation into the Exchequer?"

"It does. We have an unexpected lead. Our subsequent investigations have given us reason to believe it is extremely relevant."

Sanabalis raised a brow. "May I ask the source of that information?"

"You may; it is the only reason Private Neya is currently present."

"I will assume that the lead did not come through the Private."

"No. Not directly. She has been involved as your attache in the fief of Tiamaris for much of the investigation; as she has not yet been released from those duties, she has had no direct involvement in the Exchequer affair."

Lord Sanabalis nodded.

"Even if she is no longer required as frequently in the fief, she appears to be the unofficial minder for the newly arrived Lady Bellusdeo."

Kaylin cringed.

"Private?" Marcus growled.

Kaylin cleared her throat. "She doesn't like to be referred to as Lady Bellusdeo."

"And given her position at the moment, that is understandable. I will endeavor not to cause her the hardship of appropriate Elantran title in future," Lord Grammayre said. "However."

Sanabalis's eyes had shaded to a pale copper. Kaylin wasn't certain what color her eyes would be if human eye color shifted at the whim of mood; given that she was standing near an angry Leontine, an annoyed Dragon, and an unhappy Aerial, it probably wouldn't be good.

"What is Private Neya's involvement?"

The Leontine glared at the Hawklord. The Hawklord pretended not to notice either the glare or the question. "The usual method of paying in Imperial currency for information was rejected; the information, however, was deemed necessary."

"And?"

"The information offered to us came via Lord Nightshade of the fief of Nightshade."

Copper shaded toward orange in the Dragon Lord's eyes. "He offered the information first?"

"Of course not. But he offered some of the information to indicate the importance of the offer."

"And the information he did offer was not sufficient for our investigators?"

"No; if we attempted to investigate thoroughly, we would almost certainly be detected, and any proof of criminal activity would vanish."

"What was the tidbit he dangled?"

"The Office of the Exchequer has been working in conjunction with two highly placed Arcanists. Both," he added, "are Barrani, and both might be in possession of some of the embezzled funds."

Kaylin did not, through dint of will, whistle. She did sneak a glance at Sanabalis; his eyes hadn't gotten any redder, which was a positive sign. On the other hand, Marcus's hadn't gotten any less orange, which was not, given that Marcus now turned the full force of his glare on her. She felt this a tad unfair, given that she'd already warned him what Nightshade would demand in return for the information; she was not, however, feeling suicidal enough to point this out.

"Were you aware, Private, that the leave of absence requested in return for this information would be extensive?"

"...How extensive?"

"The fieflord is asking for a minimum of six weeks if we provide the transport, and a minimum of eight weeks if we do not."

She blinked. After a moment, she said, "Eight weeks?" thinking, as she did, of her rent. "Eight weeks."

"I can't take eight weeks off!"

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