

Errant Spark

Elemental Trials, Book 1

Ronelle Antoinette

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DEDICATION

Many thanks to the friends and family who supported me through this long, occasionally tumultuous journey. Zadara and Kim, you two ladies have been the best muses I could wish for.

PROLOGUE

“It is a boy, Mistress. You have a beautiful son.”

Lightning flickered, incandescent in brilliant emerald eyes.

“A boy?”

“Yes.”

The rumbling thunder metamorphosed into approaching hoof beats. The woman grasped her companion's cloak and pulled herself into a sitting position. Reaching out, she lay a pale hand on the wriggling bundle.

“Let me see him, just for a moment.”

The infant was placed in her arms and she gazed down at him with tears overflowing her dark lashes.

“You will be great, my son, and my love will be with you always.”

Silver glinted briefly and disappeared into the swaddling. With a gentle kiss to the tiny nose, she handed him back and gave her servant a push.

“Take him and go!” She collapsed back to the wet grass, exhausted.

“But, my lady—”

The woman shook her head violently. “Quickly! They cannot track you in the rain.”

“I won't leave you!”

The riders drew closer.

“Go now, Zaya. She must never find him, no matter what!”

Clutching the baby to her chest, the young servant scrambled to her knees.

“A name. You must at least name him, Mistress. The Consorts demand it.” She bent, barely catching the whispered word.

The loudest clap of thunder yet exploded overhead and blue-white fire split the sky.

A sharp intake of breath and the crystal falls, shattering into diamond fragments on impact.

“And so the trial by fire begins. The flint is struck, and an errant spark is cast adrift.”

“But what does it mean?”

The ensuing silence is broken by a single, quiet exhalation. *“That if it catches awrong, the kingdoms will burn.”*

CHAPTER ONE

Two men waited in a small audience chamber as, beyond the windows, the dying day flung its final streamers over the Imperial city, gilding everything in a patina of fading fire. One figure stood still, patiently facing the closed door, while the other wandered restlessly through the light and shadow. The only sound was the scuff of boots over plush carpet and the occasional, impatient sigh.

They were dressed in identical fashion; long-sleeved tunics the deep blue of twilight, matching trousers, and knee high boots of black leather. Each bore the golden eight-point star and shield of Turrus Arcana emblazoned over their hearts, the fine thread glimmering against their black tabards. Both were armed, despite the long-standing rule against such things in this inner sanctum, and between the uniforms and the carved wooden staves they carried, no one could mistake them for anything but initiated mages of Egalion's Tower.

But the similarities ended there.

The older man towered over the other and while his leanly muscled frame gave him the look of a seasoned fencer, the broadsword across his back called to mind the berserkers of old. He was in his middle years, with storm cloud gray eyes and deeply tanned skin. Faint veins of silver were beginning to thread through his raven hair, which he wore cropped close to his skull, and through the short, neat beard softening the stern set of his jaw. His face was long and narrow and his gaze was sharp. He'd assessed his surroundings immediately upon entering and, satisfied with what he found—or perhaps what he didn't—he now stood easily, hands clasped behind his back, seemingly content to wait until the world ended.

His restive companion, however, appeared less eager to do so. He, too, had swiftly taken in his surroundings and found nothing amiss, and now alternately wandered and stood beside the older man, swaying from foot to foot while picking a loose thread in one tunic sleeve. If the Goddess ever took a consort to patron bored youth, this would be he.

The young mage was handsome, with a fine, lightly-tanned complexion and the sculpted cheekbones of an aristocrat. His black hair was long and pulled into a ponytail high on the back of his head, though several strands hung in his face. He frequently brushed them back to reveal eyes of an emerald so luminous they appeared more feline than human. They sparkled with ready humor tempered by something darker, watchful, and quick.

The door before them suddenly opened and the two men snapped to attention, the younger setting aside an ornate compass he'd been examining.

“Ah, Eryk, at last!”

Tor Brinon Kikori, joint ruler of the kingdom of Egalion, stepped from the ivory paneled throne room in a rustle of purple and black silk. He shut the door behind him firmly, right in the face of a gangly man trailing him with an armload of scrolls, and moved forward to embrace the larger of his guests. The top of his head came just to the other's chest.

Eryk returned the embrace warmly. “It's good to see you again, my tor.” His voice was a deep rumble, mellow and soft, but anyone listening could not miss the thrum of power behind his speech. Though he addressed his liege with respect, he was clearly someone of authority himself.

The short, balding tor waved a bejeweled hand. “Now, now. No formalities here, you know that isn't necessary. We're family, for Xochi's sake!” His attempt at a stern frown was somewhat ruined by the twitching at the corners of his mouth.

When Eryk smiled, it lit his face and unexpected laugh lines crinkled the corners of his eyes. “What would your court think of such familiarity? I am but a sorcerer, after all. Or demon, depending on whose stories you heed. It matters not to them that I'm High Mage or that you're married to my sister.”

“Damn the court!” Brinon grumbled, his round face screwing up in disdain. “Between you and me, I never much cared for the opinions of those jumped-up, self-important, attention-whoring magpies. Well,” he amended, “the Hundai aren't so bad, but all the rest of them do is strut around and squawk, filling up my days

with their nonsense and pecking each other to death over any treasury coin I'm not sitting on. Let Aelani charm them if she wishes. I haven't the time for it anymore."

Eryk shook his head, hiding another smile behind his hand. He'd met the tor when he was still just a plump little Ibirani magistrate, more than a quarter century ago now. Brinon had been as irritable and bristly then, though perhaps a little less...wide. And despite his sour attitude towards the niceties of court politics, Eryk knew him to be a fair and honest ruler, an excellent administrator, and a good man who doted on his family.

Prior to wedding the tora-in-waiting, Aelani Alycon, Brinon had overseen the entire District of Ibiran in southeast Tesriel. The two had been introduced at a court function Brinon had reluctantly attended his first season at court and Aelani later confided in her younger brother that it had been love at first sight. They announced their plans to wed within a year, shocking everyone except, Eryk suspected, their father, Marin.

There had been a great many objections to the match, but all had been overridden in the end. The objections proved baseless and the kingdom of Egalion flourished under their combined rule. It would seem that having a man native to Ibiran on the throne had eased the ever-simmering tensions between the Tesians and Ibirani.

At least, until recently.

"Ah, but you *should* care," the High Mage chided his brother-in-law gently, "Those 'magpies' are necessary to keep the kingdom functioning. And besides, I must set a good example for Jex." He motioned for the young man at his side to step forward.

Jex did as ordered, bowing low to Brinon, the gesture elegant while still managing to look just a little ostentatious. Eryk sighed inwardly, knowing he should have expected this. The lad never could resist the chance to show off, even if it was just his pretty manners.

The tor smiled in welcome. "Well met, youngling! Your Sura has told me great things about you. He says you may yet become High Mage when he steps down."

Jex grinned impishly in return. "I don't know about that, sire. Perhaps someday, although I think *he* plans to live forever." He tilted his head in Eryk's direction and lowered his voice to a conspirator's whisper, "The Tower ladies keep him young."

He received an elbow and a reproving scowl for his cheek, but his smile only widened. Though he was clearly a man grown, he retained an aura of childish mischief that always came out in situations like these. He just couldn't help himself.

Brinon laughed and threw a wink in Eryk's direction. "Your apprentice has learned quickly, and he seems well advised of the secret to eternal youth."

Eryk felt the little knot of uncertainty in his chest loosen. He'd been somewhat hesitant to bring Jex on this particular journey, as he'd always had a way of getting himself into trouble with that tongue of his. Even while he'd been under Eryk's tutelage, there'd been no stopping his ever-running gob. And speaking of—

Eryk cleared his throat. "Actually, sire, Jex is no longer my apprentice."

The tor's eyebrows rose, causing his forehead to wrinkle almost comically. "No? What did he do?"

"Not a thing. Well, nothing wrong at least, in spite of his best and constant attempts to the contrary. Jex passed his trials a fortnight ago and he is now a full-fledged adept. He's joined the ranks of our Battlemagics."

"Congratulations!" Brinon clapped Jex on the shoulder and the young man had the grace to look humble. "It seems we have something more to celebrate this night, besides your safe arrival." His expression turned dour. "I heard about the trouble you had, by the way. Your sister was most distressed."

"We can speak of it another time, Brinon," Eryk said gently, not wanting to spoil the evening with talk of their little skirmish on the road. The bandits or rebels or whomever they'd been had been dispatched easily enough, and their party had lost not a man in the process. Though their attackers were dressed in Atromorese garb, Eryk had his suspicions as to their true allegiance. One of their own had been left to investigate the matter, and he would deal with it when the report came and not a moment sooner. Other, more pressing matters took precedent.

"And we shall. For now, I know you've traveled long and must be famished. I've ordered a special banquet to be held in honor of your safe arrival." Brinon rubbed his hands together and an eager gleam entered his eye. "You know, that's really one of the few advantages of being tor these days. The food is excellent even if the company is often less so."

The men laughed and Brinon continued. "You're to sit with me tonight. now come, it wouldn't do for you to be late to your own party." He turned to Jex. "This is your first trip to Rowan, isn't it lad? Or wait...were you

here with Eryk for the birth of my youngest?" The tor frowned, obviously sifting memories for the answer to his own question.

"Yes, I came with my Sura when Torina Kylan was born, sire."

"That's right, I remember now. You *were* here then, and all knees and elbows if memory serves. Now as then, I intend to make sure that you retain only the fondest memories of your visit. My daughters will be pleased to have such a fine young gentleman join them at table and I think you'll find my Sarene to be less of a terror this time."

Jex blushed furiously at the reminder and ducked his head.

"Have we time to clean up first?" Eryk asked, glancing pointedly at his travel-stained clothing.

"Ah, I suppose you should. It wouldn't do to bring you in smelling of sweat and horse. You'd offend far too many delicate nostrils, and I'd have to spend hours in council tomorrow morning fielding the complaints, I'm sure. How long do you need?"

"An hour would be adequate," Eryk said after a moment spent in consideration. He was accounting for the time it took Jex to dress rather than his own needs.

"I'll see you in half," Brinon shot back.

"Impatient as ever, sire, but done."

"Not so much impatient, brother, as hungry." Weariness pulled at his features. "I have few pleasures left to me that compare to a finely set table and my tora's company. In half an hour, then. Be quick, we shouldn't keep your lovely sister and nieces waiting. The toadies, though, they can linger until the sky falls for all I care." The little man bustled from the room, leaving them alone again for only a brief moment.

Jex opened his mouth to ask why they were still standing there when a purple liveried page appeared seemingly from thin air and bowed low to them, his mop of straw-colored hair falling into his eyes.

"If you'll follow me, sirs, I will show you to your quarters," the man said, keeping his head inclined politely. He looked a bit old for a page, Eryk decided, and he seemed familiar.

He took a moment to study the man, then smiled broadly in recognition. "Gaylan, isn't it?"

The page blinked in surprise. "Yes, High Mage Alycon, I am Gaylan. How did you—" Remembering his place, he swallowed his question and his ruddy face flushed even darker.

The High Mage laughed. "How did I know your name?"

"Y-yes, sir."

"You were tending table the last time I was at court, about five years ago, I believe, as a punishment for something or other. You made quite the impression."

"I did? A favorable one, I hope," he ventured hopefully.

"Indeed. You spilled an entire pitcher of mulled wine on my tablemate."

Gaylan's uncertain expression turned quickly to one of mortification. "By Plamen's anvil, you're right. I swear before the Goddess Herself that I've improved my serving technique since then, High Mage Alycon!"

Eryk waved his hand dismissively, the light catching his signet ring and casting off brilliant blue sparks. "It was no great tragedy. I found myself quite bored with the man well before you came along and provided me with such a splendid reprieve. His expression was most gratifying."

"Your current companion will fare better, by my honor! Unless you wish it otherwise?" He looked closely at Jex before adding, "This one is a little, ah, *young* for the wine in any case, isn't he?"

Jex, silent until this point, bristled visibly. "I'll have you know I've already seen twenty-five summers." He returned Gaylan's scrutiny, eyes narrowed. "A few more than you, I'll wager."

"Nay," Gaylan said amiably, "I'll have twenty-seven before the month is out."

"I'd believe the seven, at most," Jex scoffed, "I'm surprised they let you leave the kitchen with manners like that. Doesn't the cook wash your mouth out with soap for speaking to people that way? I would if I were her."

"Well, you're certainly cheeky enough for court. Oh, an' Cook's a 'he', by the way. Best not let him catch you saying otherwise. Though come to think of it, he has tits enough to make you question, and if you were really drunk and it were dark—"

Eryk coughed and stepped forward slightly, laying a restraining hand on Jex's shoulder to stem the retort he knew was readying itself to fly out of his mouth. "I'm sure your technique is impeccable. Now, lead on if you please. The tor has set us a rather tight deadline."

Gaylan and Jex stared hard at each other for a breath before Gaylan smiled.

“As you command, High Mage. If you'll come this way.” Bowing again, he ushered the two from the room.

The High Mage caught a flicker of movement from the corner of his eye and Gaylan stumbled against the wall with a quiet grunt. He quickly righted himself and Eryk shot a warning frown at Jex, who had his hands tucked into his pockets and an all-too-innocent look on his face. They followed after the page in silence and Eryk allowed his thoughts to turn to the more pleasant prospects of dinner and seeing the rest of his sister's family.

CHAPTER TWO

“Are we really to sit with the Imperial family?” Jex asked, turning to examine the back of himself in the long mirror and brushing at a piece of nonexistent lint. He tugged at the hem of his cream surcoat and attempted for the hundredth time to smooth his already perfect hair.

He’d briefly disappeared into his own room, which stood across the hall from Eryk’s. After discarding his dusty clothes, making use of the deliciously cool water left for him in the washbasin, and donning fresh clothes, he’d returned. Eryk was surprised at his swiftness, having fully anticipated banging on his door after half an hour and still being late for dinner. The younger man was actually waiting on him for once.

“Seeing as I *am* a member of the royal family...” Eryk replied dryly, examining his face closely in the silver-backed mirror of his dressing table and using a small pair of shears to trim his dark beard and mustache.

Jex ran his fingers over his hair again and in exasperation, Eryk put down the scissors and turned to face his once-apprentice. He thought, not for the first time, that the man was as vainglorious and distracted by his own appearance as any court lady he’d ever met. Jex was good-looking enough and popular with the female mages and tavern wenches, but Black Goddess help them, he was as conceited as a peacock with his tail at full feather.

“Enough preening, Jex. You’re more than presentable for a court banquet. Anyway,” he reclaimed the shears and went back to snipping carefully here and there, “Brinon and Aelani’s daughters are very accommodating. I’ve known them all since they were infants and I promise they won’t bite.”

“That’s what you said last time, Eryk, and yet I have a scar on my forearm that should perfectly match the charming Torina Sarene’s teeth.” Jex rolled up one sleeve to reveal the mark in question and Eryk snorted a laugh.

“Perhaps you should have thought about what you said to her before you said it, then. Ladies, even at her age, seldom like to be told they screech like hunting falcons when they laugh.”

* * *

Dinner was a splendid affair in the palace of the tor and his lady. The wine flowed, as did the lively conversation. The formal banquet hall was brightly lit and the flickering glow of a thousand candles was reflected in the shine of silver plates and goblets, and sparkled in the threads of the ornate tapestries covering the dark stone and wood paneled walls. A polished mosaic of marble lay underfoot, winding in elaborate patterns that slowly lightened until culminating in a pale sunburst before the dais on which the high table stood. The hall was filled to capacity by gaily dressed courtiers and exotic diplomats from far off lands.

Eryk and Jex found themselves directed to the head of the Imperial table where Tor Brinon sat with his family.

As they approached, followed by curious eyes from all sides, Tora Aelani rose swiftly to her feet and raced down the platform steps. She flew to Eryk and threw her arms around his neck, standing on tiptoe to kiss his chin in front of the entire court. Although she was a head taller than her husband, she had to stretch to reach her brother with her lips. A smattering of good-natured cheers erupted from the closer tables at the display of familial affection.

“I’m glad to see you, little brother! I thought you’d never arrive.”

“Sister,” he replied, hugging her warmly. “It’s been too long and I’ve missed you terribly as always. Are you well? I see you’re expecting. You should have written me with the news! A little torin this time perhaps?”

She smiled up at him, resting one hand on her gently rounded, silk covered stomach, “You ask as if you don’t already know the answer, just like you did with the girls. I do pray this one is a son, but I’d be just as pleased with another daughter. Brinon claims to have no preference, so long as he or she is healthy.” She looked back at her husband fondly and he blew her what he thought was a surreptitious kiss.

Brother and sister spoke quietly for a moment more before the tora turned to Jex. Delight suffused her beautiful face as she extended her hands to take his.

“Jex Xander! My, you’ve grown. You were such a little boy when last you were here, but no longer, I see. Come and sit beside me. I’ll enjoy being surrounded by such handsome men tonight.”

Jex couldn't take his eyes from her. The tora was the most gorgeous thing he'd ever seen and the women he'd encountered in the past couldn't hold a candle to her radiant beauty. He had indeed been a child when he'd first met her, and as a grown man, he discovered a completely new appreciation for her loveliness, which pregnancy had not diminished in the least.

She had the same storm-gray eyes as her brother, but hers were set in a face as fine and flawless as a porcelain dish. Her curling ebony hair flowed to her waist and was adorned with tiny jewels that caught the light when she turned her head. Tall for an Egalion woman, she was still slender and fine boned. Her deep turquoise gown was a perfect contrast to her golden skin and flowed over her shapely figure like water. From the looks she received, it was obvious that both her husband and her subjects were completely enamored of her.

Eryk noticed Jex's unabashed stare and leaned down to him. “Didn't I teach you it's impolite to stare? And close your mouth. You look like a landed fish!”

Jex flushed and immediately snapped his jaw shut, the click of his teeth embarrassingly audible. Aelani laughed and squeezed his hands. She had a light, musical laugh that he knew he would never tire of hearing.

“Jex, let me reintroduce you to our daughters.” She gestured at the three torinas who had appeared beside her and they promptly curtsied. They widely ranged in age, with the eldest appearing to be in her mid-twenties and the youngest looking no older than ten.

“This is my eldest daughter, Anya. She would have been away in Cyril when you were here before.”

The woman took after her father in looks; short, dark, and rather plump, but with a sweetly shy face that made her quite pretty. She was dressed in violet damask and her auburn hair was gathered into an elaborate braid that fell down her back. She smiled at Jex from beneath her lashes, her coffee eyes shining with mirth and intelligence.

“This is Sarene. I'm sure you remember her.”

Jex bowed over the proffered hand, brushing a kiss across her knuckles. “How could I forget?”

The middle daughter was several years his junior and she studied him with thinly-veiled interest. She looked nothing like either of her parents or sisters, but Jex had once seen a portrait of her grandmother, Tora Rianne, and the two could have passed for twins. Sarene was tall like her mother, with fair skin and bright eyes the green of summer grass. She had a pixie's nose and ears and her face was surrounded by a cascade of golden hair. Her rosy cheeks dimpled becomingly when she smiled.

Aelani rested her hand on the head of the girl closest to her. “And this is our youngest, Kylan.”

Kylan took after her mother in all things physical. Her turquoise-flecked gray eyes were wide with thick, dark lashes, and her complexion was faultless. Her dark hair was braided and coiled around her head, making her look younger than her years. Although her face and figure maintained a vestige of baby roundness, she was absolutely stunning, with the promise of growing into a woman of rare beauty. The smile she gave them was welcoming, without a hint of either the shyness or the coy awareness displayed by her sisters. Jex noticed with amusement that she was missing two of her top front teeth.

“You three have certainly grown,” Eryk observed with a proud grin. “You're more lovely every time I see you. The Imperial palace has quite the pretty flower garden indeed.” The torinas blushed and giggled at the praise, Kylan ducking a little behind her mother's skirt.

He turned to Anya. “Have you taken your vows at the Cyrilan Temple yet?”

“I've been a kvinna for six years now, Uncle. I took my trials as Abdesa-in-Waiting in the spring.” The eldest torina's voice was soft, a bit deeper than one would expect, and quietly confident. “I'm really only home until the baby is born.”

“Ah, that's right. I remember now that you wrote me afterwards. I grow forgetful in my old age and I apologize. The sisters are blessed to have you among them and I know you'll make an excellent Abdesa when the time comes. I only wish I could have brought you to the Tower instead.”

“Don't tease, Uncle Eryk. We both know I haven't enough magic to blow out a candle,” she sighed wistfully, “but it's as the Goddess wills.” With a bow of her head, she retreated and rejoined her father at the table.

Cheerfully, he focused his attention on Sarene. “And you, my blossom? What great plans do they have for you?”

Sarene stood up straight and met the High Mage's gaze unflinchingly. "I'll be leaving for Davaria in the spring." She glanced at her parents. "Father secured a diplomatic position for me there and, apparently, an engagement to their torin."

"Does this please you?"

"It did," her gaze flicked to Jex and her smile turned bold, "but after seeing how your apprentice turned out, I may be tempted to stay."

"Sarene!" Aelani scolded.

Eryk snorted, putting an affectionate hand on her shoulder. "Davaria is a beautiful country and Torin Reord is a good man. Be content, lass."

Aelani, who'd been watching Jex and noted the beginnings of restless shifting, reached out and took her brother's arm. "Come and sit. You must be hungry, and you're keeping your apprentice waiting."

Jex found himself seated between the tora and Torina Kylan. The two older girls sat beyond their father and Eryk, at the far curve of the table. The High Mage and the tor had their heads together, already deep in conversation and from their grave expressions, Jex surmised that business didn't take time off to enjoy dinner in the Imperial court. A pity, that. The room seemed to be full of tempting pleasures, and more than one of them was very much focused on him.

Oh yes, this trip promised to be rather enjoyable indeed.

It didn't take long for Jex to discover Torina Sarene watching him. Catching her eye, he winked at her and she giggled. He quirked an eyebrow and she stuck out her tongue in reply. Perhaps not so changed after all, he mused, although as long as she'd grown out of biting when she didn't get her way, he could cope.

"So, you're my uncle's mage-apprentice?" Torina Kylan asked, looking up at him with curious eyes.

"Until a fortnight ago, my lady, I was."

Kylan crinkled her nose. "My sisters are ladies. I'm just Kylan," she stated firmly, reaching to pluck a ripe peach from the platter being passed in front of her.

Jex tried not to laugh at the little girl's assertion. Of course she was a lady; she was one of the tor's daughters, all three of whom were ladies of rank, despite what she thought. Her open innocence, however, was charming.

Aelani turned to him before he could reply. "Tell me, Jex, how do you like being apprenticed to my brother? He doesn't work you too hard, I hope."

"Actually, I passed my...*examinations* several weeks ago and am no longer an apprentice. I'm—" he paused, searching for an adequate description, "more of an assistant now, I suppose."

"Well, congratulations. Eryk is good to you?"

Jex smiled. "He can be quite demanding at times, but I've grown used to it and relish the challenge, most days."

"He was fond of giving orders as a child as well, so it sounds as if little has changed. Your mother must be very proud of you. I understand that not all apprentices make the transition to adept."

"So her letters indicate."

"Letters? Do you not visit her?" The tora's eyes turned a little sad and flickered to her own children.

"She and my younger sister live near the walls in the city and I visit them when I can, but it isn't as often as they would like."

"Oh, my poor dear. To be sent so far away from your home, and your own mother." She was interrupted by her husband, who had leaned over to whisper in her ear.

As soon as the tora's head was turned, a purple-clad arm reached over Jex's shoulder to refill their wine goblets.

"That's a fetching shade of cream you're wearing," Gaylan murmured, "I think it would look even better with a splash of red, don't you?" He waved a flagon and Jex grabbed his wrist, his long and slender fingers barely able to encompass it. The glare he leveled on the other man would have made a dragon stop and think twice.

"Do it and I swear by the Five I'll turn you into a dung beetle right here and now."

"That's a little harsh, sir mage." Gaylan snickered and retreated, braking the grip on his wrist with ease. Jex glowered after him.

“Would you really?” Kylan giggled. While the tora, intent on her husband, seemed unaware of the exchange, her daughter had been eavesdropping.

“Would I what?” Jex asked innocently.

“Turn him into a gross bug!”

He winked at her but said nothing.

The child looked between the two, head tilted thoughtfully. “I wish I could be a mage. I hate being a torina! Nobody ever lets me do *anything*.” Her eyes brightened. “But I bet Uncle Eryk lets you do lotsa stuff. Have you ever gone to the sea and seen the nymphs? Or killed a dragon? Or—”

“Don't pester, Kylan. It isn't polite,” Aelani cut in as she turned back to them. “I'm sure if you ask nicely, he'll tell you all the stories you want another time. For now eat your supper, my love.”

Kylan pouted a little but did as she was told, dragging her fork in little swirls across her plate as she contemplated its contents.

“If you don't mind,” Aelani whispered, leaning close to Jex, “no stories about dragons. She has nightmares.”

“As it please you,” he replied, “On my honor, I promise to tell no dragon-stories. Not that I actually have any. My life isn't nearly that exciting.” Come to think of it, he really didn't have any child-appropriate stories, a deficiency he'd never had reason to regret before.

“You have my thanks.”

As the meal progressed, Jex noticed food from the torina's plate disappearing beneath the table while the tora had her attention elsewhere. When he lifted the hem of the tablecloth to look, he saw a fat chocolate-and-white puppy sitting between Torina Kylan's slippered feet. It wagged its stubby little tail when it caught sight of him, tongue lolling in a doggy grin.

“His name is Astraeus and he's supposed to be in my room,” Kylan explained, tugging the cloth back into place. “Promise you won't tell?”

Jex patted the pup's head and felt it lick his palm. “I promise, Torina.”

“You have to swear!” She held out one hand, little finger extended.

He hooked his pinky through her and squeezed. “Swear.”

“I like you,” the torina announced matter-of-factly, “Sarene or Nurse would have told Mama.”

“Would have told Mama what?” Aelani asked, her lips curving up in a small smile at the pair of startled and guilty faces turned on her. The mage and her daughter exchanged a glance, but before either could answer, she held up a hand.

“I've already seen him, Kylan. Just don't let him wander off.”

“Yes, Mama.”

Servants began clearing plates as another course was brought in and Kylan giggled when she saw Jex's greedy eyes.

“We only get to eat like this on banquet nights,” she told him, “Although Papa and me wish it were more often.” Her giggles became hysterical snickering as Jex gazed in bewilderment at an intricate crystal bowl being held out to him by a silent serving girl. The thing was full of scented water and there were exotic-looking flowers floating in it.

“Dip your fingers in it to get the fruit stickies off,” Kylan prompted, demonstrating by daintily placing her own fingers in the bowl and wiggling them around dramatically. “Make sure you use your napkin to dry them, though. Nurse says not to use your sleeves. It isn't nice,” she added. He quickly followed her example and the bowl was removed.

Grinning, he flicked damp fingers at the torina and she squinched up her face and smothered a squeal as a few droplets splashed her cheek. She kicked his shin softly under the table in retaliation. Not wishing to be outdone by a seven-year-old, he reached over and tugged her hair gently.

* * *

“Matters are reaching a boiling point in Ibiran,” Brinon said. He kept his voice low so as not to be heard beyond the table. “The Council is pushing for a suppression campaign and I'm not sure how long I can stall them. It could mean open war this time.”

“What happened to your negotiations?” Eryk asked, just as quietly. He took a thoughtful sip of wine before setting the goblet aside. “The last thing we’d heard at Turrus Arcana, before your letter, was that the talks were going rather well.”

“They were, and things settled down when the new delegate arrived.” The tor ran a hand across his eyes. “Then she just vanished and no attempts to locate her have been successful, which has only added to the problems. The Council is muttering that she abandoned the talks and cite it as proof that Ibiran isn’t ready for the responsibilities of independence, and the Ibirani are crying foul play. I’m rather afraid she’s dead, truth be told, though we can’t be certain without a body or other evidence. Someone new is in charge, unofficially, and my agents haven’t been able to learn a damn thing about them.”

“We hear stirrings at the Temple,” Anya added. She looked somberly at her father and uncle. “This new leader seems to be very well educated and very well organized, but also secretive. They’ve even put a name to the rebellion, calling it The Provincial Movement.”

“Isn’t that odd,” Eryk mused, rubbing his chin. “For the last two hundred years, they’ve been too disordered to work with one another for more than a few weeks. Now all of a sudden, they function almost like an army.”

“That’s what the Council thinks and an army is exactly what the Tesians fear. There have been raids on several Ibirani villages ‘suspected’ of housing rebels and handful of Tesian farms have been burned. No one has been killed, yet.” Brinon looked wearier than Eryk had ever seen him. Deep lines of care had etched themselves into his face and bags had formed beneath his eyes that weren’t there a year ago. “That’s part of why I wrote to you and Jordin.”

Eryk leaned back, surprised. “Jordin as well? Is he coming? He hasn’t left Darmiad in years, with his wife in such poor health.”

“Aye, I wrote and he responded. He’ll be here within the week. We need the support of Turrus Arcana and the nobility, Eryk, more than ever.”

“What does the Grand Council think of our summons?”

“The Grand Council is so consumed with its own internal politics that it’s practically useless. A formal petition for reopening negotiations with Ibiran would take weeks, or even months, to be approved and that’s if a consensus can be reached at all. I’m afraid we don’t have that kind of time before this devolves into bloodshed.”

* * *

The meal seemed endless, but not in an unpleasant way. In the course of an hour, Jex consumed more and a greater variety of food, some of which he couldn’t readily identify, than he thought he’d eaten in all his life. Just when he thought there couldn’t possibly be anything left to serve, a little bell was rung and more platters were carried through the hall by young pages both male and female. As the meal progressed, he did slip a few of the stranger morsels under the table to the eager puppy and allowed Kylan to wheedle him into eating the coins of yellow squash her mother put on her plate. Both actions seemed to earn him high marks in her eyes.

Contrary to Tor Brinon’s earlier jest about the company, Jex found his two ladies to be even better than the food. Torina Kylan was bright and vivacious, full of questions and stories, and Tora Aelani proved to be a most informative dinner companion. She indulged his curiosity, explaining the different aspects of court life and pointing out the realm’s most important and powerful nobles.

In turn, the tora wanted to know everything about Turrus Arcana and the life he led there, lamenting that her brother didn’t write nearly enough to give her a clear impression of the place or its inhabitants. She couldn’t seem to resist mothering him, either; refilling his glass, making sure he got a little of each dish that was served, and generally monitoring his comfort. He also noticed that, after his second serving, she started watering his wine when she thought he wasn’t looking.

When the debris of the final course, a delicate citrus ice he’d had to defend from the sneakily reaching spoon of Torina Kylan, had been cleared away, a group of servants began moving the large wooden tables to one side of the hall. A small band of musicians gathered in a far corner and began to tune their instruments. The atmosphere changed from languid, stuffed contentment to one of excitement as courtiers hurried to choose partners.

After a good-natured argument with Brinon, Eryk took his sister's hand and led her from the dais. The first dance was lively, and the accompanying steps were fast and complex. The tora was a superb dancer and Jex was a bit impressed to learn that Eryk was as well.

Kylan watched with longing widening her pretty eyes as the colorful figures whirled past, shouting and laughing. She sighed dreamily and propped her chin on one small fist.

"I usually get sent to bed when the fun stuff starts," she said, looking around warily for an approaching nurse. "I never get to dance, even though they make me take lessons."

Jex rose to his feet and offered his hand. "Well then, now's your chance. Come on, before someone notices you're still awake and decides to cart you off."

She folded her arms. "You have to ask me proper, like the fancy men ask Sarene and Mama."

"I thought you weren't a lady," he teased.

She merely stared at him, childishy obstinate in her demands.

Forcing a solemn expression, he bowed deeply to her and held out his hand again as he straightened. "My apologies. Would you honor me with a dance, your highness?"

Her face lit up and she squealed joyfully, decorum forgotten as she jumped to her feet. She practically skipped as she pulled him down the steps, but then halted, frowning up at him uncertainly.

"You're too tall!" she declared, "I can't reach, but we'll look silly if you lean over."

"You're right," he agreed. After pondering for a moment, he bent and swept her into his arms, then proceeded to twirl them into the crowd. She beamed at him in adoration, locking her arms around his neck as he spun her in and out of groups of courtiers, heedless of the actual pattern to the dance. His actions garnered laughter and applause from the other dancers, while the tor and tora looked on in approval.

He danced with her until she grew drowsy, even setting her on her feet once and giving her the opportunity to proudly put her lessons to use. Much to her delight, a large section of floor cleared for them and her uncle, along with one or two other men, whistled and called encouragement from the sidelines.

Features set in determination and glowing under the attention, Kylan moved with great care and performed admirably, with only a few missteps here and there that were easily made less noticeable by her partner's quick adaptations. When the dance reached its end, she curtsied deeply, though at the last instant an enormous yawn nearly stole her balance. Turning his bow smoothly into an unobtrusive rescue, Jex steadied her and disaster was averted. The applause was loud and a few people cheered. Kylan blushed scarlet and hid her face in his chest when he picked her up again.

Finally, after another dance and the third jaw-cracking yawn in as many minutes, the torina was passed off to her nurse and the sleepy Astraeus was retrieved from beneath the table. Jex dismissed the many thanks for his kindness with a wave and a grin. He returned to his seat, procuring a glass of wine along the way, and settled back to let the riot of sound and color wash over him.

He'd been watching for only a short time when there was a touch on his sleeve. He looked up to find Torina Sarene standing beside his chair.

"I see you can dance well enough with children, but do you dance properly, sir mage?" she queried archly.

He sighed somewhat dramatically. "Only a little, I'm afraid. There are few opportunities at the Tower. Not many women there to dance with and I don't fancy men, my lady." That last was a small lie, but no matter. While the Imperial court was said to be quite open-minded, he wasn't sure it was *that* open-minded.

Her smile broadened and her pretty eyes flashed impishly. "We'll have to fix that immediately. If you're to spend time at court, you must learn."

Jex accepted her hand and allowed her to lead him back to the dancing. Sarene's hips swayed alluringly as she walked and he couldn't help but admire the curves so nicely outlined by the pink silk she wore. Several of the more intoxicated attendees staggered past them, laughing hysterically, and he quickly steered the torina out of their path. His hand may have lingered a little too long at the small of her back, but she said nothing.

"Now," she instructed, turning to face him, "this one is a Mandé, a little fast but not terribly complicated. Just watch me and do as I do." So saying, she stepped back and began the quick steps, spinning as she went. Jex studied her intently and when it was his turn to join her, he did so with confidence. He mimicked her perfectly and she clapped in approval.

"Excellent!" she cried, grabbing both of his hands in hers and pulling him close. He was acutely aware of her warmth against him and the bodice of her gown was soft beneath his hands. He took a firm grip on her waist

and they were drawn into the crowd briefly before being separated. Jex found himself joining hands with more than a dozen ladies before Sarene was finally back in his arms. Her cheeks were flushed and she panted slightly with the exertion.

"I knew you were a quick learner!" she gasped when the dance ended. She curtsied to him and he bowed low in return.

"It helps to have an exceptional partner."

The music slowed and a few drums joined the mix, changing the entire feeling of the room. Sarene stepped into his body and slid her arms around his shoulders.

She glanced up at him with eyes gone heavy lidded and Jex felt his pulse quicken. "I'll teach you every one they play tonight. Just trust me and you'll be dancing properly in no time." She ghosted one hand up to the nape of his neck and he felt her fingers toying with a wisp of hair that had come free of his ponytail. He stared down at her blonde head with growing arousal and his body began to heat in ways that had nothing to do with the climbing temperature. Feeling his tension, she glanced up.

"I promise I don't bite, sir mage. Not this time."

"That's what everyone keeps telling me." His lips twitched into a flirtatious smile.

"You could test me, if you wish," Sarene murmured into his shoulder. "Just slide your arm around my waist..."

"Your parents and my recent Sura, who just so happens to be your uncle and a lot bigger than I, are all watching us. Perhaps another time, in a more private setting, Torina," he replied, lips just brushing the shell of her ear.

She said nothing, but he felt her pull a little away from him and was both relieved and disappointed. The last thing he needed was to make a spectacle of himself on his first night in court. Although if he had to choose someone to make a spectacle with, she seemed certain to be an entertaining choice.

"Well then, just hold me and we'll both act as if you're the consummate gentleman you pretend to be." Sarene's playful tone softened the implication of her words somewhat, and he smirked.

Jex managed to make it through the rest of the evening without a mishap, although by the end, his groin ached with want of her. The triumphant glance Sarene shot him as they parted to the fading strings of the last melody indicated she was entirely aware of his predicament and had in truth done nothing but encourage it.

The torina's guardian, a matronly woman nearly as wide as she was tall, with a stern face and hawkish gaze, descended on them almost instantly. She eyed Jex like she expected him to either ravish her charge on the spot, or eat her. Sarene, ignoring her completely, looked reluctant to go.

"You were an admirable partner, sir mage, and I thank you for a wonderful evening. Will...will I see you tomorrow?" She looked at him hopefully, brushing nervously at her gown. Her demeanor now was a stark contrast to the sensual confidence of moments earlier.

"I expect so. Your uncle and I will be in Rowan for some time, I believe. Important business of one kind or another." he replied with a vague shrug.

"Good. I shall look for you tomorrow." Sarene leaned up and pressed her lips to his cheek. "Good night," she whispered hurriedly as her nurse took her arm and shot Jex another withering look. He caught the woman making the sign against evil sorcery in his direction and rolled his eyes.

"Good night, Torina." He stared after her until a tap on his shoulder broke his reverie. He turned his head to find Eryk standing beside him.

"I see you managed to survive the evening. Quite successfully, I might add." He glanced pointedly after Sarene and then to a flock of young women loitering nearby, appraising Jex while pretending not to. "Didn't I tell you everything would be fine?"

"You did."

"Let me give you one piece of advice, if I may. I know how much you love when I do that." The High Mage lowered his voice so that only Jex could hear. "Beware the ladies of the Imperial court, and that includes Sarene. They're nothing like the girls you're used to. These will eat you alive and spit out what's left...even while teaching you more than a life spent at the Tower ever could. And I suggest that any future instruction be a little more discrete." Eryk's eyes twinkled as he took in the younger man's open mouthed shock.

"Sir—"

Eryk threw his head back and roared laughter. Jex only called him 'sir' when he was trying to avoid being punished. "I'm not angry, but did you truly think I wouldn't notice? You're a grown man now and your choices in that regard are none of my business anymore. I know you're a favorite at home. Believe me, I've heard the rumors from Eras, and I didn't doubt for a second it would be any different here."

Jex sighed heavily. "And I thought my jumping the wall to sneak into town had gone unnoticed."

"I was your age once, Jex, hard as that may be for you to believe. There were wenches in the inn and pretty female apprentices then, too. I know more about what goes on in Tower dormitories and upstairs tavern rooms than you dare to guess. All I ask is that you have a care."

Eryk turned on his heel and walked away, leaving Jex to gape after him.

Well, that hadn't been *quite* the lecture he'd been expecting.

"So," drawled a voice from behind him, "you've seen how the lords and ladies do it. Care to go to a real party now?"

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