

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, childish 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 tora 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?’

CHAPTER THREE

Jex turned slowly to face the speaker. "You."

The single word dripped with annoyance and derision.

Gaylan stood behind him, tapping one foot. He had changed from his livery to a nondescript shirt and trousers of blue and black. It suited him much better than the purple, Jex decided.

"Yes, I. You're quite the master of wit aren't you, lad?"

"I can be when I wish, and that's Battlemage Xander to you, page," he grumbled sullenly.

The blond man opened his eyes wide in mock terror. "A Battlemage is it? I'm sure I ought to be terrified."

"You should be."

"I'm not," Gaylan smirked. "Now, how 'bout it. Do you want to go or not?"

"That depends," Jex crossed his arms over his chest and stared stonily at the other man. They were of a height, but Gaylan outweighed him by a significant amount. The man wasn't fat, just broad and muscular in the way of fighting men and laborers. Based on the flaxen hair and periwinkle eyes, Jex guessed he was Tesian, but if so, he was the shortest one the mage had ever seen. He was actually quite an attractive man, really. Rude, obnoxious, and in need of a good thrashing, but attractive.

Gaylan returned the stare with a raised eyebrow. "Depends on what, Battlemage?"

Jex shot a quick glance around before he answered. The hall had all but emptied and the ladies who'd been studying him with so much curiosity were gone. He huffed out a breath rife with disappointment.

"On whether or not you're buying the first round."

Putting an arm around Jex's shoulders, he laughed and led him towards a door on the far side of the room. "Where we're going, there's no need."

* * *

"So this is what you call a 'real party', is it Krihamre?" Jex taunted. He was sitting on a wooden stool tilted back against the rough stone wall so that only its back legs rested on the floor. His boots were propped on the table in front of him and he held a clay tankard of ale in one hand as he studied the common room.

It was a large space whose center had been cleared of all furnishings, with rough walls and exposed ceiling beams. Since it was a warm night, the hearth across the room was unlit, empty, and swept clean of ashes. Fresh rushes had been strewn about the bare flagstone floor, but one could still smell the faint odor of spilled beer and charred wood that had soaked into the room over centuries. It was a cozy, homey sort of place, with one notable defect.

The chamber was full of men; servants, men-at-arms, groomsmen, and the like. All held pipes or mugs and were either standing or sitting on benches pushed back against the walls. Very few women were present and these were mostly old grandmothers. The distinct lack of attractive females was rather a letdown, and Jex was beginning to feel a little cheated; he could have been in a tavern in the city by now, surrounded by enough willing women to keep a man happy for nights on end.

"Oh, just be patient," Gaylan shot back, settling in beside him with his own drink. "The lassies will be down from the kitchens and chambers soon and that's all we're waiting for."

Jex snorted but said nothing, sipping at his ale in lieu of a reply. It wasn't as good as what he'd had upstairs but it was ambrosia compared to the slop they served in Eras. That stuff was brewed for Hendai and was as likely to kill a man as get him drunk. Too much of it caused a hangover not soon forgotten and that was always assuming you weren't still crocked when you woke up, wherever and whenever that happened to be. He shuddered as a few such mornings—and afternoons—flashed through his mind.

"So tell me about yourself," he said to his companion, leaning forward and setting his mostly empty tankard on the scarred plank table. Gaylan refilled it from an earthenware pitcher and Jex nodded his thanks.

“Not a lot to tell, really,” Gaylan answered, “I’m a Tesian, but I’m sure you guessed that. Both parents, my brother and sisters and her man are still in Val. As the youngest son, I was placed in the Imperial Service when I was about seven and trained as a man-at-arms. I’ve been serving ever since.”

“What are you doing on page duty, then?” Jex asked after a deep draw of the amber liquid. He wiped his mouth with the back of one hand and closed his eyes contentedly. In the absence of pretty girls, he could at least get drunk enough not to mind.

“Ah, that. I, well...I’m being punished, as it happens, and that’s the worst thing the captain can think to do to me.” The other sounded self-conscious at the revelation.

“Punished for what? Or do I not really want to know?”

“It’s probably best if you don’t. Let’s just say it’s not a permanent placement.”

At that moment, a flood of women swept into the room, to the obvious pleasure of the men present. The previous murmur of conversation swelled to a dull roar.

“This is more like it,” Jex observed, gazing around with an appreciative grin.

Gaylan whistled loudly and a woman with skin the color of bronze, shining chestnut hair, and slanted sapphire eyes looked in his direction. She gestured rudely at him, but began making her way across the room nonetheless. Stopping just short of Gaylan’s booted feet, she put her hands on her full hips and pretended to scowl down at them. She was short and pleasantly rounded, the blue of her gown lovely against her dark skin and emphasizing the color of her eyes.

“Now who be this, Gaylan Krihamre?” she demanded, her accent thick and lilting, “He be too fine for a guard and much too nice-looking for the stables.”

“I be Jex Xander, battlemage extraordinaire, at your service.” Jex rose to his feet and bowed over her hand, planting a lingering kiss on the back. “Might I be so blessed as to have your name, divine one, or are you simply the Goddess in mortal guise, to remain unnamed?”

Gaylan gave the woman an amused look and she rolled her eyes, though she was clearly pleased by the flattery. The Tesian reached out and pulled her firmly down onto his brawny knee.

“Xander, this is Babirye Krihamre. My wife.” There was unmistakable emphasis on the last two words, a mark of pride and friendly warning. He circled her slim waist with his arm, his hand settling possessively on her thigh. She swatted it away, but the gesture was playful rather than affronted and she didn’t protest when he simply put it back in the same place with a firm squeeze.

“I can speak for myself, you great bear,” Babirye sighed. Returning her attention to Jex, she ducked her head in greeting. “Pleased to meet you, Battlemage Xander.”

“Please, my friends call me Jex, and I would very much like for us to be friends.” He gave her his most winning smile, revealing a dimple in each cheek.

“Find your own woman, mageling,” Gaylan growled affably, “This one is already taken!”

“Alas,” Jex mourned, putting a hand over his heart as if wounded. “Mine eyes shall never look upon another beauty as perfect or as fair. You are the brightest star in the velvet heavens, yet no matter how I yearn for thee, your radiant affections will be forever beyond my grasp.”

“Such blarney!” Babirye accused, laughing heartily. She turned to her husband and cuffed the side of his head. “Why don’t you ever speak to me so?”

“I do!” he protested, rubbing his offended skull.

Babirye rolled her eyes again. “Asking me to play the blanket hornpipe doesn’t count. Now *that* one,” she pointed at Jex, “knows some very pleasing words. Learn from him, husband, and perhaps you will spend more time in my bed.”

“Now look what you’ve done,” Gaylan groaned at the mage, “I’ll never hear the end of it.”

“Apologies, my good friend...” His words trailed off as his eyes focused on something over Gaylan’s shoulder. The big man turned his head to follow his stare. Babirye glanced behind as well.

“Ah, that be my twin sister, Chimaka,” she said slyly, reading the interest in his eyes. “She’s not taken.”

“Exactly. Go ply your silver tongue on her. She’s a, um, a most accommodating lass.” It was evident Gaylan had meant to say something quite different, but changed his mind at a look from his wife.

“Oh, I most certainly will. If you’ll excuse me.” Jex started away, weaving between and around small knots of people, eyes fastened on the beauty standing alone near the cold hearth.

* * *

Babirye's sister proved to be a most accommodating lass indeed.

After Jex reached her side, accepting another mug of ale along the way, a lively tune was struck up by a group of men and women in the opposite corner. It took a bit of doing, but he coaxed her to the middle of the floor with him and she turned out to be nearly as expert a partner as Sarene had been, and twice as enthusiastic. She was even so bold as to steal his tankard, throwing her head back and downing the contents in a series of long swallows that accentuated the graceful column of her throat.

The atmosphere in the servants' common room was nothing like the grand and stately affair of the hall upstairs, even at the height of the revelry. The musicians played more rustic instruments here; fiddles, tambourines, pipes, and bodhrán, and the dancing was much less structured, requiring a great deal of prolonged contact between partners. Most of the steps, he learned, were improvised on the spot.

After almost a dozen reels and sets, they were both flushed and sweating from the exertion. Chimaka plucked the neck of her gown away from her chest, under the pretense of fanning a bit of cooler air onto her overheated skin. Jex studied the deep valley between her breasts, thoroughly entranced by the firm globes that peeked from the top of her shift. When he looked up again, she was watching him hungrily, the tip of her pink tongue sliding out to lick her lips.

In another half hour, well into his fourth... fifth?... tankard, he was at last overcome by the lust born of Chimaka's hot glances and increasingly aggressive touch. He took her hand and drew her from the crowd, retreating into a dark corner for more privacy.

On the way, she caught hold of a pretty Darmese girl and pulled her along. The two women seemed well acquainted with one another, much to his delight, and he was glad he'd accepted Gaylan's offer instead of slipping into the city.

Kisses became sloppy, caresses turned greedy, and before he knew it, they were leading him from the room. A chorus of catcalls and bawdy laughter followed after them, but Jex barely noticed, intent on following the enticing pair of bottoms in front of him wherever their owners chose to lead him.

They staggered together up the winding flights of stairs to the guest wing on the fourth floor, lips and hands roaming without a thought or care as to who might see. By the time they'd reached his room, Jex's surcoat had vanished. He had the front of the Darmese girl's dress unlaced, freeing her breasts to his skilled fingers and Chimaka had progressed from yanking open his tunic—losing a button or two along the way—to struggling with his belt. It would have gone much more quickly if her hands hadn't gone into his hair every time he stopped to kiss her.

One foot tangling in someone's skirts, Jex stumbled and careened sideways, all three of them colliding with the wall as they laughed and panted. It took every ounce of his remaining concentration to get the key out of his pocket, into the lock, and then to open the door. In his haste, he overbalanced, sprawling backwards across the threshold. The two women followed him down and his head struck the floor soundly.

For a moment, he saw stars, but they were quickly replaced by sparks of another kind when Chimaka bit down on his bottom lip and sucked it into her mouth. A little more fumbling and she finally succeeded in removing his belt, casting it aside before immediately pulling down his trousers and palming him. Without bothering to gain his feet, and relishing the feel of the other woman's hands on his now bare skin, he rolled Chimaka onto her back.

Shoving the door closed with a booted foot, he threw her skirts up to her waist and was delighted to find her naked beneath. As he settled between her splayed thighs, an equally naked body pressed against the length of his back and a slim hand came around him to pull down the neck of Chimaka's bodice.

They never did make it to the bed.

* * *

It was still hours before dawn when he heard the door creak open and only then did Jex realize that, in his earlier rush, he'd failed to lock it upon entering.

That was a mistake that had often proved fatal in the Imperial court.

He lay perfectly still, eyes closed and breathing evenly as if still asleep. He listened to the intruder move about the darkened room, stumbling once over an unseen obstacle and swearing softly. A man, then, and clumsy. Not a servant, either; they would be familiar with the layout of the room and it was far too early for them, anyway.

When he sensed the other man begin to bend over him, Jex made his move.

Launching himself up into the man's gut, he bore him over backwards and to the ground. They struggled briefly, each seeking to top the other, before Jex finally gained the upper hand. He'd found the dagger sheathed at the man's waist and, jerking it free, pressed it to the other's throat. His opponent stilled immediately

"Black Goddess, Xander, relax! It's me!" a familiar voice hissed.

Jex kept the dagger steady. He was in a rather foul mood and this one had it coming. "You have five seconds to explain yourself, Ophelius. Four, three, two—"

"The Shadow Lady sent me!"

Ophelius reached up and pushed at Jex's chest until he rolled aside, sliding the dagger back into its sheath as he did so. He was on excellent terms with Moravelle at the moment, so she had no need to send an assassin. Especially one as inept as Ophelius.

"Diu, Xander," Ophelius whined, rubbing his neck. "You're such an ass sometimes."

"What did you expect, breaking into my rooms in the middle of the bloody night?" Jex shot back. His head was starting to pound and he had no idea where his clothes were. When he felt around, his groping hand encountered a smooth, warm thigh in one direction and a tangle of silken hair in the other. How the two women had slept through the scuffle was beyond him, but he must have worn them out rather thoroughly. That made him feel a little better.

"Drunken git," Ophelius continued, evidently not done with his complaints. "How did you know I was here? I was sure you were out cold."

Jex stretched out with a contented sigh, tucking both hands behind his head. "Because you walk like a mine gollum and smell like a latrine."

"You're one to talk," Ophelius fired back. "This place smells like a brothel."

"Jealous?"

"Hardly. Your talented sister keeps me more than satisfied. I'm only here because she sent me."

"So you said." He decided to let the comment about Raela go unanswered. She'd do more to the braggart than Jex could manage, and wouldn't thank her big brother for interfering.

"Believe me, if it was important I'd have waited till morning. Goddess knows I didn't want to see *this*." He took a deep breath. "Things are stirred up in the city."

"Not just the city," Jex replied gravely, "It's everywhere."

"Aye, but we think this is different. The witch has been getting visitors. Very fancy, well-guarded visitors. They try to disguise the fact they're money, but they're piss-poor at it. Even their men stink of nobility."

Jex sat up again, his languor abruptly evaporating. "The old hag above *The Cauldron*? I'd heard she died. Rather gruesomely, they say, which would serve her right. Diu take the vile bitch."

Ophelius laughed bitterly. "You heard wrong, but that ain't no surprise, seeing where you live. We tried to get rid of her, but she was ready for us. We lost every man we sent. All thirteen."

"Black Goddess," Jex swore, "What was Moravelle thinking?"

"That she needed to eradicate a vermin problem before it overran us."

"Not often the rat bests the cat, is it?"

"This is serious, Xander. That old woman hasn't had anyone to see her in years, decades even, and you know how it ended last time they started sniffin' around. There's council members involved."

"Which ones?"

"That's just it, we dunno. Haven't been able to get anyone inside for almost a year, but you're here now..."

"...and she wants to know what I learn, is that it? I'm not giving up Imperial secrets to her."

"You will if she asks it," Ophelius countered, "You're sworn, remember? Just like the rest of us."

"Like I could forget," Jex snapped, "Tell her I'll come to visit in a few days. I'll see what I can find out in the meantime. You've got people on *The Cauldron*?"

"Day and night," he confirmed.

“Alright. Now get out.” Jex lay back down and closed his eyes, waiting for his guest to make himself scarce. He heard Ophelius rise to his feet and cloth rustled.

Something soft landed on his bare abdomen. It wasn’t heavy, but he knew what it was as soon as it touched him and it took all his self-control not to murder Ophelius where the slimy little weasel stood. It wasn’t actually his fault the way the Shadow Lady chose to make her point; he was simply the messenger and there was some old saying about not killing those...

“See you soon, Jex.” He paused at the threshold. “Oh, and Raela sends her love. She’s well, and so’s your mother. I don’t let no one mess with either of them.”

Jex said nothing and the door closed as quietly as it had opened. Once he was sure Ophelius had truly gone, he rolled to his side and spooned up to one of his bedfellows, snuggling his face into her hair. She murmured and pressed back against him, but didn’t wake.

The room fell into silence and it wasn’t long before the mage’s breathing became slow and regular once more.

The second time the door whispered open, he didn’t stir.

* * *

“We’re ready to begin. You’ll present the proposal to the Grand Council tomorrow, while their strength is divided.”

“With all due respect—”

“Likewise, Councilor, but I didn’t employ you for your opinion. Your respect, however, is appreciated. The time is right and we shall proceed. I trust, lords and lady, that you won’t disappoint me.”

“Of course not. With things in Tesriel so stirred up and word getting out about the mages being attacked on the road, people are scared. Frightened people will agree to just about anything that promises them the illusion of safety and stability. It will be like shooting fish in a barrel, as that rather quaint aphorism goes.”

“Must everything be about fish with you, Adipem?”

“Shut up, you moron! No names, remember? These walls have ears and I’ve no wish to be executed just because you can’t hold your stupid tongue!”

“My apologies.”

“And the Ibirani envoy? What of her?”

“You needn’t worry about Laine. My... associate has persuaded her to cooperate.”

“Then the path before us is cleared. Shall we toast?”

“A bit early, perhaps, but what can it hurt? To the bright and illustrious future.”

“To the bright and illustrious future!”

CHAPTER FOUR

“Enari? Where are you?”

The penetrating voice of the Abdesa reached her even in the highest boughs of the old mahogany where she sat, the summons echoing through the otherwise still dawn. A few startled birds exploded into flight, winging away to safer roosts beyond the wall.

Heaving a quiet sigh, she glanced down. She could see the black clad figure far below and contemplated ignoring her. While it was unwise to disobey the head of the Cyrilan Temple, Enari felt the need for solitude this morning.

The dream had come to her again last night, as it had nearly every night for as long as she could remember. It was always the same; a presence pulling her up from swaddling, comfortable darkness into colors that pulsed softly in time with her own heartbeat. There were words, beautiful, melodic, but foreign words spoken by a hauntingly familiar voice. Words she couldn't remember uttered by a presence she couldn't see. They, like the rest of the dream, faded into the mist upon waking, no matter how hard she strained to recall them.

But something about last night had been...different somehow, though she couldn't put her finger on exactly what that meant. So she'd come to her special place to think. She did her best thinking alone.

“Novice Namelum!”

When the call was repeated, and her surname used, Enari reluctantly pulled her gaze from the cloudy horizon and began her descent, dropping from branch to branch until she'd reached the last. She hesitated in the ancient tree, wishing she could remain in her leafy seclusion, then decided against it and leapt the last ten feet to the ground. Her landing was silent in the short grass, the dew chilly under her bare feet.

* * *

“Goddess where is that girl? She's harder to keep track of than the temple cats!” the Abdesa muttered, squinting against the glare. This particular courtyard was not large, but it was full of shadows this early in the day and its many trees offered hiding places aplenty. She looked up as she walked, aware of the girl's penchant for climbing.

A touch on her sleeve drew her head down sharply, but she managed to stifle the urge to flinch. After so many years, she should be used to the soundless movements of her ward, but she was still frequently surprised. She knew the novice's intent wasn't to startle, it was just her peculiar way.

“*The kvinnas may be right when they whisper of her being fairy-born. Her mother certainly resembled depictions of the Vintyri well enough.*” To the girl, she spoke firmly but kindly, “Enari, we've talked about this. You are to attend meditations and break your fast with the kvinnas and other novices before coming out to play. You're eighteen now, no longer a child to run about as you please.”

The girl fished in a tunic pocket and brought forth a half eaten apple and held it up for inspection, as if to show she had fulfilled at least half of the previously given and oft-repeated command.

The older woman folded her arms.

Enari reached into a second pocket and brought out a small chunk of dark bread, a few nibble marks marring one corner. She presented it with a lopsided little smirk.

The Abdesa found it difficult to suppress the smile now threatening her carefully cultivated façade of severity.

“That is half a breakfast. I've seen a baby sugar glider eat more than that and I know you missed meditations again this morning, but I will give you some credit for the attempt.”

Enari lowered her gold-flecked amber eyes and looked away without speaking, a touch of pink rising in her cheeks. The Abdesa studied the novice before her as she fidgeted.

Enari Namelum was a little thing, considering she was almost half through her eighteenth summer. Her year-mates had outstripped her long ago and she could easily pass as one of the much younger novices. The

Abdesa guessed the girl weighed no more than seven stone, even fully dressed and sopping wet, and that estimate was a generous one, especially of late. As a woman grown, the Abdesa herself was barely of average height and the top of the novice's fiery head came just to her chin.

Diminutive stature notwithstanding, Enari was no child, and despite her best attempts to conceal it, she was quite lovely. And that hair of hers certainly set her apart.

Kvinna Vasi de'Curande, Enari's Sura and Master Apothecary of the Temple, had once remarked that the girl's hair couldn't simply be described as 'red'. She said it reminded her of a spice box she'd seen once at the Great Market in Rowan; paprika and vibrant curry, with hints of cinnamon and rich cayenne. Enari's tresses were silky and long, almost to her hips now and the sun brought out streaks of gold amidst the red waves. She had adamantly refused to allow the kvinnas to cut it, becoming so agitated when they tried that the Abdesa finally ordered them to leave her be. While Vasi had accepted the order to keep Enari's hair uncut, she did require the girl to bind it back when she was working in the Apothecarium. Now, however, it tumbled free down her back and around her heart-shaped face, a bright contrast against her ivory skin.

The Abdesa had never seen her equal...save the long departed Tanith.

Enari resembled her mother in every feature, from her wide, almond-shaped eyes to her little upturned nose and expressive mouth. She even had her mother's delicate, slightly pointed ears. That feature alone contributed greatly to the whispers of Vintyri blood.

She reached down and, without thought, brushed a small bit of leaf from Enari's sleeve. The girl tensed almost imperceptibly before forcing herself to relax, and the Abdesa quickly drew back her hand. It was a typical reaction, and one she'd seen a thousand times or more, but it still seemed unnatural somehow. The girl jumped as if the lightest touch stung like a slap and she rarely allowed another's touch to linger, not even Vasi's.

"The tales say it is thus with the Vintyri as well." Shaking her head free of the stray thought, she addressed the restless novice, "Kvinna Vasi has been looking for you, Enari."

The girl bowed slightly in a gesture of assent and the Abdesa shoed her away, neither looking for nor expecting a verbal response.

That was another of the novice's peculiarities. Many of the kvinnas mused that Enari lacked the ability to speak, possibly due to an injury suffered coming into the world as she had. One or two of the more shrewd sisters, Vasi and Torina Anya among them, thought she merely chose not to. The Abdesa could confirm neither assertion, for even as an infant, the girl never cried and she had endured normal childhood cuts and scrapes in silence. When she'd fallen out of a tree and broken her wrist at five, she had remained utterly soundless, even while the bones were set.

Enari Namelum was certainly a puzzle to them all. In that way, too, she was very much like her mother.

* * *

Enari entered the Apothecarium in search of Vasi, having already checked the woman's rooms and the library without success. She found her Sura with her back to the door, folding garments and stowing them neatly in the open satchel on the table before her. A beam of sunlight filtered through the leaves of the benjamina just outside the window, catching in the honey-gold of Vasi's braid. Enari had always admired her Sura's hair, thinking it one of the more beautiful things she'd ever seen, even if the kvinna herself considered it a nuisance.

Vasi looked up and smiled as her apprentice entered, knowing the novice was there despite her silent entrance. The girl had obviously been exactly where she'd suspected; up in the old courtyard mahogany if the bits of leaves and twigs in her hair and stuck to her clothes were anything to judge by. It seemed she would never grow out of her love for heights and distant views.

"I'd bet my eyeteeth she missed breakfast and meditations, too. Again."

"Good, the Abdesa found you," Vasi stated matter-of-factly, choosing not to voice her suspicion. "She has more important things to do than chase wool-gathering novices. You came when she called you, yes?"

Enari nodded, but her eyes slid away from Vasi's hazel gaze for just an instant. It was a small tell, one that only the very observant would have found significant.

Vasi wasn't fooled. She'd raised this one since infancy and knew when her apprentice was being less-than-honest with her. Thankfully, it wasn't a frequent occurrence and never had there been an outright lie.

"The first time?" One pale eyebrow rose with the question.

The telltale, and expected, shift from one foot to the other and Vasi nodded. She turned back to the white smock she was folding, talking as she worked.

"Nevermind that for now. I received a message from Torina Anya this morning. It seems she's concerned about the tora's condition and impending lying in this Dicem. She's asked me to attend her through the rest of the pregnancy."

Enari's thoughts brightened at the mention of Anya, for she liked the plump torina immensely. The woman was intelligent, sweet, and jovial, quick to laugh and possessed of an endless capacity for kindness. Best of all, she treated Enari like a real person with ideas and feelings, rather than an object to be whispered about or regarded with suspicion. It had been she who taught Enari to read, despite warnings that it would be difficult at best and, at worst, speculations that it might not be possible. She was only four at the time and had fond memories of endless hours spent together in the library, with Anya reading book after book aloud, pointing to each word as she went. The Temple hadn't been the same in her recent absence and Enari found she missed her a great deal.

Anya had been the closest thing Enari had ever had to a real friend.

Vasi continued, "The Abdesa has granted leave and as my apprentice, you are to accompany me. One of the other kvinnas is packing for you and I need you to get some things for me from the storage cabinets. Do you remember what we need?" She glanced over her shoulder, tucking in the last item and closing the leather saddlebag.

Enari nodded. This was a small test, but a test nonetheless, and she recognized it for what it was. She crossed to and then unlocked a door in the far wall, hooking a stool to her with one foot and dragging it into the adjoining room after her.

Climbing up, she began digging through a large wall cabinet, gently moving aside vials, baskets, and sealed ceramic pots. Within moments, she reappeared, bringing an armful of packets and bottles to Vasi for her approval. Vasi sifted through them before nodding with satisfaction.

"Very good. Your memory is better than mine." She picked up a brown paper packet and studied it closely. "But why this one?"

Her apprentice shrugged. She wasn't really sure why she'd picked it up, but it had seemed to call to her when she'd touched it, so she added it to her other supplies.

"Well, no matter. We'll be leaving shortly, but if you'd like to say farewell to anyone, there's still time."

Enari shook her head and her expression went a little flat.

"I hadn't thought so, but..." Vasi sighed, feeling the usual unease at her apprentice's lack of close friends. Enari's silence and exceptionally quick mind put off many of the other girls and the rumor of her being Vintyri grew like a weed; no matter how hard the more practical sisters tried to stamp it out, it stubbornly persisted. It never seemed to bother the girl, though. She generally appeared content to work and study alone, and at times it was as if she was completely unaware of the existence of those around her. Vasi had often seen her apprentice look right through people like they weren't even there.

The feeling passed as quickly as it had come and Vasi dismissed the novice with a wave. She detected excitement in the hasty bow Enari gave her before spinning on her heel and almost skipping from the room. Vasi chuckled softly. Ah, to be that young again.

* * *

The Hall of the Dead was secluded and silent, as such places should be.

Enari slipped through the heavy bronze door and let it swing shut behind her on oiled hinges. The soft click of the latch always sounded so final to her and the sound stirred the hair on the nape of her neck into prickling awareness. She halted on the threshold and drew up her hood, a sign of deference to the departed.

The stone building, half as large as the main sanctuary, stood in the southwest corner of the temple grounds. Flanked on two sides by the outer walls and overshadowed by trees and climbing vines, it was dim and still cool from the previous night. Small windows near the ceiling provided only token illumination, as the sun

had not yet risen far enough for its radiance to chase the shadows into their corners. The only other light in the twilight gloom came from two candles floating in separate crystalline bowls of water on the altar. Night and day they burned to keep the Hall from ever falling into complete darkness. It was the final gesture of respect for those within.

As she gazed around the hushed chamber, the familiar ache of long buried sadness gripped her heart and she fought the urge to weep. She had succumbed to her tears here, many times, but that had been before. The pain she felt was a child's pain and she was no longer a child.

Small recesses covered the walls and columns, each holding a single urn that bore a plaque engraved with the occupant's name and date of passing. Enari knew there were fourteen pairs of columns marching from the entrance to the altar of the pantheon at the opposite end. She had been coming to the Hall for as long as she could remember and had counted them on each occasion. This place held the ashes of *kvinnas* who had departed the world of life for *Andehai*, stretching back to the founding of the Temple itself.

And her mother was here.

Moving on silent feet, she proceeded further into the chamber, taking a path so well-traveled she sometimes fancied her steps had worn impressions into the floor. The shadows whispered just at the edge of her hearing, but the soft susurrations were more comforting than frightening. This place was for the dead, but no spirits lingered this side of the Eternal Gates.

Tanith was where she had always been.

Enari knelt so that the urn holding her mother's remains was at eye level. She could feel the cool stone biting into her knees even through her trousers, but ignored the slight discomfort. Reaching out, she ran her fingertips over the gleaming metal, tracing words as familiar to her as her own name.

Tanith Namelum

14 Janua 789

Fháil Cosán Gi Andehai

'*Fháil Cosán Gi Andehai*' was a traditional *Egali* death-blessing, and it meant 'May You Find Your Path to *Andehai*'. They were the only words she knew in Old *Egali*. It was nearly a dead language now, spoken by the conquering tribe that formed the first *Egalion* from warring factions nearly two thousand years ago. They adorned all the urns, as it was generally thought that anyone who gave up the life they could have had to come and serve the Goddess would go to *Andehai* to be with Her upon their deaths.

It was said that all judged by the guardian and consort, *Dusan*, to have lived worthy lives went to *Andehai* to be with the Goddess for all of eternity. The rest went to *Diu* and she refused to think of that. Her mother hadn't gone *there*, even if she hadn't taken vows and only carried half a proper name. There were others here who bore the *Namelum*, or "Unknown" for their surname; it was the common title given to those whose family names had not been known at the time of their deaths, though in polite company it was more of a slur. Enari hoped that one day she could learn her mother's true name and have the plaque corrected.

She knelt before the urn for a long time, head bowed and eyes fixed on the locket she withdrew from the neck of her tunic. It was the only thing she had of her mother beyond her name and it had always carried an odd aura that made her skin tingle. She pressed the tiny catch on one side and opened it to reveal a few beautiful circular patterns. Writing of some kind, she supposed, though she couldn't read it.

"It's part of the dreams."

She is standing on something soft, but when she looks down there is nothing but darkness. It surrounds her on all sides and for a moment, she is alarmed. But the feeling quickly passes as a familiar presence takes her hand and draws her up. It doesn't hurt and there are no fleeting fragments of sensation like she usually experiences when someone touches her skin.

As she rises, the empty dark begins to fade, replaced by blank whiteness. Then the colors appear; softly pulsing blues and greens, muted violets, indigos, deepest crimson, petal pink. They swirl around and somehow through her, yet do nothing to illuminate the face of her guide. Though it remains obscure she is not bothered. Some part of her knows this being, a hazy presence from half-memories of a time she cannot recall.

"Ah, *Fi Ele, fi dra'jena. Fi alym lida lle mintin, amin fia—* My love, my dearest one. My heart sings to see you, beloved mine."

The greeting is always the same, Sometimes the speaker holds her hands, sometimes touches her cheek, or brushes back her hair. Always she feels love. Always the voice is gentle, like cool water in the heat of summer. She is drawn through an enticing doorway to secret ways and secret wisdom, the words slipping into her mind like smoke, like distantly tolling bells.

“Listen well. You will want the knowledge I give.”

But upon waking, she can never remember the words or events beyond that first greeting. No matter how hard she strained for them, they were always just out of reach, burning away even as she wakes, like fog under the sun.

Enari opened her eyes and surveyed her surroundings. The room was brighter now, the sun casting little pools of light against the western wall and she knew Vasi would be looking for her again soon. Leaning forward she pressed her lips to the urn, then rose to her feet and turned towards the head of the room. Even though her time was short, she refused to leave this place without visiting the altar.

It was a simple thing carved of stone, five man-sized figures standing in a ring around the sixth, but its effortless beauty captivated her.

As it always did, the rhyme came unbidden into her mind when she circled the plinth. It was something all children learned almost before they could speak and it started with the austere but attractive women standing back to back in the center:

*All-Mother stands two faced, two-fold
Surrounded by her consorts' ring
Black Goddess, Death, lacks will to sing
White Mistress, Life, does chalice hold
The Goddess amidst her Gods, five told*

*Grand Plamen holds fire at his command
Dark-eyed, jealous, flame-haired and jawed
First consort is Warrior, the Conqueror God
Armies guided by his hand
Spill blood and flames across the land*

*Consort Earth does blessings bring
Xochi is pleased by food and wines
To delight him tend your fields and vines
Fertile life blooms with the spring
The Horned God is the festival king*

*Wise Suman rules the sky and air
Proud Hendai ride beneath his sign
Speech and song are his design
Sylph messengers tend to his affairs
They that travel need not despair*

*Patron to those that ply the sea
Youngest consort rules the waves
And oft inclined to misbehave
Cleansing, love, the wish to See
Ea plays among the waters free*

*Whilst Dusan, Spirit, is grave and pale
Sentry from our world to the last
He guards Her children as they pass
All seeing eyes judge and prevail
He leaves no souls behind to fail*

The last Consort always made her shiver. There was something about the figure of Dusan that drew her. He stood a little apart from the rest, a single small step removed from the circle of his brothers and he was the only consort in the pantheon to be facing outwards, his back to the Goddess. It was so in every depiction she had ever seen, whether it be in statuary, books, or paintings. Enari trailed a hand across the hem of his cloak, feeling the stone ripple beneath her fingers.

Vasi's voice floated across the Temple grounds, finding her ears even within the Hall of the Dead.
It was time.

CHAPTER FIVE

Jex awoke to brilliant sunlight, uncomfortably bright even through his tightly closed eyelids. Groaning, he rolled over and turned his head away, raising an arm to shield his face from the glare. Something hard was digging into his side and when he groped beneath himself for the culprit, he found the belt he'd worn the night before. The buckle was prodding him and he threw it away in irritated disgust. It struck the wall and clattered to the floor, the noise making him cringe.

"I see you enjoyed yourself last night," an amused voice rumbled from somewhere above. A shadow fell over him, mercifully blocking out some of the painful light, and he forced his gritty eyes open a fraction.

Eryk was looking down on him, fully dressed and clearly amused. It took Jex a moment to realize he was lying on the floor, completely naked, and freezing. Looking around, he groaned again as hazy splinters of memory returned. His sitting room was a mess; clothes had been discarded haphazardly in all directions, the contents of a small table littered the floor, and somehow the chair by the window had been overturned. When had that happened? Probably during his scuffle with Ophelius, whatever-time that had been.

The bed, however, or what he could see of it through the partly open bedroom door, was still perfectly smooth and unrumpled. That was extremely unfair.

"Time to rise and shine. We're to attend a session of the Grand Council in half an hour. You look like hell, by the way." The delight in the High Mage's voice was unmistakable.

"I'm not your apprentice anymore, old man, which makes you not my master." Jex rolled onto his stomach, paused for breath, and attempted to rise to his hands and knees. "What would the opposite of that be, anyway?"

"Your nursemaid, apparently," Eryk retorted, reaching down and hauling the wobbly man to his feet. "Clean yourself up and get dressed." Wrinkling his nose, he added, "Bathe first. You smell like an ale barrel, and wear something with a high collar."

"Why?" Jex grouched, peeling one of the floor rushes off his backside. He briefly examined the pathetically crushed and wilted thing before throwing it aside and bending to pick up his trousers.

It was one of his poorer ideas.

The room spun and tilted and he thought for a moment he would vomit. Closing his eyes and breathing deeply helped and he straightened, gingerly fingering the tender lump on the back of his skull.

"Because I spy at least half a dozen bites on your neck that will probably bruise by midday, and that was without looking too closely. I'll have breakfast sent in for you. Coffee?"

"Black, if you please," Jex sighed. Eryk was enjoying this far too much, in his opinion. With a mental curse that his mother would have slapped his mouth for if she'd heard it spoken aloud, he resigned himself to being up for the day.

As he turned away from the smirking High Mage, he caught sight of his reflection and grimaced.

Eryk was right, he did look like hell. But oh, if the night had gone even half as well as he remembered, it was more than worth the hangover.

All the parts before his uninvited guest had shown up had gone well, at any rate. Which reminded him... where was the bag Ophelius had left? It didn't appear to be anywhere amidst the debris around him, but he didn't really have the time to search. He briefly considered telling Eryk about the visit, but quickly decided against it. This was his problem, and involving anyone else would only make it unduly complicated.

The door closed softly behind him, snapping him back to the present. At least Eryk had had the decency not to slam it.

Thank the Goddess for small favors.

* * *

"Explain to me again why this has to be done now?" Jex grumbled, not for the first time, as he hurried to keep up with the High Mage's brisk steps. "Honestly, why us?"

“Those involved in the governing of the realm rise early as a rule,” Eryk replied mildly, not bothering to look behind him as he spoke. He could picture his companion’s unhappy expression without having to see it, having been on the receiving end of Jex’s distaste for early mornings on many previous occasions.

“And again I ask, why us? We’re mages, not politicians. Superb and extraordinarily handsome mages, mind you, but unless Tor Brinon has a troublesome lady he’d like distracted, wants us to whip up a tornado, or needs someone to set the trousers of the collective Grand Council afire, I don’t see why we’re needed.”

Eryk’s smile was thin and a little brittle, “You would be amazed how often mage and politician have become the same thing in this city over the years.”

“So, do I have your permission to light a few trouser-fires in case we need to make a quick escape? I’ll be discreet, I swear.”

“Absolutely not.”

“Not even if—”

“No!”

Jex remained silent this time and there was a sulky quality to it. Eryk let him pout, knowing it would blow over quickly enough. The young man’s moods were like the weather; wait long enough and the sun would reappear. At any rate, the lull in conversation gave him an opportunity to enjoy the fleeting tranquility this time of day afforded.

So close to dawn, the halls of the Imperial palace were deserted and peaceful. Briefly glimpsed servants trod like ghosts through the still morning, flitting from one chamber to another in near perfect silence. One of the things Eryk had always appreciated about the staff here was their ability for inconspicuous service. He knew, however, that forgetting their presence could be fatal. His granduncle, Dorian, had learned that lesson the hard way and they never had caught the attendant who poisoned him. That said poisoning was rumored to have been at his tora’s behest only added to the scandal.

The building that housed the Grand Council was connected to the palace by a wide gallery and they traversed it without speaking. By the time they reached the atrium outside the council chamber itself, Jex had finished his sulk and his steps quickened enough to bring him abreast of the High Mage. The guards posted before the ornately-carved double doors bowed respectfully and one stood aside, granting them entrance.

When they slipped into the room, they found that they were the last to arrive and the councilors were already embroiled in a heated debate.

Thus came the end of the morning’s tranquility.

Eryk and Jex joined the three mages in the shadows of the very back row of the tiered chamber. The two men and one woman were dressed in blue-and-gold robes and they watched the proceedings without comment. Inclining his head in greeting, Eryk turned his attention to the rest of the room and the inevitable uproar of so many powerful individuals at odds with one another. Jex leaned back against the wall and put his hands in his pockets, an expression of boredom and resignation on his face.

“But sire,” someone protested loudly, “we cannot continue to ignore this threat! The rebels must be subdued at once.”

Murmurs of agreement rumbled through the gathered crowd. Representatives of the five provinces of Egalion; Hamel, Tesriel, Zyr, Darmiad, and Mezzo, and those who spoke for the districts of the capitol city, their aides, and entourages filled the room. Most sat at the rows of polished marble tables, but a very few chose to remain on their feet. Pike-wielding guardsmen in full armor, the Imperial crest engraved upon their breastplates, stood at attention beside each of the three doors that allowed access to the council. Even though the room had been occupied for only a short time, the space was hot and stuffy from the heat of so many bodies and papers waved back and forth in front of perspiring faces.

Tor Brinon, who looked as if he hadn’t slept much the previous night, sat in one of two elegant thrones upon a stage at the front of the room. Seeing the other empty, Eryk frowned slightly. He’d expected his sister to be in attendance, as she normally was. Collin Fin, the tor’s secretary and personal scribe, sat at a small desk just beside and a little lower than the platform, scribbling furiously on a stack of parchment. Four women in the uniforms of royal couriers waited at his side. They looked nearly as bored as Jex did.

“And what exactly do you propose, Councilor Undabe?” Tor Brinon demanded coolly, “We have discussed this a thousand times and, while you are quick to complain, you have so far failed to present a solution. If you have one, we would be pleased to entertain it.”

“They are *your* people, my tor.” Councilor Undabe sneered, his dark face twisted in distaste. “You tell us.”

“Now, now,” chided a new voice, a rich baritone well suited to oration, “there’s no need for such veiled accusations. Someone might mistake your meaning, and none of us want that.”

Bodies shifted and eyes turned to the main door. A man stood backlit by a shaft of morning light pouring in from the atrium, but only momentarily. The door whispered shut behind him as he crossed the threshold, cutting off both the light and the cool breeze that had accompanied it. A few people sighed in regret and began fanning themselves again.

Tall, gray-eyed, and dark-haired, the newcomer was an almost perfect mirror image of the High Mage. His hair was a little longer, as was currently fashionable, and he was not quite as muscular, but their facial features were identical. He was dressed in fine riding trousers and tunic, both white, with slashes of scarlet satin in his sleeves appearing and disappearing as he moved. A longsword was belted at his right hip and the dark hilt of a dagger protruded from the top of one polished boot, both of which he turned over to the nearest guard without protest. Overall, he cut a rather dashing figure and was quite clearly aware of it.

“Jordin,” the tor said, rising to offer his greeting. “This is a pleasant surprise! We didn’t expect you so soon.”

“We had a fair wind coming upriver and made excellent time,” the other answered, striding down the steps until he reached the dais. He knelt gracefully and bowed his head. “And as I knew you would be in session, I thought to lend my aid, humble as it is.”

“You are most welcome, brother. Do you wish to represent your province in a formal capacity as part of this congress?”

“I would be honored, Your Majesty,” Jordin replied smoothly, inclining his head as he rose.

“Very well. The Throne officially recognizes Jordin Alycon, Duque of Darmiad.” Collin Fin began writing in earnest, his quill flying across the page in front of him.

Jex whistled softly and Eryk glanced at him.

“You never mentioned the Duque of Darmiad was your twin,” he murmured, eyeing the two men speculatively.

The High Mage shrugged. “It was never a secret. At least not any more so than your connection with the Shadow Court has ever been.”

Jex barked out a short laugh. “As you say. Though I’d wager more people know about your brother than know I was once a runner for the lady.”

“I think you owe me enough coin already from past wagers. And you’re still active.” It was a statement, not a question and Jex ignored it, deliberately turning his attention back to the room below. One of the mages beside them stifled a chuckle and Jex ignored him as well.

“The Ibirani rebels are of little consequence when compared to the threat posed by Atromore,” another councilor called out. The agreement was louder and more unified this time.

“The rebels are stirring again, are they?” inquired the duque. He’d taken a seat next to the trio of Darmiad’s elected councilors. Being the smallest province, they had the fewest representatives, but with their duque in their midst, their opinions would carry more weight for a time.. Jordin leaned back on the bench, legs crossed and looking quite relaxed.

“They are, Your Grace, and there seems to be someone new leading them,” spoke up yet another member of the council; a woman this time. “This person is well-educated, well-organized, and has drawn the various quibbling factions into a uniformed force. An army, if you will. Most distressing of all, they have refused all offers of a civil meeting.”

Jordin pursed his lips and considered for a moment, then snapped his fingers and sat up straighter.

“Councilor Findasin, correct?”

The blonde woman nodded. “Yes, Your Grace.”

“Who is this new leader?”

She lifted her hands palm up in a shrug. “No one knows. Our spies have been unable to even ascertain whether this person is male or female. For all we know, they may not even be Ibirani. Or Egali, for that matter.”

“Curious.” The duque stroked one long-fingered hand over his chin in thought. “Though I highly doubt outside influence is to blame here. This is a problem the realm has been facing for centuries without interference from Davaria or Atromore. I don’t see why they’d bother to start.”

“We can do nothing about the Ibirani right now!” exclaimed an impatient man from the far side of the room. The speaker was immensely fat and red-faced. Sweat stood out in beads on his forehead and the gaudy red of his doublet made him look like nothing so much as an overripe tomato. “But we *must* do something about the Atromorese! Tahir is ailing and when he is gone, Nareina and Min Ha will be in charge, free to overrun us at their leisure while we squabble with ghosts and peasants.”

“Tors and toras come and go. Atromore is no different in that regard than we are,” another councilor replied calmly.

“Min Ha is as sly and deceitful as Iradi his mother was,” the fat man retorted, piggy eyes squinting around the room. “He and Nareina will move against us before Tahir’s ashes are even cold!”

“That’s if one doesn’t assassinate the other first,” Jex muttered.

“My tor, we must secure Davaria as our sworn ally. Torina Sarene should be married to Torin Reord at once!” It was the Hendai councilor from Hamel who spoke this time. His two female companions nodded firmly in agreement, though his male counterpart remained unreadable.

“Her betrothal is already official,” Tor Brinon declared. He sounded as if he’d repeated himself a hundred times on the subject. “She will go to him in the spring, and that is soon enough. It would be impossible to arrange for their union to occur any sooner without risking offense.”

“With all due respect, we need something more immediate.” The reply came, not surprisingly, from the corpulent tomato impersonator.

Jex put a hand over his mouth and his shoulders shook. He darted a glance at Eryk and his emerald eyes were sparkling with mischief.

“What?” the High Mage hissed.

“Is it just me or does that one look like a garden vegetable left too long in the sun?” Jex nodded toward the councilor in question. The man was busy mopping his face with an enormous yellow handkerchief edged in frilly and intricate lace.

Eryk forced a straight face, battling his own laughter at the image the description conjured. “Show some respect. Councilor Adipem Porcus is a well connected and powerful member of the Merchant Guild. He oversees most of the operations in River Row.”

Jex couldn’t suppress the snicker this time. “Is that really his name? How...unfortunate. His parents must have been Seers, to choose such an apt moniker for their darling son.”

The female mage next to them began to giggle, but swallowed it with an effort as soon as one of her seniors frowned in her direction. Jex grinned at her and she blushed, then quickly averted her eyes, schooling her features into serene attention once more.

“You sound as if you have a plan already lined up, councilor,” the tor was saying. He looked wary.

“Several of us have...discussed the matter,” the sly looking man beside Councilor Porcus provided. He was a sour-faced old curmudgeon, and next to his companion’s largesse, he appeared skeletal. “Instead of arming ourselves against Atromore, why not secure them as allies and eliminate any potential threat before it is hatched?”

“And how do you recommend we do that? As I recall, the last attempt to join the two kingdoms ended rather badly.”

“Torina Kylan is a beautiful girl, and not yet promised. Give her to Min Ha, or even the young Gaherith. It would secure an alliance and—”

The room erupted into anarchy.

Men and women leapt to their feet and began shouting, arguing with their neighbors and gesticulating wildly. A few councilors nearly came to blows, separated just in time by their attendants. It quickly became clear why councilors had long ago been barred from carrying weapons into their sessions. Some of them looked outright murderous as the chaos escalated to a fever pitch. The guards at the doors looked at each other and hands dropped to sword hilts as they regarded the pandemonium. One of them slipped away, likely to summon potentially-needed reinforcements.

Jex made a noise of revulsion. “How could they even propose something like that?” he demanded, voice raised to be heard over the noise. “Kylan is a *child*, for Goddess’ sake!”

“To them, she is simply another playing piece, a pawn in the game of power,” Eryk answered. While his tone was calm, his eyes had gone steely. “The age of a pawn is irrelevant. It is to be moved so as to secure the greatest advantage and nothing more.”

“It’s disgusting.”

“It’s politics.”

“She’s your niece, Eryk!”

“I know,” he said, standing to his full height. Making his way to the stairs, he strode down the center aisle towards the dais, an imposing thundercloud in black accompanied by a whirlwind of frigid air. Parchments ruffled and flew from tables, the shouting voices fell abruptly still, leaving the sharp strike of measured steps the only remaining sound.

The greater majority of the assemblage had been previously unaware of High Mage Eryk Alycon’s presence, but as he stepped onto the platform, nodding respectfully to Brinon before turning to the room at large, all eyes were riveted on him. Nervous glances were exchanged and people cautiously returned to their seats.

One could have heard a pin drop and he deliberately let the silence stretch.

“Well, he got his tornado,” Jex noted under his breath as he watched the whirling papers settle haphazardly, “which means I get a turn at one of these pretentious gits. I think the tomato could use a roasting.” A tiny flame flickered to life in the palm of his left hand and he bounced it experimentally. The eldest mage present, a white-haired elder with a beard that fell to his belt, caught his wrist in a surprisingly firm grip and shook his head in warning. Frost rimed the skin beneath his spindly fingers.

“Kidding!” Jex insisted, and let the flame die out. After a pointed second or two, the other mage released him. He shook his hand, snapping the ring of ice and letting it clink to the floor between his boots.

“Councilors,” Eryk began at last, once he was certain he had their full attention. His voice carried to every corner of the room with ease. “What you propose is impracticality just shy of madness. How would Egalion benefit from sending a mere child into Nareina’s court? Min Ha may sit on the throne once his father is dead, but it will be his stepmother who holds the true power. It is common knowledge that he makes no move without her blessing.”

“But Atromore would be a powerful ally!” the council from Inntown countered. She was a middle-aged woman with limp hair and flat, grim eyes. Her colleague from the Smith’s Quarter put a hand on her arm, but she shook him off and rose to her feet.

“Councilor Wastrel, Atromore is a pit of vipers,” Eryk replied calmly, “Did we not learn our lesson about alliances with them when Iradi was so briefly married to Dorian?”

“Tora Iradi is long dead, and I fail to see the relevance—”

“Obviously.” The High Mage’s voice was colder than the wind he had summoned. “For the short-sighted and selective-amnesiacs among you, let me offer up Nareina herself as an example instead. The tora has already eliminated multiple rivals, four or five in the last decade alone, who she only *suspected* of being a threat to her power,”

“Torina Kylan is, as has been pointed out, only a child and that is her advantage!” cried Councilor Porcus, sounding exasperated. “Nareina could not possibly view her as a threat.”

“Wrong, councilor. She would view her as the biggest threat, as a usurper of her own power, and one with years to gather supporters. The Duquessa Layalie was little more than a child and the tora took extreme exception to her. That girl was no match for the viperess, despite promises of protection from Tor Tahir himself. How would Kylan fare any better?”

“That strumpet was twice our torina’s age,” Councilor Wastrel scoffed.

“I concur with the High Mage,” Brinon announced. He had maintained his composure and his seat during the uproar, “and not only because she’s my daughter. Kylan is too young and untrained in the ways of court intrigue, of the political maneuvers that would be required for her mere survival. She would be unable to secure Min Ha’s loyalty or any kind of alliance and we would simply be throwing her life away.”

“Perhaps the younger Torin Gaherith, then?” someone suggested uncertainly.

The tor shook his head. “While it is true he is closer to her age, he will have little power in his brother’s court. In fact, that arrangement would put the torina in greater danger, without gain, than if she were wed to Min Ha.”

“We would gain nothing from this so called ‘alliance’, while handing Nareina and Min Ha a bargaining chip at the very least!” Eryk added, “Kylan would be constantly watched, under the guise of Nareina’s guardianship. Any correspondence she sent would be read, her visitors watched.”

“Torina Sarene—”

“Sarene may be old enough and clever enough to manage it,” Eryk conceded, smoothly speaking over the objection, “but she is already promised to Davaria. To renege on that arrangement in order to curry favor with Atromore would be unwise. No, councilors, we must arm ourselves against them.”

A look of calculation crossed the High Mage’s face and he folded his arms, staring directly at the woman from Inntown before shifting his attention to the perspiring Porcus. “Tell me, why propose this now? You know that both the tor and tora must approve such a decision, and as you can see, the tora isn’t here. Would you have dared propose such a thing if she were, or had you hoped Tor Brinon could be persuaded and thus convince his wife?”

The room was quiet and Councilor Wastrel looked away, refusing to hold his eyes. With a huff, she sat down and folded her hands primly on the table. Porcus and the furtive man who had originally offered up the idea looked just as uncomfortable.

“I thought as much.” The High Mage’s eyes swept over the rest of the council. “Does anyone else care to support this preposterous motion?”

No one did.

With the issue thus tabled, and the troublemakers cowed for the time being, Eryk returned to his seat and talk moved on to more mundane things. The newest representative from Zyr was officially recognized and welcomed. A raise in port taxes was proposed and the opposing factions bickered back and forth for a time before the matter was given to a vote and eventually resolved in favor of a small increase. Someone raised the necessity of repairs to the outer walls and some of the more heavily trafficked streets in Trigon Market and the tor approved the necessary funds. This opened up a floodgate of other petitions for treasury support, some of which were approved, but just as many were not. Couriers and pages were sent hither and yon on various errands and with messages for the appropriate parties. A good-looking redhead caught Jex’s eye and he watched her with interest as she came and went.

Collin Fin eventually called a halt to all requests for monetary backing and advised that after a brief recess, the crown would begin hearing petitions and grievances of a more personal nature. The chamber began to empty and the din rose as people began talking amongst themselves. Tor Brinon disappeared through a door behind the thrones with the harried Secretary Fin in hot pursuit.

Looking around until he spotted his brother, the Duque of Darmiad began making his way up the stairs to the back of the room. His progress was slow at first and he was stopped often, but as the crowd thinned, he moved more quickly.

“Our brother-in-law may refer to them as magpies, but they seem more like jackals to me,” Jordin reflected as he reached the little gathering. He and the three representatives from Turris Arcana exchanged polite greetings before the mages moved away, conferring together quietly.

Jordin scanned the milling throng and shook his head. “I’m glad Aelani was not here today.”

Eryk, too, was watching the crowd. “As am I. Although I doubt they would’ve had the courage had she been present. This has more to do with their own political advancement than any true wish to better the kingdom, and what better time to propose such a bold thing than when there is only one ruler present? You’d think they’d know by now, though, that Brinon is not one to trifle with.”

“Perhaps you’re right, but in any case, it’s good to see you, Eryk.” The two men embraced hard enough that Jex was surprised bones weren’t being crushed under the pressure.

“And you, Jordin. You should visit more often,” Eryk admonished, stepping back.

“Turris Arcana is far too cold for me these days. But I forget my manners. Who is your companion?” The duque’s eyes crinkled in a smile as he examined Jex. “Handsome young devil.”

Before Eryk could make introductions, Jex stepped forward, ducking his head politely. “I am Jex Xander, the newest battlemage to join the ranks at the Tower, Your Grace.”

Jordin offered his hand and Jex shook it firmly. “You’ve grown up, lad. I didn’t recognize you, as you’re not currently fleeing in terror from my niece.”

“That seems to be everyone’s clearest memory of my one and only prior visit,” Jex replied, “but it means I don’t have terribly high expectations to live up to, which may be to my advantage.”

“It’s only an advantage as long as your mouth doesn’t continue working to the exclusion of your Goddess-given brains,” Eryk needled.

Jex shot his former Sura a dirty look and grumbled something unintelligible under his breath.

The duque laughed and the three men exited the council chamber together. Several pairs of hostile eyes watched them go.

CHAPTER SIX

“She needs to know, certainly, but let’s you and I discuss it first. That’s part of why Brinon summoned us, after all.”

“Has he told her or do you think Aelani believes this is just a coincidental and well-timed family visit? He’s never been in the habit of keeping secrets, but he also does everything in his power to shield her. His letter certainly made it sound as if he needed the help. You don’t think he’ll come straight here after everything that just happened?”

“Nay. I don’t think they give the poor bastard enough time to piss between audiences, let alone come all the way up here to visit his wife.”

Sarene looked up when she heard approaching boot steps and the murmur of voices. A secret smile touched her lips when she saw Jex walking a pace behind her uncles, both of whom were so deep in conversation they seemed to have forgotten him entirely. He looked bleary-eyed and tired, but in good enough spirits. The trio stopped outside a closed door and she watched her Uncle Eryk speak to the younger man for a moment, clap a hand on his shoulder with enough force to nearly buckle his knees, and disappear into her mother’s suite of rooms behind Uncle Jordin. The door closed, leaving Jex alone in the hall. He heaved a put upon sigh and rubbed at his eyes.

Rising to her feet, she advanced on the somewhat lost looking mage.

“You look a bit under the weather this morning, sir mage. Are you well?” Sarene asked sweetly, pressing the back of her hand to his forehead. He was indeed warm, but she suspected a night of carousing was more to blame for that than any illness.

“Despite being locked in with the Grand Council, listening to bureaucrats try and shout one another to death for the last several hours, I feel just fine. Thank you.” The impertinence and ready sarcasm made her want to smile. He’d been the same on his first visit and would likely prove to be as lively a playmate now as then, though she had a different, much more adult, game in mind.

“You look piqued is all, but I supposed the council can make anyone appear that way.” She spoke deliberately loud and he cringed, tugging at his high collar uncomfortably. Intrigued by something half-glimpsed, she grasped his fingers and pulled them away, then turned down the neck of his tunic and began to laugh.

“What amuses you so, Torina?” His cheeks colored as he jerked his clothing back into place and ran one hand over his hair.

“It’s not a physical ailment, nor a morning in council that plagues you,” she accused teasingly, “You had company last night. Was she satisfying?”

His eyes slid away from hers and he began to reply, some excuse or other she was sure, but holding up a hand imperiously, she cut him off.

“I guessed you might seek other entertainment after I was forced to leave you and I’m glad to see you found some. Although,” she trailed off. A frown drew her blond eyebrows together, the delicate lines like spun gold above her calculating green eyes.

“Although?” he prompted, hoping desperately for a subject change. What he could remember of his bawdy escapades the night before seemed crude now, standing before the perfectly poised Torina Sarene. They were also an unfit topic to discuss with a lady—any lady—regardless of her rank. Jex Xander wasn’t a man to kiss and tell.

“I had wondered,” she said slowly, touching one manicured nail to her painted pink lips, “if perhaps you enjoyed the company of other men.”

“What could possibly make you wonder such a thing?” His eyes had gone a bit wide, like those of a naughty little boy caught with his fingers in the pie.

She smiled wickedly. Though his voice had taken on a blustering, affronted tone, he clearly knew he’d been caught out.

“You are a very fine-looking man, Battlemage Xander, but a little too...preenish for one who solely takes female lovers. I—”

“Preenish?” He looked indignant, which only furthered her certainty about his predilections. The mage had taken offense at the insult rather than her supposition.

“Aye, preenish,” she confirmed, “As in one who spends a great deal of time on their appearance and examines themselves in every reflective surface, like a cat or a peacock. Like you’ve done several times since starting this conversation.”

He refused to answer, but his hand went to his hair again. She wondered idly if he realized how utterly transparent he was.

Shrugging, she took his arm, leading him back the way he’d come. “I don’t doubt the majority of your bedfellows are of my own sex, but you’d be lying if you denied any men had warmed your sheets. Don’t worry, your secret is safe with me and in fact, I find it a little exciting. A man who knows how to universally please his partner, regardless of gender, is rare indeed. I imagine you’re a favorite in Turris Arcana.”

“If you know so much, why assume my ‘entertainment’ was female?” His rejoinder was a little tart, but at least he wasn’t trying to flat out deny it.

She was so bored with the coyness of the men, and women, at court who shared his preferences.

“The, ah, *lady* in question is one of my chambermaids. She was quite impressed with your performance, I should add. Shall I punish her for biting you so hard? Some of those have bruised.”

His head snapped around and he looked down at her, finally meeting her eyes before blurting out, “No. That won’t be necessary.” He was relieved she seemed to only know about one of his ‘guests’ from the previous evening.

“So you enjoy it?”

“Black Goddess, that’s none of your business! Do you make a habit of listening to maids gossip about such things? I’m sure that hawk of a nurse you have would be appalled to hear such crude talk from you, young as you are,” he sniffed, taking on a haughty air to cover his embarrassment. She either didn’t know when to stop asking questions or she was deliberately making him uncomfortable. Some women enjoyed that sort of thing, he knew.

“I’m twenty-one, actually.” Her eyes glittered up at him, impious and carnal. “Not that young, and I don’t need gossip to know about what passes between a man and woman in private. As for Bana, she’s getting old. She doesn’t move as quickly as she used to and I’m clever. I’ve had my share of experience, sir mage.” She uttered this last barely above a whisper.

“Have you now?”

He sounded skeptical and his smirk annoyed her.

Sarene darted a glance up and down the hall to be sure they were alone before pulling him into a nearby alcove, one that he hadn’t noticed on his first pass. While the opening had been all but completely obscured by a rather nice tapestry depicting a mounted knight, he should have seen it. Eryk was always urging him to be more observant, more aware of his surroundings, and this felt like yet another failure on his part to do so. He still didn’t buy the argument that one couldn’t simply torch anything that got in the way and, in his defense, he’d had a lot to think about after the joyful experience of his first Council meeting. Still, he’d missed a potential threat.

Pressing him against the back wall and stepping close enough to seal their bodies together from chest to hip, Sarene reached up, wound her fingers into his hair, and forced his attention down to her with a tug.

Then her lush mouth was on his, insistent and hungry and not at all shy or inexperienced. Her tongue flickered out to tease his lips and he opened them to permit her entrance, too shocked by her forwardness to do anything but respond on instinct. Of their own volition, he found his arms sliding around her waist and pulling her closer. She was well formed, with curves in all the right places, and those curves were now pressed flush against him. Her hips rolled in sinuous, sensual undulations against his own and she trailed a hand down to firmly grasp his backside.

This was a bad idea.

It was a bad idea, and he should put a stop to it immediately, but couldn’t bring himself to push her away. He wasn’t aware of any of the Imperial children being magically gifted. From what he knew of the family, Eryk

was the first in generations to display more than a modicum of talent. But Torina Sarene had some kind of hold over him now, a power that bypassed his brain and grabbed him by the libido.

Lips never leaving his, she grasped one of his hands and brought it to her breast. Her fingers ghosted over the front of his trousers, teasing at the laces, and while he wanted to press into the touch, he restrained himself.

The part of his mind not currently drowning under her spell recognized this as a game and he was loathe to play without knowing all the rules. Or the stakes.

Just as suddenly as it had begun, it was over. Sarene tore her mouth away and stepped back from him, crossing her arms over her chest as a triumphant little sneer turned up the corners of her reddened mouth.

“I,” Jex licked his lips and tried again. “Point taken.”

Her quiet laugh tinkled through the alcove. “We’re going to get on just fine, Jex Xander.”

He just bet they were. Eryk seemed to be right about court ladies; they would eat a man alive if he weren’t careful, but he would certainly enjoy it while it was happening. Discovering such fire in a royal daughter was both intriguing and promising, but he would have to tread very, very carefully if he chose to pursue her. Sarene was the type of woman who could turn that flame of passion into one that burned and destroyed with little provocation and even less warning. She could have him executed if the fancy took her.

At least his time at court wouldn’t be as dull as he’d first thought, not with a challenge like her.

Quick as lightning, she changed the subject. “Would you like a tour of the palace? I know you’ve been here before, but it was so long ago and the builders have been busy.”

“If you have the time, I would be honored.”

* * *

Egalion’s Imperial palace was a vast, yet well-designed complex of interconnected towers, halls, courtyards, and fine gardens. The main structure, a five storied white citadel that could be seen even at the outer walls of the city, had been erected during the reign of Tora Lynd nearly eight hundred years ago, and it stood atop the ruins of a much older fortress dating, as far as anyone knew, to the time of the Great War. Little remained of the original construction save a few subterranean rooms and a network of tunnels. Subsequent towers and toras had added their own flourishes, keeping more or less to the initial architectural style, with a few notable exceptions. These included a winding maze of rose bushes that bloomed all year round and towered to twice the height of a man, at the center of which lay a perfectly circular pool lined with red and pink stones; a gallery of bizarre and somewhat disconcerting statues that had been known to rearrange themselves at random; and an obsidian tower topped by an observatory whose walls and roof were made entirely of a transparent, shatterproof material that no one could identify. The story of the tower was that Tor Shan, Lynd’s grandson, had built it for his paramour in an attempt to keep her closer than Turrus Arcana.

The interior of the palace buildings were just as exquisite as the grounds. Graceful archways, marble-paved arcade galleries with dazzling views of the gardens and city, and elegant staircases existed in abundance, while opulent furnishings, tapestries, and carpets filled the many rooms. The central hall housed the suites of the Imperial family, guest rooms, the main audience chamber, and the royal library. The Grand Council and the quarters and offices of the councilors were housed in an octagonal building with a beautiful domed atrium outside the main chamber.

Considered the greatest structural undertaking in Egalion’s history, the palace was ever changing. Over centuries of slow and ceaseless construction, innumerable craftsmen and the most expert artisans were requisitioned from the whole of the kingdom and from as far away as the Keltish Isles. It was truly an aesthetic masterpiece without equal and, separated from the city of Rowan by a thick crenellated wall, it was a world unto itself.

Jex and Sarene wandered up and down flights of stairs, through corridors, and across several gardens. The torina took him to see the bath houses with a wink and a sultry smile, and even showed him the Hall of the Dead. As they passed the kitchens, he casually swiped a pair of tarts from the windowsill, only to be caught by a servant who wielded her broom with exceptional speed and accuracy despite her advanced age. Eventually forced to hop a small garden fence to escape the shrieking harpy, he lost one of the pastries in the process and was rewarded by howls of laughter from several laborers who, working on the roof, had stopped to watch the spectacle below. The men called encouragement down to the woman, but she only glowered at them, shook her

fist at Jex, and retreated inside. Sarene graciously offered to split the remaining sweet with him, stifling a giggle as he picked bits of broom from his hair and clothing with one hand and juggled the crumbling tart in the other.

They ended up in the stables, Sarene confessing that it was her favorite place in the entire palace. Her mare, Clarity, was stabled within, along with several dozen other mounts that included Jex's own.

While they stood outside Clarity's stall, talking of nothing, a series of small, surreptitious noises and a quiet growl caught the mage's attention. Putting a finger to his lips to silence her, he spun on his heel and jerked open the door of the next stall.

Torina Kylan tumbled out and onto her hands and knees in the straw at his feet, Astraeus bounding out after her. She blinked up at them in surprise, her mouth opening on a startled 'o'. Hay was stuck to her gown and she had a smudge of dust on the tip of her nose.

"Kylan!" Sarene cried, stamping her foot in outrage and ignoring the eager pup bouncing around her in excited circles. "What are you doing in here? Where's your nurse?"

"I'm not a baby, Sarene. I don't need a nurse all the time!" Her expression changed to one of uncertainty and she looked at Jex. "I was bored, and lonely. I saw you coming and so I hid, because I thought, since you were with Sarene, you'd send me away if you saw me."

"And you were right." Sarene sniffed and folded her arms. "Listening to private conversations is very unbecoming to a torina. I should tell Mama. You know she doesn't like it when you do this."

"No!"

The two sisters glared at each other. Astraeus returned to his mistress' side and whined softly. Kylan buried one hand in the fur at the scruff of his neck and scratched him distractedly.

After a moment of uncomfortable silence, Jex cleared his throat. He put out a hand and pulled Kylan to her feet, helping her brush away the clinging debris, and patting the dog's head once or twice. Sarene threw up her hands.

"You shouldn't be out here alone. Come along and we'll take you back inside." She started towards the open stable doors.

Kylan put her hands on her hips. "No. I don't want to go inside. It's hot in my room and Nurse is no fun today."

"You're going in."

"I'm not!"

Jex interrupted before the argument could escalate. "She doesn't have to go. I don't mind her staying, if you don't."

"Well, I do!" She rounded on him in fury. "I have no intention of spending my afternoon with a baby and her smelly dog clinging to my skirts. If you want to, that's your own business."

Jex looked just as startled as Kylan had a moment before. "Come now, Sarene—"

"Don't patronize me! I cannot and will not tolerate their presence. If you're going to insist she stay, then you two are welcome to each other. I'm going inside to find more suitable company! Come and find me, sir mage, when you're done playing with children." She stormed away and they watched her go.

"Well that was certainly uncalled for," Jex commented after a few moments, "Is she always like that when she doesn't get her way?"

"Yes. She never wants me around." Kylan scowled at the swiftly-retreating back of her sister. "She says I stole Mama from her when I was born, and I sort of think she hates me." Her scowl melted and tears welled in her doe-like eyes. Astraeus leaned his head against her leg with a mournful sigh.

"Don't be ridiculous," Jex countered, "No one could hate you." He reached out and rubbed his thumb against her cheek, catching the single tear that fell. She gave him a wavery smile.

"You really don't mind if we stay with you?" The little girl sounded hopeful, fit to break his heart.

"Of course not. You seem to be more pleasant company than your sister just now, anyway." Jex shot an acid look in the direction Sarene had gone. True, the little torina's spying had been clumsy and impolite, but the older girl's explosion of temper had been a severe overreaction. There was nothing wrong with a healthy dose of curiosity, after all.

Kylan sniffled and hugged him, arms wrapping around his waist and squeezing tightly. A little startled by the act, he quickly recovered and returned the embrace, rubbing her back with one hand. When she stepped

away a minute later, her tears had vanished. She seemed to be as naturally cheerful as she was affectionate and he suspected, if the eavesdropping had been any indication, mischievous as well.

“Is your horse here?” she asked brightly, her brief unhappiness clearly forgotten.

“He is indeed. Would you like to meet him?”

“Yes, please!”

Kylan and Astraeus followed Jex down the wide cobblestone row. Horses of all sizes and colors poked their noses out of stalls and whickered at them as they passed. Stopping before a stall near the very back, Jex tapped on the wooden half door and clucked his tongue. The blood bay stallion within whinnied and kicked at the door with one hind hoof, making Kylan jump and back away. Astraeus growled softly, hackles raised.

“That’s enough, you,” Jex scolded. The horse turned around and put his head over the door, butting it playfully into the mage’s chest. Jex stumbled back a step, laughing, and ran a hand over the velvety nose. The animal blew out a short breath and rested his chin on the mage’s shoulder.

“He’s very big,” Kylan said in a small voice, “Does he bite?”

“Not anyone I don’t tell him to. Isn’t that right, Phetos?” the mage cooed. The stallion snorted and tossed his dark mane, then began nuzzling Jex’s tunic for hidden treats. Discovering only empty pockets, he nipped his owner and Jex let out a startled yelp. The smack he gave the animal was met with bared teeth and narrowed eyes.

The torina giggled. “You named your horse after the hero in *Absent Winter*?”

“As a matter of fact, I did.” Jex turned to her, surprised. He shoved Phetos’ head away from his own with a grumble and another warning to behave. “How did you know that?”

Kylan gave him a lofty smile. “I read a lot.”

She produced a cube of sugar from her pocket and offered it up to the animal. He lipped it delicately off her flattened palm, whiskers tickling her small fingers.

“I think you’ve just made a friend for life.” Jex crossed his arms and leaned back against the wall, well out of biting range. He kept a watchful eye on Phetos as he spoke. “What else do you read?”

“Everything,” she answered, reaching up to scratch under Phetos’ chin, “I liked *Absent Winter*, but *Dragons in the Mist* is my favorite. I’ve read it three times.”

“There is no adventure so great as that in a book. If a traveler cannot enjoy the journey over and over again, and find something new each time, there is no use in reading at all,” Jex quoted.

“E.N. Moranscote,” Kylan supplied at once.

He squinted at her in mock suspicion. “Aren’t you nine?”

“Almost ten!”

“I didn’t read Moranscote till I was twelve.”

“Mama likes him and she reads to me at night, or at least she did before she started getting so tired. She taught me to read when I was...” she considered, then shrugged. “I don’t know, but I was little. I can’t remember a time when I couldn’t read.”

“You live in the perfect place, then, little torina. The Imperial library is unrivaled.”

“You can call me Kylan.”

He sketched her a quick bow. “And you may call me Jex, if you like.”

“Does Turrus Arcana have a library, Jex?”

“It does, though not so grand a one as yours.” His quiet exhale was one of longing. “A deficiency I mourn most regularly.”

“Did you bring any books from there?”

He produced a slim volume from within his tunic and showed it to her. Giggling, she dug into a pocket of her skirt and pulled out a book of her own. Jex caught the half-eaten apple that tumbled out after it and tossed it to Phetos, who began crunching contentedly.

“I overheard Sarene talking about a tour. Did she take you to the library?”

Had the little girl been following them from the beginning? He dismissed the idea even as it came; he’d have seen her, or at the very least, heard her or Astraeus at some point.

As if reading his thoughts, she answered the unspoken question. “I was coming out of Mama’s room when she offered to show you around. I know how much she likes the horses, so I figured you’d end up here eventually. I came in and waited.” She put her book away. “How did you know I was here, anyway?”

“I heard you moving in the straw, you sighed once, and the door creaked when you leaned against it,” he answered without hesitation, “The little noises will give you away every time, and so will the dog.”

Kylan looked crestfallen. “Oh. I thought I was being really quiet.”

He patted her shoulder in consolation. “Lurking without being discovered is a skill that takes practice and patience to learn.”

“Do you know how to do it?”

The smile he gave her was enigmatic. “I might.”

“Want to see the library?”

“Lead on.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

“Mama, I’ve sent for one of the *kvinnas* from Cyril.”

Aelani looked up from the pool of saffron embroidery silk in her lap. Her oldest daughter stood at the threshold of the sunny day room, her hands clasped behind her back and earnest concern creasing her brow.

“Anya, I’m fine. It’s early yet and every pregnancy is different. I may be more tired than I remember, but nothing is amiss, daughter mine.” Aelani tried to soothe her eldest, though a secret niggle of anxiety wormed its way through her belly. She patted the cushioned seat beside her. “Come and sit with me awhile. Your uncles have just left and I find myself wanting the company of my children.”

“The Grand Council?” she guessed, “Papa told me about their proposal. It’s ridiculous and they should know better.”

The tora nodded. “Yes, indeed they should, but some things never change.” She patted the seat beside her again.

Anya came into the room and settled beside her mother, but persisted solemnly. “I’m still worried. Vasi de’Curande is the best healer and midwife in all Egalion and she would be discrete. I’ve gotten to know her well in the last few years and I’d feel better with her in attendance. You’re…” she trailed off.

Aelani’s rich laugh rang through the room. “I’m too old for another child, is what you were going to say. It’s true, love, and there’s no use dancing around the point. I didn’t expect to bear any more after Kylan, but the Goddess has blessed us and everything will be fine. You’ll see.” She set the little tunic she’d been working on aside and took her daughter’s hands. “Besides, your uncles will be with me, as they were when each of you was born. This baby has brought our family together in one place, and it’s been far too long since that happened.”

Anya set her jaw and drew herself up, a pose Aelani guessed she’d learned from either the *kvinnas* or her father. “Nevertheless, Vasi will be here within a fortnight, or perhaps a little longer. Please, Mama, it couldn’t hurt. I know it’s barely past midsummer, but the sooner she’s here the better Papa and I will feel. Especially with things…as they are.”

Aelani gave up and nodded her agreement. Anya was like Brinon; prone to worry and with little patience for uncertainty and even less for formal channels. There were hints of Eryk in her daughter as well, and the likeness had only become more apparent as she grew older. Once a plan of action was set, there was no stopping them.

She sighed. If it eased their minds for one of the sisters to be present, then she would not object, and if Anya had already sent for the woman as she’d said, there was nothing to be done about it now anyway.

Truth be told, she *was* bothered by her pregnancy. She was in her forty-fifth year, an age at which most women did not bear children and she truly had believed herself incapable of conceiving again. This baby exhausted her as none of her three previous had and it was starting to interfere with her duties as tora, loathe as she was to admit it. The evidence of her lessening ability to actively participate in matters of state was getting hard to ignore, as proven by the recent visit of her twin brothers.

Eryk and Jordin had gravely discussed the events of the council meeting from earlier that week, a meeting she had missed because she was too tired and ill to rise from her bed. Anger blossomed in her breast as she recalled what they’d said about the scheme put forth by Councilors Porcus and Wastrel. Long had she struggled with those two and it seemed that they, along with several of the more avaricious members of the Grand Council, would waste no time in raising their ugly heads in her absence. How they continued to be reelected every term was beyond her, and she could only assume bribery or intimidation was involved. Investigations had never turned up any solid proof of such behavior, and thus they returned year after year to complicate an already tedious process.

How dare they suggest marrying her seven-year-old daughter to a man who was old enough to be her father! It was an appalling notion, even for them. Yet it was also clever in a way that was unlike their usual machinations and she had to wonder if they’d truly been the engineers of the proposal.

Thankful as she was for the support and intervention of her brothers, she felt a stab of guilt for having left Brinon to face the vultures alone. He was more than capable of handling them, she knew, but she still felt she should have been there to remind everyone that they were a united front in all things. He'd come to her after the meeting, but had said nothing of the council's designs and her brothers had discussed it for several days before bringing it to her attention. Hurt was liberally mingled with the guilt she felt.

At that instant, the door flew open and Kylan skipped in, dragging an amused-looking Battlemage Xander in her exuberant wake. Jex halted just inside the doorway and somehow managed to give a neat genuflection, even while her daughter was pulling on his sleeve. Aelani hid a smile behind her hand.

"Mama, Mama!" the girl cried, hopping up and down in her excitement. "Guess what?"

"Kylan," Anya interjected with patient affection, "there's no need to shout. I'm sure the kitchen doesn't need to hear your news."

The little girl sighed noisily, rolled her eyes, and lowered her voice to something less than glass-shattering, though none of her eagerness was lost with the diminished volume. "Guess what?"

Aelani smiled. "What?"

"No, Mama! *Guess!*" she insisted.

"I haven't the slightest clue, other than that it must have something to do with your new friend," she replied with a laugh, throwing her hands up in surrender.

Kylan clapped and bounced on the balls of her feet. "Jex speaks Atromorese and he promised to teach me! And he's read *Absent Winter* and *Dragons in the Mist* and—"

"Wait a minute!" the mage protested, "I told you to ask your mother first!"

Anya blinked in surprise. "Do you indeed speak Atromorese?"

He ducked his head. "I do, Torina Anya."

"Fluently?" she pressed, head tilting slightly in interest. A contemplative expression crossed her face, and anyone who'd spent time in the presence of Tor Brinon would have recognized it at once. More than ever in that moment, Anya was her father's child.

"Yes, and I read and write it as well, although, I'd rather it not become widely known if you don't mind. I didn't intend for your sister to find out, but it seems her little ears are more perceptive than I would have thought"

The mage was starting to look a little self-conscious. He ran a nervous hand over his hair. Atromorese were widely hated and feared in Egalion, and he had more than his own safety to consider. This situation had the potential to become extremely complicated.

After a quick look at her mother, Anya agreed to his request. Jex couldn't help his parentage and she had no wish to bring strife to him.

"You have my word, Battlemage Xander. None will learn of this from me."

"Thank you."

The conversation drifted to other topics, but Aelani had retreated into her own thoughts, allowing the ebb and flow of voices to wash around her. It was clear that Jex feared discovery, and not just for his own sake. She, at least, had known his secret long before this day, however.

Eryk had come to her years and years ago, accompanied by Jex's terrified young guardian. Jex, it seemed, had been caught in the act of lifting her brother's coin purse in the market. The child had easily evaded the city guard, using what Eryk described as 'quite clever and advanced illusion magic for someone with no training'. He'd followed the five-year-old thief home and sought permission to take the boy to Turrus Arcana for instruction. Upon discovering the family was in the kingdom illegally, he'd asked his sister and brother-in-law for papers. They'd provided them, after hearing the woman's tale and Eryk's, but it appeared Jex didn't know that.

She would ask her brother about it later, but for now the beginnings of a plan came to her. She tugged mental strings and gathered tendrils of thought until she had the makings of what she hoped would save her Kylan.

"Girls," the tora said softly, "leave us. I wish to speak to our guest alone."

"But, Mama. Can he teach me? Please?" Kylan pleaded, "Pretty, pretty please?"

"Let me discuss it with your father first, my love," Aelani answered, "Now go with your sister. Anya?"

“As it please you,” Anya replied at once, rising to her feet and bending to kiss her mother’s cheek. “I’ll come back and have tea with you later, if you wish.”

“I would like that very much. Come and kiss me before you go, Kylan?” Aelani held out her hands and her daughter came forward and put her arms around her carefully. Her growing belly between them made the embrace a little awkward and Aelani had to lean forward to receive the asked-for kiss. Kylan gave it with a giggle, then gingerly placed both palms on her mother’s stomach.

“Can I kiss the baby, too?”

“Of course you can.” She heard the mage cough and over Kylan’s dark head, she saw him politely avert his eyes.

Kylan then insisted it would be unfair for Jex to be left out and stood before him with her face raised until he capitulated. Taking a knee to bring himself on a level with her, he accepted the kiss graciously. Aelani felt something warm suffuse her heart at the sight and tears prickled at the corners of her eyes. How could anyone even consider sending this precious, loving girl into Atromore?

After kisses had been given and received, Anya took Kylan’s hand. “Will you show me what your music tutors have been teaching you? Papa said you’re learning to play beautifully and I’d love to hear.” She had to all but drag her sister from the room, though she did it with gentleness. The door closed behind them, cutting off the little girl’s reply.

“Will you walk with me, Jex?” Aelani stretched and put a hand to her back. “I grow sore sitting for too long.”

“Of course, Ma’am.” He helped her to her feet and offered his arm. She took it and directed him to a door opposite the one her daughters had taken. It led into a long corridor, empty but for golden afternoon sun flooding through the open windows. They strolled for a time, saying nothing.

Aelani closed her eyes and focused on the simple pleasures of the warm rays bathing her skin and the soft cotton of his tunic sleeve beneath her hand. Distantly, she could hear the trickle and splash of water from the fountain in the courtyard below and the scent of lilies drifted in on the occasional breeze. The baby inside her shifted and her smile grew.

“My brothers came to me this morning and told me what happened in council,” she began at last, “I wish to know your opinion.”

“Regarding which matter exactly?” Jex asked cautiously.

“You know of what I speak.”

“The High Mage—”

“I know what my brother thinks. What I wish to know is what *you* think.”

He looked a little taken aback, but his steps never faltered. “I hesitate to question my tora, but... why ask me? You must have an army of advisors tripping over themselves and each other to offer their opinions.”

Aelani shook her head with a laugh. He certainly was a cheeky one, just as she’d been told. “Indeed, I have more than enough but you, you’re a stranger here, unused to the ways of the court and its politics. Unlike my brothers, my advisors, or my husband, your perspective is fresh. What did you think of the councilors’ plan to marry off my youngest?”

“I thought it was abhorrent.” He gave his answer immediately, without a hint of uncertainty.

“Tell me why.”

“Because,” he said more slowly, carefully choosing his words, “Torina Kylan is an innocent. I mean no insult or disrespect, but from what I’ve seen in just the last few days, she hasn’t the guile needed to accomplish what the council would ask of her. Min Ha is old enough to be her father and is most likely hardened to the wiles of a woman by now, especially if one considers who’s raised him. Kylan is not a woman yet, and would have no sway over a man like that.”

“What of the other torin, Gaherith?” she prompted, “I understand he was also put forth as an option.”

Jex frowned. “I know little of him, which tells me he has almost no power or influence in his father’s court. He would be a better match for her in age and likely gentler, but I think there would be too little advantage. It might even be more dangerous than marriage to Min Ha.” He cleared his throat, “May I be so bold as to offer a more personal thought, Ma’am?”

“Of course. Any insight you have is most welcome.”

“I think being sent to Atromore, no matter which torin was chosen for her, would destroy your daughter.”

“Because of Nareina?”

“No, though she must be considered one of the greater threats. Torina Kylan is something special, but delicate as well, I think, and Atromore is a hard land. My mother was born and raised there, and she’s told me many stories over the years. I’m afraid that it would break Kylan’s spirit to be sent away at her age and that would be too great a sacrifice for such an uncertain, and likely temporary, gain.”

Hearing those words, and the feeling with which they were spoken, brought tears to the tora’s eyes again. She was both surprised and pleased at his perceptiveness, having feared that such thoughts had occurred to no one but herself. To have them spoken aloud reassured her that her objections were based in more than maternal fear.

“You’re a wise man, Jex Xander,” she commented, voice thick with emotion. She swallowed hard around the lump in her throat.

He snorted. “Not so much wise as observant and not even that on a bad day.”

“You give yourself far too little credit. I think you would make a fine diplomat,” she argued.

They’d come around at last to the plan that had been forming in her mind since the moment of Kylan’s excited pronouncement.

She stopped, turning him to face her. “May I propose a bargain?”

“A bargain?” His eyebrows lifted. “You have but to command me, my tora.”

Aelani waved a dismissive hand. “I would prefer to make a trade. I find I get the best results from those whose loyalty is freely given.” She folded her arms and looked him up and down. “Though I can make it an order after you’ve heard me out, if that sort of thing tickles your fancy, dear boy.”

His eyes sparkled with interest and he made no attempt to hide his grin. “Not necessary, Ma’am. What do you have in mind?”

He was intrigued. Perfect.

“Let me teach you the ways of court as only an insider knows them,” she said.

“To what purpose? I think Rowan has more than enough courtiers, don’t you?”

“I see you prefer blunt speech. Something to work on later. I would like to train you in the art of diplomacy and espionage. That way, if negotiations are ever opened with Atromore, I can send someone I trust into them, If said negotiations are unsuccessful, I would then be able to employ...other means to ensure peace,” Aelani explained, watching him for an unfavorable reaction and readying responses to potential objections.

“Why me?” he asked, a touch of shrewdness coloring his expression.

“As I said before, your perspective is fresh. You haven’t been spoiled by a life at court.”

“Pluck any brat off the street and you’ll have that. Why me specifically?”

“You are clever,” she praised, “I want you, Jex Xander, because I know I can trust you.”

“You don’t know that.” He put his hands in his pockets and leaned back against the window ledge, studying her without a hint of his former deference.

Honesty and frank speech, it seemed, were her best course with this one, so she offered her heart’s feelings. “My brother has always spoken highly of you, and his praise is not given to many as I’m sure you know. And you’ve been kind to my children. If that doesn’t earn a mother’s trust, I don’t know what would.”

“But does it justify a tora’s trust as well?”

“Ask any woman with even one child, and you’ll find that the trust of a tora is nothing in comparison.”

He seemed to accept the explanation. “And in exchange for your patronage?”

“Put your knowledge of the Atromorese language to use by teaching Kylan. Things in our world are changing and when it comes time for her to rule, she’ll need every advantage and ally she can get. Also, as you are no longer my brother’s apprentice, you will, once trained to my satisfaction become my personal emissary for whatever matters I require. Do you find this arrangement agreeable?”

“If it be your desire, I’ll do it gladly.”

“I needn’t command you?” she teased.

“Nay, Your Majesty. I think this is a bargain I can enter quite freely without compromising my conscience or my honor.”

“Good. Starting tomorrow, you’ll spend your mornings with me or Brinon. You have your choice of afternoons or evenings for lessons with Kylan.”

“Afternoons would be my preference, Ma’am. I prefer to have my evenings to myself.”

“I’ll see it arranged.”

They began to walk again, Aelani feeling quite satisfied with the deal she had made.

* * *

“Will you tell me more about magic?”

Sarene and Jex lay side-by-side in the shade beneath a gnarled apple tree. The dappled shadows were only marginally cooler than the rest of the grounds, but immensely more comfortable than the palace interior.

He’d still been a little annoyed at her when she stopped him as he left the tora’s rooms. Head bent, eyes downcast, she had apologized for her loss of temper and asked for his forgiveness. Unable to refuse her contrite manner, or the attractive blush that stained her cheeks, he’d told her to forget it, and accepted her invitation of a walk.

They’d ended up in a small and little-used garden cut off from a larger plot by thick hedges, and its isolation guaranteed privacy and a measure of quiet. Bana would be less than pleased if she discovered them there unchaperoned, which he suspected had a great deal to do with why Sarene chose the spot.

“What do you want to know?” He lay with his hands tucked behind his head, eyes closed and drifting on the verge of what promised to be a pleasant nap.

“How is it done? And are mages trained only at Turrus Arcana?” She rolled to her side and propped her cheek on her fist, the pose accentuating the dip of her waist and swell of her hip. Her hair was braided simply and twisted into a bun atop her head, leaving her neck exposed to the cooling breeze. She wore the lightest gown she owned and had removed her shoes and stockings, discarding them carelessly in a pile.

“Asking ‘how is it done’ is a little like asking how you know to breathe. You just do and with magic you either have the gift or you don’t. The only thing you can be taught is the when and the why.”

“So why Turrus Arcana, then? What’s so special about it?” she inquired.

“Ah, well that has very little to do with magic, actually,” he said, “The Tower is a closed and controlled environment. Out in the middle of Goddess-forsaken nowhere, the damage from any mishaps can be kept to a minimum. That, and there are less distractions.”

She laughed. “Are there many? Mishaps, I mean. I’m sure the creative ones can find or create plenty of distractions.”

“From time to time.” He chuckled, an example evidently come to mind. “Though only a few of them have ever been spectacular or noteworthy.”

“Were you involved?”

“Not I, Torina,” he said, a little too calmly.

“Are there many different types of magic?”

“Not as many as people think. We’re gifted with control over the six elements—”

“There are only four elements, silly. Air, fire, water, and earth,” she interrupted, “Everybody knows that.”

“Spirit and, though it’s been debated for centuries, ice are elements as well,” he explained.

“Ice is just frozen water.”

“I know.”

“So why is it considered a separate talent?”

“You’d have to ask an arctomancer. Since I’m not one, I have no idea what the fuss is about, but I generally try to stay out of it. Sometimes they can be a bit touchy about the whole thing.”

“I can well imagine. So six elements, then. Is that it? That seems a little too simple.”

“Generally speaking, yes, that’s it. There are more subtleties and nuances to the gift than that,” he tilted his hand back and forth, “but the explanation tends to get a little tedious and technical. Suffice it to say, the vast majority of mages wield one element. There have been some over the years whose gifts are a little more fluid, in that their main strength is in one area but they show hints of another. It’s not common.”

“Are you one of those?”

“I am. I’ve dabbled a bit in etheromancy and spirit magic, but my strongest gift is for pyromancy.”

“Oh,” she sniffed, “I suppose I thought it would be a bit more exciting than setting fires.”

“What’s not to love about that?” he demanded, “I find it very useful.”

“Being a man, I suspect you would,” she mocked.

Jex sat up and scowled at her in indignation.

Sarene only smiled, gimlet gaze fixed on him. "What else can be done with magic, besides lighting torches and making ice or what-have-you?"

"It depends on what your strengths are. The potential mage would have to be tested to determine specific gifts, but one of the more common is the Second Sight."

"The Second Sight?"

"The most universal application is sensing the presence and residue of magic, though I've heard it can be used to summon visions of the past or the future as well. It's a peculiar ability, in that each mage who has it uses and perceives it differently. My friend Antilles, he Sees the touch of magic on the world as colors and brushstrokes, like a painter. Another mage, Hallie, hears music when she uses her Sight to look into the future. Don't ask me about that, because it's never made any sense to me."

"How peculiar. So do you have tutors as I do? How do you learn about the magic you possess if it varies so much?"

"I imagine our lessons are similar to yours, when we're young, at any rate." He shifted to put his back to the trunk of the tree and closed his eyes again. "Potential mages are grouped by age and take classes in general studies, reading, arithmetic, runes, and the like until they're about fourteen,"

"What happens at fourteen?"

"We're eligible for apprenticeship. Once chosen, our education is the responsibility of a Sura. We still take classes together for some things, but the purely magical training is done one-on-one, with an enormous amount of reading on the side."

"I've never had much patience for reading. I'd much rather just be told what I need to know. Why waste the day hunched over some dusty old tome when it can be explained in half the time?"

The corners of his mouth tilted up. "I've heard that same lament many times, but never understood it. We have an entire library at the Tower filled with knowledge on magical practice and theory, so why wouldn't you make use of it? But in the end, only the *Lexicon Magus*, *Scrolls of the White*, and *The Seventh Door* are required."

She wrinkled her nose. "I can't imagine learning all there is to know from just three books. Can anyone read them? I've never heard those names before."

"The first two, yes, but I don't know why you'd want to. They're a bit...dry, to be honest. *The Seventh Door* is forbidden to anyone outside the Tower."

"Why?"

"For reasons I'm hesitant to discuss on such a lovely afternoon," he hedged, "The last afternoon of my freedom, as it were."

"I heard about that. I'm sorry to see you shackled to my little sister."

"I don't see it that way. I think she's charming," he said easily.

"It sounds dreadfully dull to me and far too much work."

"Everyone needs a purpose, Torina, and I can think of much worse."

Sarene shrugged and returned to the previous subject. "What other talents do you have, besides pyromancy?"

There was a brief shimmer in the air around her and she gasped in surprise. Before her eyes, her gown changed from green to red to purple before returning to its original pale blue.

"That's...very strange to watch." She touched her skirt with wary fingers.

Jex grinned and stretched his arms above his head. "More impressive than setting fires?"

"Much."

"Illusion *is* a little more widely useful."

"Is there more?" she demanded excitedly.

He smirked at her. "I have a wide range of talents. Not all of them magic-related."

"Which makes me wonder. Why do you insist on visiting whores when there are plenty of fine and willing ladies of higher birth here to enjoy said talents?" She turned onto her back again, skirts pooling about her thighs as she bent her knees to wiggle her toes in the thick carpet of grass. In the spirit of being more aware of his surroundings, Jex was quick to note that she had rather lovely toes, and ankles, and—

She saw him staring and winked, then turned her attention to the sky. "Why do you do it?"

Jex looked at her in confusion, having lost the thread of their conversation in favor of smooth skin. “Do what?”

She sat up and regarded him as if he were half-witted. “Take serving women to your bed, of course!” Crawling on her hands and knees, Sarene closed on him. She straddled his thighs, hiking up her gown to accommodate the spread of her legs over his. This brought her face to within inches of his.

“Why does it concern you so?” His eyes were locked on her mouth, and he didn’t seem to expect an answer.

“Because you are a guest,” she breathed against his lips. “You know, you needn’t stoop to maids and kitchen women. I saw the others at the banquet, and many since, watching you. You could have your pick of any one of them willing to... serve you.”

“Like you?” he asked boldly, eyes sliding lower.

“Perhaps,” Sarene purred, “Would the opportunity to bed a torina interest you?”

“It might.”

“I can feel that it does.” She shifted in his lap. “You may, if you wish.”

And he had her, there in the grass under the bright summer sun.

Or rather, that had been his intention. Sarene, it turned out, had her own agenda.

She was demanding and aggressive, taking her pleasure from him with a single-mindedness that left no room for anything else.

“Sarene,” he tried to touch her but she pushed his hands away impatiently, “there’s no need to hurry.”

She ignored both his request and any attempt he made to slow her pace. In the end, he simply lay still and watched as she rode him to her climax. Only then did she relinquish control.

Falling onto her back, she spread her legs and closed her eyes, giving him permission with a gesture of her hand to pursue his own release. He rolled atop her and attempted to kiss her mouth, her neck, anything to make the moment more intimate, but she turned her head aside. With a grimace, he did as she bid him, though he might as well have been alone for all that she participated.

It was over mercifully soon and he rose hastily. Sarene watched him for a moment before straightening her own clothes and getting to her feet.

Standing on her toes, she whispered into his ear. “It would be worth your life, mageling, if anyone were to learn of this. Promise you won’t tell?”

The question was the same one Torina Kylan had asked that first night, but this time a thrill went through him and not an entirely pleasant one.

His mouth curved up in a mocking little smile, “Believe me, even if I were prone to boasting, this isn’t an encounter I’d brag about.” He regretted the words immediately.

Her eyes bulged and her face flushed scarlet.

“What did you say?” she hissed, nails biting into the tender skin on the inside of his wrist. He could tell from the initial sting that he’d bear a nice set of puncture marks there.

Jex stiffened and stepped back from her a pace, but refused to acknowledge any discomfort. “You have my word, *my lady*, that no one will ever know of this. Good day.” He removed her hand and turned on his heel,

Just before he was out of sight, she fired off her parting shot. “You’ll pay for your insults, you smug son-of-a-whore!”

* * *

Aelani outlined the agreement she had made with Jex over a small and quiet dinner with her husband and brothers. The young mage had disappeared, presumably into the city, and the girls were dining in the garden, taking advantage of the cool evening air. Sarene had seemed out of sorts, but refused to tell anyone why and Aelani had somewhat reluctantly let the matter drop.

“You are a very shrewd woman, Aelani my dear,” Brinon chortled, once she’d finished her tale. He wiped his mouth with a linen napkin. “You’ve secured yourself a blank-slate spy for the price of a tutor.”

“So it would seem,” she agreed, “He consented readily enough and Kylan adores him. I think this will work out to the gain of all concerned. What do you think, Eryk? He was your apprentice, after all, and you know him best.”

The High Mage set aside his fork and took a small sip of wine before answering, "I think Jex will make an excellent tutor for Kylan and he should take to your lessons quite well. He's an incredibly quick study and has always enjoyed a challenge. He has some additional skills that are well suited to the position you have in mind."

"What sort of skills?" Jordin inquired, "Other than his knowledge of Atromorese? Although I think that is skill enough to make him invaluable. Where did he learn, by the way? I daresay no one in Turrus Arcana taught him."

"His mother is a native and he learned from her before he came to the Tower," Eryk explained, "They lived here in the city, in the slums, which is where he learned the 'other skills' I mentioned."

A moment of dead silence fell.

Aelani at last voiced her disbelief, "The Brotherhood?"

Eryk failed to mention that when he'd come to her twenty years ago. She'd been under the impression that Jex had simply been a common cutpurse.

"Yes. He's a runner for their Lady, has been since he was five or six."

"Well. That is useful indeed. I think you've come out the better in this little arrangement, sister," reflected Jordin as he idly swirled his goblet before drinking deeply.

"I believe I have." This was certainly an unexpected turn, but a welcome surprise. Some of the best spies in Egalion's history had ties to the Obscuri Brotherhood, to the Shadow Court and its Lady.

"You may need to postpone this plan of yours for a bit, however," Eryk informed her.

"Oh?" Aelani asked, leaning back in her seat. "And why is that?"

"I spoke with Anya this afternoon and she's informed me that we're expecting a kvinna."

"Word certainly travels quickly in this family."

"I'm sorry, my darling," Brinon offered.

"It's quite alright. I've resigned myself to the idea. What does this have to do with Jex?"

"I'm... acquainted with the sister in question and she is very capable, but her party will have to pass through a great deal of open country and with all the recent unrest, I would feel better if one of my mages escorted them. Jex leaves on the morrow."

"I see." She shrugged. "No matter. The lessons can just as easily start when he returns, but I think Sarene and Kylan will be disappointed to see him go."

Brinon snorted. "I think a great many ladies will be disappointed to see him go. The lad has a perpetual shadow of females. I wonder where he gets that from." He shot a devious look at his brother-in-law, who only smiled and raised his goblet to his lips.

The room was quiet for a time before Eryk spoke again.

"There is something else you need to know about Jex, something that he himself doesn't know. His mother swore me to secrecy when she allowed me to take him to Turrus Arcana, and I've never breathed a word of it before this night. I need your sworn word that the knowledge will never leave this room."

CHAPTER EIGHT

The room at the top of the ancient, rickety stairs is dark, hot, and close, the air redolent of things that make the skin crawl and the hair stand on end. This is not a place one enters with good and honest intentions and its tenant is spoken of only in fearful whispers. They are both avoided by all but the desperate and the desperately greedy.

The splintered door creaks as it opens, but only a little, and light from the alleyway briefly skitters over the dusty threshold. It illuminates nothing, as if too horrified by what lies within to reveal it.

"I've become rather popular all of a sudden."

The voice is as aged as the blackened wood of the door, and quiet as the brush of a cobweb in the dark.

"You have a reputation, Old Mother."

"Of course I do. What do you wish of me?"

"Knowledge. And power of course. The usual things people seek of you, I suppose." There is a touch of bored contempt in the speaker's voice, though not enough to completely hide the underlying wariness.

"I don't work for free."

"No one does."

"Then you've brought payment?"

"Of course." A bag rustles and several metallic objects clink against one another as they scatter across a tabletop. There is a short silence before the old crone begins to wheeze in laughter.

"You're in over your head, child. What need have I of coin at my age?"

Another bag drops amidst the coins, but this one falls with barely a sound. Bent and knobby fingers pull the drawstring and there is a sigh of satisfaction.

"Not the best quality, but it'll do. State your purpose."

"I seek the Guardian, Old Mother. I have a request, and you will tell me how to summon Him."

A short bark of disbelief cuts the air. "You would send for a Consort as if he were a mortal page, to do your bidding? Ignorant fool!"

"Keep your opinions to yourself, crone. I've paid you for your services, not your judgment. Now tell me what I want to know!"

"Fine," she said sullenly, "but your fate be on your own head. Only the stupid shun the advice of the old ones. For what reason do you summon Him?"

"Does it matter?"

"Oh yes, it matters. Your purpose determines which incantation you are to use, and what preparations you must make. Have you a copy of The Book?"

"Which book? I have many."

"You truly are an ignorant, but it's no concern of mine. The Seventh Door is needed for your task. The ritual you seek is contained within."

"I haven't the time nor the inclination to travel all the way to Turris Arcana for a copy. Try again."

"But you needn't. There's a copy hidden away in the Imperial Library, if you can get it. Be wary, though, for the priests guard it well and I hear tell there are two new mages in the palace. One of them the High Mage himself."

"Noted. What else?"

"Listen carefully. You risk your soul in this and it'll be no one's fault but your own if you make a mistake..."

Enari sat bolt upright in her bedroll, cold sweat trickling down her face and a cry of warning lodged in her throat. The night beyond her tent was still, save for the occasional pop of a log in the campfire and the shift of a man in his blankets. Her eyes darted back and forth, searching the shadows for any hint of the crone or the Other, but she was alone.

Lying back down, she closed her eyes and tried to banish the images, but it was no use. Sleep did not come for her again that night and it was with a troubled heart that she finally rose at dawn.

CHAPTER NINE

It was their thirteenth day of riding since leaving Cyril and Enari was bored to death with the grasslands. They'd crossed from the dim, humid jungle of Zyr into the arid and open plains of Tesriel early three or four mornings past and she already hated the seemingly endless expanse of green and gold. It had been fascinating at first, and their party made much better time, but now...

Small brown birds twittered and flitted overhead, diving into the meadow to disappear for a time before leaping back into the cloudless sky. Enari assumed they must have mates or nests full of hungry young hidden in the tall grass.

She sighed as she scanned the open land for what felt like the thousandth time that morning. Even the birds here were drab and colorless and she had seen no other animals to speak of, even if vague rustlings and bending grass hinted there must be something out here besides birds.

She missed the brightly varied life of Zyr with a desperation that gnawed at her. The Temple had felt confining at times and she'd spent hours staring out at the horizon, longing to travel beyond it. But now she wanted nothing so much as to return home, to the serene kvinnas and the safety of her high redoubts. This place was too open; she felt naked and vulnerable beneath the vast heavens.

Hours before noon, it was already blisteringly hot and the air was dry as old bones. Enari used her sleeve to wipe the sweat from her forehead and licked her parched lips, wishing, not for the first time, that the brown tunic was at least sleeveless. She'd found several light tunics without sleeves when she dug through her pack that first night, but hadn't thought she'd need them. Zyr was humid and warm, but it was shady under the trees and she had always been quite comfortable in the long, bell sleeved cotton garments worn by the novices. They were also well suited to keeping the bugs at bay.

Thus the clothing that would be more appropriate for late summer in Tesriel were buried in the bottom of her pack and the pack was strapped behind her on the pony.

Approaching hoof beats broke her gloomy train of thought and she lifted a hand to shade her eyes, impatiently pushing back hair the inconstant breeze kept blowing across her face. A horseman was riding towards them from the northwest at a quick canter, the tall grass swishing around the knees of his long-legged mount.

Having caught sight of their party, he raised a hand to hail them. Vasi reined in her horse, and the small procession straggled to a halt. The guard captain and his men warily checked the draw of their swords and balance of their pikes, watching the approaching stranger with dark, suspicious eyes.

To her annoyance, Enari's fat little white pony immediately dropped her head to crop at the roadside verge. When she tugged the reins, the beast merely flicked its ears and rolled an eye back to glance at her in disinterest. Enari kicked her lightly in a fit of pique, but was ignored completely. She felt her patience unravel another notch. Goddess, were all horses so stubborn or was it simply this one in particular?

Within moments, the rider had reached them, and he made straight for Vasi and Enari.

He was quite handsome, Enari thought, studying him as he neared, although, she had to admit that she really had very few men with whom to compare him. Other than the occasional trader, men were not allowed on the Temple grounds and the nearest Zyrite village was miles away. This one appeared to be several years older than she and of average height, though his legs were long and he had a rangy build. His black hair was pulled into a tail and several strands framed his face, ruffled by the wind. He was also well armed, with a sword on his hip and a black, curiously carved staff slung diagonally across his back.

He must be a mage.

The prospect of meeting a real mage made her nervous. The older novices had told both terrible and beautiful stories of the sorcerers who dwelt in the fortress of stone in the far lonely north.

When he drew near enough for her to clearly see his face, the first thing she noticed were his eyes. They were the most vibrant emerald she'd ever seen and fringed in thick lashes that many a woman would envy. He

had a slightly angular nose, and full lips that seemed ever on the verge of a smile. His skin was lightly tanned, but that could have been from the dust of riding. His clothes, while fine, were certainly covered in it.

Pulling his mount to a halt, the young man bowed from the waist, which looked a little uncomfortable astride a horse. When he spoke, it was in a smooth baritone that made Enari shiver for reasons she didn't quite understand.

"Jex Xander, at your service, my ladies. Well, Jex to my friends and Battlemage Xander to everyone else, if they know what's good for them at least. Might either of you gorgeous visions be Vasi de'Curande?"

His eyes met Enari's and a little frisson of energy passed between them. They each sucked in a startled breath and their mounts shifted nervously.

"Well, well, Nani. What have we here?" he asked in surprise.

Enari stiffened slightly at the bold informality. From the little Ibirani she had picked up, 'Nani' meant 'my little butterfly'. She narrowed her eyes at him. Little she may be, but certainly no butterfly, and most definitely not his in any fashion.

From the corner of her eye, she saw Vasi press her lips together in a thin line of irritation. She pulled herself up straight and pinned him with a glower to which he seemed entirely oblivious. Enari recognized the pose and winced. It was the same one her Sura assumed while lecturing wayward novices...generally ones about to be sentenced to a month of something unpleasant.

Like scullery duty. Or weeding the Apothecarium garden. The newcomer had no idea of the tongue lashing he was bringing down on himself.

"Battlemage Xander, *I* am Vasi de'Curande. I know you do things differently at Turrus Arcana, but it would behoove you to address my apprentice with a little more respect—"

Jex blinked. "Apprentice?" He gave Enari another long, appraising look. "I wasn't informed you'd be bringing an apprentice. Isn't she too old? I'd have guessed her to be sixteen at the least, and I thought vows were taken before then."

Vasi said nothing, merely continued to stare him down until he blushed and broke eye contact.

"My apologies, Novice. I meant no disrespect." Despite his humbled words, he winked at her again and she had to fight to hold back a smile this time.

She thought she might like this Jex Xander. He would at least be better company than the pony, if nothing else.

Vasi huffed out a sigh. "State your business, Battlemage. It's hot and I have no wish to tarry here without need. You might not be aware, but there are bandits and rebels rumored to inhabit this area."

Jex straightened and cleared his throat. When he spoke again, it was in the tone of a consummate professional; cool and respectful. He turned fully to Vasi and addressed her in a polite manner.

"Which is the reason for my presence. I have been sent by High Mage Alycon to escort you to Rowan. He is concerned with your safe passage since, as you say, bandits and rebels are reported to inhabit this area."

Vasi blinked in surprise. "Eryk sent you?"

"Yes, Kvinna. I am recently graduated from apprenticeship and went with him to Rowan to attend the Imperial family. When the High Mage learned that Torina Anya had summoned you, he ordered I see you safely to the capitol."

"How am I to know the truth of your statement?"

Smiling faintly, Jex withdrew a sealed parchment from within his tunic and passed it over. Vasi studied the wax seal closely before breaking it and unfolding the single sheet. She scanned its contents, then returned it to him.

"Your...escort, and the High Mage's thoughtfulness are much appreciated, Battlemage Xander. We would be so pleased to have you join our party." Vasi sounded anything but pleased, though the young man before her seemed oblivious to the frost in her tone. Saluting smartly, he nudged his horse and rode ahead.

"Mouthy little popinjay," Vasi muttered, watching Jex ride forward to join the captain of their small guard.

* * *

Enari sat cross-legged on the ground near the campfire. She ached in every joint and muscle of her body from the days of riding and a hard tumble or two. She'd taken only rudimentary riding lessons at the Temple;

there had been no need and she'd had little interest for more, and thus she was not accustomed to the activity. The pony she'd been assigned seemed to enjoy making the ride more uncomfortable than necessary which didn't help, a sour part of her grumbled.

The fire's heat against her face was a pleasant contrast to the cool night air around her. A bowl of stew sat forgotten in her lap, a hunk of bread left untasted on one knee as she brooded. She rubbed her neck and winced; she wasn't used to all this sleeping on the ground, either, though she would never hint to Vasi that she was uncomfortable.

"May I join you?"

Without waiting for a response, Jex Xander settled gracefully to the ground beside her. He offered her a tin cup and she took it, warily examining the contents.

"You have the look of someone who could use that." He jerked his chin at the cup before turning his attention to his own bowl of stew and chunk of bread.

Chamomile and meadowsweet wafted up on the steam and she inhaled appreciatively, but didn't drink.

"Oh, I almost forgot!" Fishing a flask out of his pocket, the mage unstopped it and leaned over her, pouring a small amount of something brownish into the tea. "Not the best quality, I'm afraid, and I know it smells vile, but it'll take the edge off your sore muscles, I promise." He grinned at her startled expression before settling more comfortably and beginning to eat heartily.

Enari took a tentative sip and tried not to gag. It was horrid, but the warmth that spread in her belly was soothing, so she continued to drink. They sat in silence for several moments as stars twinkled to life overhead. A few even shot brightly across the sky and Enari watched them, still awed at the sheer immensity of the view above her. At the Temple, parts of the night sky had always been obscured by foliage, even when viewed from the high branches of the trees she climbed.

"Mmm, Plamen works his forge tonight," Jex observed around a mouthful of bread, "Wonder what he's making?"

Enari didn't answer and after a moment, he tried again.

"Did the kvinna speak truth? Are you really still a novice?" He used the remaining crust to mop out his bowl before licking his fingers and wiping them in the grass beside him.

She nodded, still not looking at him.

"May I ask how old you are?"

It was a rude question to ask a woman, he knew, but he'd been watching her all afternoon and hadn't been able to guess her age. 'Young' was all he'd determined for certain. Probably too young.

Using a stick, she drew a number in the dirt and his conscience eased. Eighteen. Not too young, then, or at least not so much that he felt guilty for looking. And he definitely had been looking. Couldn't blame a man, really.

Well, the kvinna probably would. She seemed the excessively protective sort.

"I have a sister about your age, back in Rowan. Not as quiet as you, though," he mused, hoping to at least get a smile out of the girl. She was exotically appealing and he could only imagine how much more radiant she would be if she smiled.

Enari stood quickly. She didn't know how to fend off interested men and retreating to bed seemed like the easiest way out of this awkward situation.

"Novice!" one of the guardsmen called out. To Jex, he sounded more than a little drunk. "If you be done with that pretty boy, come and spend time with a real man. The night promises to be chill, but I'll warm you well if he won't!"

Jex rose to his feet upon seeing her uncertainty and embarrassment.

"You!" he called back, "Didn't your mother teach you how to address a lady?"

"Mind your own business, mage," the man retorted. He got up unsteadily and swaggered towards Enari. She hurriedly backed away, eyes darting left and right as she sought an avenue of escape.

Before the man could reach her, Jex stepped up and put his palm in the center of the other's chest. He gave him a stiff shove, eyes dark with menace.

"Don't be a fool. I wasn't sent to protect these women from their own escorts but I will. I suggest you find your bedroll, friend," he said dangerously, "Sleep it off, or you'll be no good to anyone on the morrow."

Enari stared at the pair with round eyes. The mage didn't even know her, yet here he was, protecting her honor like she was some grand lady.

After a moment of glaring at each other, the guardsmen broke eye contact first. Muttering sullenly under his breath, he retreated and Jex released a sigh. He really hadn't wanted to fight the drunken lout, even though he was confident he'd have won.

"Silent little thing, aren't you?" Returning his attention to Enari, he reached out and touched her cheek gently.

Weariness in blurry waves of gray, spikes of hard red adrenaline and anger, fading sparks of vibrant blue lust... Goddess, she'd be so pretty if she smiled. Too pretty to stay much longer in a group of men with no one but her Sura to look after her. Stupid, stupid to send such a small party across so much open land.

Quiet thunder of a rapidly pounding heart, the sharp tang of fear-sweat, nervous little brown mouse... That man almost...he could have...and the mage. I don't even know him, he doesn't know me, but he stopped the other one. His hand is on my skin and...

Starting in alarm, Enari recoiled and the string of awareness that was and wasn't hers snapped like gossamer thread. She took a quick step back and the sudden movement unbalanced her. Her sore leg muscles were unable to compensate and with a surprised gasp, she fell onto her bottom in the dirt. Jex looked down at her, clearly as startled as she.

A heavy hand grabbed the back of his tunic and the grizzled old guard captain shook him roughly. His voice was deep and his accent was rough. "She dun'a like to be touched, maging. Keep your mitts to yourself!"

"I-I'm sorry. I didn't know, I," Jex stuttered and cleared his throat. "Sorry," he finished lamely, looking back and forth between Enari and the captain, as if unsure who he was actually apologizing to. He offered her a hand up, took a look at the captain's face, and put both of them in his pockets.

"You alright, little mistress?" the captain asked Enari.

She nodded and climbed stiffly to her feet, brushing dirt from her trousers.

"I'm sorry for startling you, Nani," Jex apologized again. Enari smiled and waved it away. He frowned at the captain and opened his mouth.

As if guessing the younger man's thoughts, the captain shook his head. "She dun'a speak, either." He narrowed his eyes threateningly at Jex, thick brows beetling down even further. "But dun'a you be going and thinking she be stupid for it, mage. She ain't."

Jex held up his hands in placation and took a step away. "I would never!"

"See that you dun'a." With that, the captain strode away into the darkness. Jex made a face and gestured rudely at his retreating back. Enari covered a smile.

Turning back to her, he raised a speculative eyebrow and put his hands on his hips. "He wasn't having me on, was he?"

Enari's expression turned distant.

"Alright, alright. Keep your secrets." His eyes darted to the bowl of stew she'd somehow managed not to drop or spill all over herself. "Are you going to eat that?"

* * *

The beast absolutely would not mind.

Enari prodded the pony impatiently with her heels in an attempt to urge it out of its rambling gait and into something that resembled speed. She shifted awkwardly and had the sense of losing her balance. Dropping the reins, she grabbed the pommel to steady herself and waited for the brief sense of vertigo to fade.

"If you sit up straight and relax, you'll be more comfortable," a voice announced from her left. Enari glanced up and scowled at the battlemage. He swayed easily in his saddle, reins dangling loosely from one hand as he watched her. She wanted to slap the smug look right off his face.

"You don't ride much at the Temple, I presume." He popped a fresh blackberry into his mouth. She'd seen him leaning over and plucking them from bushes alongside the road all morning and envied his confidence in both his mount and his own horsemanship.

She shook her head and nearly went over the saddle horn as the devil-pony ambled to the side of the road and ducked its head to pick at the grass. She yanked on the reins and the pony crow hopped sideways, eyes rolling.

“Stop that!” Jex reprimanded sharply, “You’re hurting her!”

Swinging a leg over the bay’s back, he slid to the ground and stepped to the pony’s head. He caught the bridle and gently pulled with one hand, tugging the reins loose from Enari’s clutching fingers with the other. Petting the pony’s nose and cooing softly under his breath, he led them forward. His own horse followed obediently.

“The reins will give your mount a clue as to which direction you want her to go, but you guide her with your legs,” Jex instructed, continuing to walk at her side and still holding the pony’s bridle. He reached to put a hand on Enari’s knee, but remembering the odd encounter and the captain’s warning of the night before, stopped short of touching and looked up, raising a dark eyebrows in question.

He was waiting for her permission to touch her and Enari felt an odd lightness in the pit of her stomach. No one, not even Vasi, had ever actually asked before and she was a little taken aback. The pony carried her forward several steps before she slowly nodded her consent. She took a breath and held it, fighting the urge to close her eyes as his hand settled lightly.

His touch, even through her trousers, was warm and not at all uncomfortable and she released her pent-up breath on a quiet sigh of relief. Jex’s lips twitched in the barest hint of a smile, but he otherwise pretended he hadn’t noticed her reaction or the lingering tension in her posture. He squeezed ever-so-slightly and she trembled beneath his palm.

“To turn left, pull back with a *gentle* pressure on the rein in your left hand. Squeeze back, don’t tug, and continue contact on the right rein to control the amount of bend she’ll take as she turns.” He stopped walking and pressed on the outside of her left thigh as she pulled gently on the rein in her left hand. “You want her to turn around your leg. Like this.”

To her delight, the pony turned smoothly left, making a full circle around the motionless man.

“Very good. Now turn her to the right,” Jex directed, clearly relishing the role of teacher. He released the bridle and moved out of the way. Enari pulled with her right rein and pressed her right leg into the pony’s side, but too hard. This turn was less smooth and Enari felt herself sway.

“You’re too tense, but I don’t know that I can help you with that while I’m down here and you’re up there, Nani.”

There was that name again. Enari knew she should probably be offended, but the more he called her that, the more she thought she liked how it sounded.

“Enjoying yourselves, youngins?”

They glanced up to find the grinning captain beside them. Enari hadn’t even heard his big roan approach, and that bothered her a little. She was usually acutely aware of her surroundings and the people in them.

“The *kvinna* asked I check on you, little mistress, as you seemed to be falling behind a wee bit. And you, mage. Are you behaving?” he regarded Enari. “He ain’t bothering you, is he?”

Enari shook her head emphatically and smiled shyly.

The captain nodded. “Good. Catch up to the rest, now. Both of you.” Clucking to his horse he trotted ahead to rejoin the rest of the party, casting watchful glances back at them as he went.

“Old grump,” Jex muttered. Enari nudged his shoulder with her knee in rebuke. Captain Bohlale may have been gruff, but he was a kind man and he meant well.

Still grumbling, Jex swung back into his own saddle and watching her out of the corner of his eye, he tried not to smirk.

“You sit too stiffly. It makes her nervous and just as uncomfortable as you are. That’s why she’s so disobedient and keeps trying to throw you off. I’d throw you, too, were I her.”

In response to the unasked for criticism, Enari used the gesture she’d seen him give the captain’s back the night before. Later, she would blame the heat for her rudeness.

Instead of taking offense, Jex threw back his head and laughed, the sound startling a covey of little brown pheasants into panicked flight. Before she could blink, he drew alongside the pony, reached over, and scooped her out of her own saddle. He deposited her in front of him, shifting his position slightly to make room for her. Her body went completely rigid in shock at so much contact with another person.

“We’d never catch up at the pace you’re riding.” he informed her, “not without you falling off and breaking your neck, anyway. I’m sure someone would find a way to blame me for that.”

The explanation barely registered as she fought to control her panic. It was too much, he was too close, and she couldn’t breathe.

“Relax,” he said after a moment, using the same gentling tone on her as he’d used on the pony. “I’m not going to hurt you, I swear. Sit up straight, but don’t stiffen your spine. That’s why you hurt at night.” He rubbed his thumbs in little circles down her back, kneading the stiff muscles before moving both hands to her hips and trying to coax them to sway with the motion of the horse.

She tried to do as he bid her, but it was impossible with him pressed against the length of her back and his hands on her. Never in her life had she been touched so intimately and part of her mind screamed at her to scramble down and run.

But another, a new part, urged her to stay where she was. He was...very male, and very different. The butterflies started up in her belly in earnest now.

“The Horsemaster at the Tower is a Hundai tribesman and there are no riders to equal them in all the three kingdoms. Have you ever met one?”

Enari shook her head, mind filling with images of the barbarian half-horse-half-men that had been described by older novices. She shivered a little.

“That’s a pity. They’re magnificent people. Anyway, he told me once that riding a horse well was like making love. Your movements should be fluid, natural, and in tune with your mount.” He chuckled at the look on her face as she gazed over her shoulder at him. “A vulgar metaphor, to be sure, but not wrong. Although you’re too young for it, I suppose.” He seemed to search for another description, came up empty, and shrugged. They rode on in silence.

* * *

Vasi had been keeping an eye on her apprentice and Battlemage Xander all morning. She had been willing to grant the mage a small measure of respect when she saw him dismount to help Enari, and had been shocked beyond words when the young woman allowed him to touch her without a violent recoil.

But grudging respect swiftly changed to outrage when he reached over, plucked her apprentice from her pony, and settled her in front of him in his own saddle. Panic crossed Enari’s face and her whole body went rigid.

Kneeing her gelding a bit roughly in her haste, she began to turn and head back, intending to put the man in his place at last. How dare he lay hands on her apprentice in such a way?

“Peace, Kvinna. I dun’a think he means her harm,” Captain Bohlale spoke from her side, reaching out to lay a hand on hers. “The little mistress does need the help. She truly is the most unnatural rider I ever did see in all my years.”

“But—”

“Arrogant little dandy, I know. He grates on the nerves sure, but you must admit the lad certainly can ride. I’ll whip him for you later, if it soothes your feathers some.”

“No,” Vasi grated, “Battlemage Xander may no longer be the High Mage’s apprentice, but he is still subject to his authority. I’ll speak to Eryk about this when we get to Rowan and let him do it.”

The captain’s grin widened. He’d just bet she would...or do it herself more likely if the boy continued to tempt his fortune. He eyed her in appreciation. She was a fine woman, was Kvinna Vasi, and no mistake.

After several moments of silence, he spoke again, “Vasi, I think it be good for the little mistress to get used to being touched by others. You’re taking her to Rowan, and there be many there who will bump and jostle, mostly without meaning to. She needs to get used to it at some point, and better now than in a crowd.”

Or in front of the court jackals.

Vasi looked on the man with a newfound admiration. Simple Zyrite tribesman he might be, but Captain Bohlale was wiser than she’d given him credit for, and he was correct, of course. Rowan was vast and the Imperial palace was a crowded place. Many of its occupants would not be as understanding of Enari’s sensitivities as the kvinnas were. Better to get her ready now, though it pained her to think of the discomfort she

knew her apprentice would experience. And Enari did seem to tolerate the mage's touch...perhaps a little too well.

She would watch them closely, and make sure to put an immediate stop to things if he became too impertinent. Though she would hold her tongue for now, she still planned to have a private discussion with Eryk when they reached the Imperial city.

CHAPTER TEN

The book lay open on the floor, its pages illuminated by the barely adequate glow of candles. The air was still, quiet, the night seeming to hold its breath in anticipation of the impending storm. Lightning flickered beyond the window, though the roll of thunder was not heard for several long seconds. The tempest was still distant, but approaching rapidly. The next flare of light was followed more quickly by the basso rumble.

A robed and hooded figure knelt within a diamond of silver dust, a lit white candle at each of the four points. A whispered chant filled the room and a slim hand occasionally reached out to turn a page.

Beyond the northern point of the diamond, a mist began to form. It billowed and swirled, rising from the floor in a rotating pillar of fog as it slowly coalesced into the figure of a man. Though the face could not be seen, there was no doubt as to the gender of the summoned.

He was tall, taller than any mortal man, and lean, with the air of a large cat stalking prey. His armor was plain, unadorned by any crest or symbol, but of exquisite, unearthly craftsmanship. It reflected the wildly dancing candle flames in tiny flashes that hurt the eyes. The naked sword in one gauntleted fist was likewise unadorned, save for the large moonstone in its pommel. The visor on his helm was lowered, but through twin slits, two points of glacial blue light burned like cold fire.

“You dare to come before me so covered?” rasped a voice. The sound was cold, the words like winter sleet hurled against the senses; stinging, bitter, biting. It was alien and terrible.

“I did not know what garb was appropriate, my lord,” came the trembling reply.

“Once only will I overlook such disrespect,” the armored figure warned. He stood utterly still, but the threat in his voice was unmistakable. The hooded form touched its head to the floor.

“You are most gracious, Guardian.”

“Why have you summoned me, mortal?”

“I seek the power to right a wrong, address an injustice done to me,” the supplicant hissed.

“The Consorts do not give freely.” Contempt, disdain, boredom.

“With your permission, Great One, may I rise and present my offering?”

The helmet bobbed once and the hooded figure rose. It glided to the corner and drew forth a struggling child. The little boy was gagged, his hands bound, wide green eyes bulging in abject terror. The front of his worn trousers turned dark as he was pulled into the flickering light and the reek of urine filled the small chamber. He was pushed to his knees, his head yanked back by a fist in his riot of ebon curls. A little whimper of panic escaped the gag.

“This one is not ready for judgment.”

“But will you accept his soul in return for what I seek?” the voice from within the hood demanded.

An object appeared in the air above the diamond; an oval moonstone on a fine silver chain. It caught and reflected the light in a rainbow of colors. The boy’s eyes followed it, becoming glassy.

“Excellent.”

The drawstring of a small, black silk bag opened with a quiet slithering sound and a coin gleamed in a smooth palm before being slapped against the boy’s forehead. He screamed as the hand was removed, a line of fire circling the coin’s edge, burning and blackening the tender skin. His eyes rolled back in his head and he slumped forward. The summoner let him fall.

Violet light streaked from the crumpled body and into the outstretched hand of the Guardian. As soon as it reached him, thunder boomed and the window flew open. The storm poured in, the wind and rain snuffing out every candle in the chamber.

The pendant and chain dropped to the floor.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“You’re doing much better,” Jex praised.

It had been a week and Enari had to admit she’d improved under his patient guidance. Though she didn’t ride in complete comfort, she did find herself much more at ease astride the now obedient pony.

And it wasn’t just the pony she’d grown more comfortable with, either.

There was something about being near the battlemage, a lightness she felt in his company, that she’d never experienced with another person. He was solicitous of her comfort, courteous in his treatment of her, and with the exception of that first lesson, asked before touching her. The latter was a courtesy not even Vasi paid her with any regularity.

At first, Enari held her breath in anticipation that his hands on her would trigger a repeat of that first night. If Jex noticed her reaction, he made no comment, but she noted that he was careful never to touch her skin. Consequently, the only thing that came of their contact was a tingling heat in the pit of her stomach. It was almost a disappointment; he’d felt so warm as he was thinking of her.

Then there was the way he looked at her when he thought her attention was elsewhere...

An enormous yawn that felt like it would split her face in two suddenly overcame her and she shot an embarrassed glance at Jex, belatedly raising a hand to cover her mouth.

“You had a nightmare last night,” he said, tilting his head back to watch the clouds.

Enari shrugged and rubbed her eyes. She had indeed had another nightmare. It had been along the same vein as the one she’d had the night before he joined them, though not as vivid and there were parts she couldn’t recall. But just as before, she’d been unable to go back to sleep and tiredness coupled with the oppressive heat was catching up with her.

“I heard you tossing in your tent,” he continued, eyeing her with some concern. “You look exhausted.”

She grimaced. That was always something a lady liked to hear. *“Oh, the purple circles under your eyes goes quite well with that lovely shade of dusty brown you’re wearing. They bring out the red in your sunburn.”*

“Have you ever been to Rowan?” he asked, absentmindedly rubbing at his chest. He’d repeated the gesture several times, as if in mild discomfort, and it bothered her for reasons she couldn’t quite put a finger on. Something to do with her dream, perhaps.

She shook her head no, wishing he’d be quiet for just a moment so she could think.

“Outside of Zyr?”

Another brief shake.

“Outside the Temple?”

Enari just raised an eyebrow and he laughed.

“This must all be very strange to you, then.” They rode in silence for only a short time before he spoke again.

“Do you enjoy living among all those women?”

The rapid and seemingly random changes in his incessant chatter were not so confusing or unexpected as they’d been at first. Enari suspected the jumps were indicative of an over-quick intellect, albeit one that was easily distracted, and trying to guess where his conversation would lead had become a sort of game for her. It wasn’t easy and her guesses were often wrong, but the longer he talked, the more she discovered she enjoyed listening to him. It was a pleasant way to pass the time, since the surrounding countryside certainly offered up no distractions.

Jex coughed twice, then turned his face aside and leaned over to spit into the dirt. She noted he was a little slower to right himself than he’d been the last time and wondered if she should be worried. Examining his face more closely, she thought he did look a little flushed, but perhaps it was just the heat. Goddess knew it was getting to the rest of them.

“Well?” he prompted when she failed to answer his question.

She blinked at him in confusion and he laughed.

“What’s it like, living in a compound made up solely of women?”

She shrugged, having never really thought about it. Not knowing anything else, it hadn’t occurred to her to wonder; it just was.

“I suppose it would depend on whether you were a man or a woman,” he rambled on, “I imagine as a woman, it might get irritating to constantly be among females. But a man would well enjoy it. I wonder if that’s why the kvinnas never take male novices.”

“Mage,” grumbled a nearby guard, “Do ya EVER stop talking?”

“When I’m asleep,” Jex shot back, unruffled by the annoyed tone, “although I’ve been told occasionally, not even then.”

“Eyes alert, the both of you,” ordered Captain Bohlale. He rode between the two, thumping his man on the back of the head and shooting Jex a frown.

“Oh, right, because we’re in so much danger here. Out in the open. In the ass-end of nowhere,” the mage scoffed.

“I’m surprised you still have all your teeth, what with you making such a ready target of em all the time.” snapped the captain. “But dun’a think I won’t thump you, too, Mouth,”

‘Mouth’ had become a rather catching nickname over the past days, much to the mage’s displeasure.

“The ladies have always enjoyed my mouth.” Jex snickered and ducked his head, dodging the first blow.

The second caught him square as he looked up and knocked him from his saddle. He tumbled into the dust with a curse as the men around him burst into wild laughter.

Captain Bohlale came to a halt and looked down on the sprawled form impassively. “If you spent as much time looking around as you did flapping your gums, you’d have been ready for that.” He didn’t wait for a response before riding on.

The mage lay on his back for a moment more, gazing up at the sky before rolling slowly to his hands and knees and spitting out a mouthful of blood. He regained his feet, fingering his split and swelling upper lip.

“Bastard,” he hissed, catching Phetos’ reins and remounting.

Because his back was turned and her eyes were on him, neither saw the danger until it was too late. The only warning they had was a deep and angry buzzing sound and the shrill scream of the pony.

Before she could blink, Enari found herself tumbling head over heels along the rough ground. She came to a halt in a tangle of bushes and began struggling to free herself, to make sense of the sudden chaos. Brambles tore at her exposed flesh and caught in her hair as she fought against them.

“No!” Jex barked out, his voice sharp as a whip crack above the horrible noise. “Nani, be still!”

She froze at once, not even daring to draw breath. Through the jumble of branches, she had a clear enough view of the nightmare that had descended upon them. It was a sight that would haunt her for years to come.

The size of a very large dog, the thing appeared to be a combination of several insect-like creatures. It had the brownish-red, thin-waisted body of a wasp and enormous wings shimmered in the sunlight. Instead of the expected short stinger, however, it had a tail like a desert scorpion, curled up over its back and poised to strike. Black, multi-faceted eyes and a pair of oversized pinchers called to mind the cutter ants often seen marching along tree limbs in the jungle, carrying leaves back to their nests.

The thing in their midst now had no such innocent intentions.

It crouched over the violently thrashing body of Enari’s pony, mandibles busily ripping gobbets of flesh from its side. Enari could see a few ribs gleaming within the gaping wound and a wave of nausea swept over her.

A hail of arrows struck the shining carapace of the creature and bounced off without doing any damage. It shrieked in rage, waving its tail threateningly and fluttering its wings.

“Stop shooting at it!” Jex bellowed, ducking as another arrow whistled past his head. “It’s an aspion, you idiots! Stop, stop!”

He was still mounted, though he was now standing in the stirrups with his staff held tightly in one hand. His eyes darted between the creature and Enari, gauging the distance. She remained perfectly still, sprawled half on her back in a thorny blackberry bush. Blood oozed from several scratches on her face and neck, but otherwise she looked unhurt and the thing hadn’t spotted her.

Yet.

He'd no idea aspions could grow so large nor were they normally this aggressive. It must either have a nest nearby or their party had inadvertently ridden into its mating territory. Fire would drive it away or kill it readily enough but he was afraid that if he attacked it now, even a precise strike would also catch Enari. And if he *missed*, he ran the risk of setting the whole plain alight and killing all of them.

Alternatively, he could call up an illusion and try to frighten it away. That approach would pose the least risk, though it required more concentration.

Closing his eyes, he drew on his power and visualized what he wanted. He crooked his fingers and when he looked again, there was an enormous rattlesnake slithering out of the bushes beside Enari. The young woman stared at it in abject terror, but it ignored her and headed straight for the Aspion. The rattle of its tail was loud and ominous.

Another arrow suddenly flew past and buried itself to the fletching in the aspion's eye, and the thing went mad.

Thrashing and screeching, it began to scuttle in Enari's direction. It passed right through the snake without even noticing and it became clear there was no longer any hope of simply driving the creature away.

When Jex figured out who had fired that shot, he would skin him alive

Cursing viciously, he let the illusion fade and put his heels to Phetos. He had to duck beneath a whirring wing and felt the air stir as the aspion's venomous tail flashed past his cheek. As soon as he was close enough, he leaned almost completely out of the saddle and made a grab at the novice's belt. He jerked her clear just as the deadly stinger buried itself in the earth where she'd been. The aspion screamed again and a small spattering of liquid struck his sleeve. It immediately began eating a hole in the fabric.

Oh, now he remembered; in addition to a stinger the size of a spearhead, mandibles that could crush a man's leg, and exceptionally creepy eyes, they had acidic venom. It ate through anything it touched, even solid stone.

Damn. This tunic was one of his favorites.

"Hold this," he told Enari, thrusting his staff into her arms before ripping his tunic off over his head and flinging it away, "and don't drop it!"

She nodded and clung to it with one hand, seizing his belt with the other in a desperate bid to stay mounted.

Wheeling Phetos around to face his adversary, Jex called fire. It built rapidly in his cupped palm, soon surrounding his entire hand in a snapping ball of flame. His first shot missed by inches, roaring past the aspion to explode in a shower of red and gold embers in the dirt of the road. Several of the Zyrite guardsmen cringed and threw their arms up to shield their faces.

His second volley didn't miss.

While its carapace was impervious to arrows, it burned like oil-soaked wood, and within a few seconds, the aspion was a howling, jittering torch. It collapsed to the road, writhing and arching even as it burned and Jex dismounted at a safe distance. He took his staff back from Enari and strode forward. Upon reaching the aspion, he brought the butt of the oaken rod down with all his strength, cracking open its head like a ripe melon dropped on cobbles. The twitching and screaming abruptly stopped.

But the dreadful ordeal wasn't ended yet.

Gut twisting and bile rising in his throat, Jex went to the side of the road and crouched beside the downed pony. The poor beast was somehow still alive, bloody froth foaming out of its nose as it breathed. Pain-filled brown eyes rolled towards him and he reached out to pat the lathered neck lovingly.

"I'm so sorry, girl," he breathed, "You didn't ask for this. May Suman welcome your spirit and may you ride the wind for all time." Yanking a dagger from his boot, he drew it sharply across the pony's throat. Her life's blood flowed out and stained the dirt at his feet a deep crimson. Mercifully soon, the beast lay still.

A choking sound behind him made him look over his shoulder. Enari stood, both hands over her mouth and tears running in diamond tracks down her dirty face. She wept silently, shoulders jerking as she gasped for breath between sobs. Jex rose swiftly to his feet and took her by the arm, turning her bodily away.

"Come on, Nani. Come away."

She didn't resist as he led her back towards Phetos and stood woodenly as he fished a clean tunic from his pack. Once he'd pulled it on, he caught her around the waist and swung her into the saddle before climbing up behind her. His thunderous expression halted the few men who'd dared to approach. One man's gaze slid away

from his for an instant and he knew he'd found the careless archer. He mouthed an 'I'll deal with you later' before turning his attention back to Enari.

His hand smoothed across her forehead, fingers lingering over her temples, and her skin tingled wherever he touched her and there was a hazy wash of color in her mind. Exhaustion settled on her, the weight of it nearly suffocating, and she leaned her head back against his chest.

Enari closed her eyes, tears still leaking from under her lowered lashes and was quickly asleep, lulled by the gentle swaying of the horse beneath her and the steady beat of his heart beneath her cheek.

No one, not even Vasi, dared speak, and the party journeyed on in stony silence.

* * *

It took another week to reach the walls of Rowan and the closer they got, the more soldiers they encountered on the road. Standard patrols, they called themselves, and they were always made up of fourteen Legionaries with at least one battlemage in their midst. Jex stopped and exchanged whispered words with the man, or occasionally, woman, and Enari felt deeply uneasy as she watched them talk. Folded scraps of paper changed hands and disappeared into pockets when they parted ways and there was always a tight wariness to Jex's posture for quite some time afterwards.

The soldiers and tense conversations had ceased to be a primary concern, however, when the mage had fallen ill five days back. He'd been a wretched traveling companion ever since.

He currently rode slumped over almost double, letting out the occasional groan when Phetos traveled over an uneven patch in the road and jostled him. Even Vasi was more than a little concerned.

It started with a few sores around and inside his mouth, a day or so after their encounter with the aspion. He'd been clearly mortified by the unsightly eruptions, yet refused the kvinna's initial offer of a salve to put on them. All assumed he'd just come into contact with a little of the creature's venom and that the blemishes would heal.

Then the vomiting had begun the next morning, accompanied by a low-grade fever and body aches. Symptoms that could be attributed to the heat or one of the various summer maladies that plagued the land each year, if it weren't for the rash. Enari first glimpsed it around his neck when he'd leaned over in his saddle to surrender his breakfast and it resembled deep, vicious scratch marks, of all things.

Despite his obvious misery, Jex continued to ride and waved away any concern expressed by the others, politely at first but with increasing acrimony as the day progressed and he grew more unwell. Captain Bohlae kept an eye on him nonetheless, and Enari rode close. Vasi was convinced the mage just had a bad case of influenza or the like, and forced a few herbal teas down his throat, most of which he threw up almost immediately.

The third day had been worse.

Jex had risen in the morning stiff and cramping after a night spent tossing restlessly without much sleep. He refused anything to eat or drink and moved as if the touch of clothing against his skin was painful.

After watching for a few minutes, Vasi threw up her hands in exasperation and ordered him back into his tent, following on his heels with her pack of herbs and medicines in tow. In a brisk and clinical manner, ignoring his loud protests, she commanded him to strip. He'd done it grudgingly and she assessed him with more than a little alarm.

The man was a mess; the rash had descended from his neck and now covered one side of his chest in angry red lines that he'd clearly been picking at and he had what looked like bite marks and blisters on the inside of one thigh and on his back. He'd tried to cover his groin with his hands, and she'd struck them away with an irritated sigh. As if he had anything she hadn't seen before and modesty would do him no credit if it hindered her examination.

"Black Goddess, what have you gotten into?" she demanded, digging in her pack. "Here, this should help with the pain while I mix something up to cover those. You should thank Enari, by the way, as she insisted on packing that. Take only one for now."

He tried to refuse the small brown packet of leaves she thrust into his hand, but capitulated under her stern glare. She watched him swallow one, just to be sure he did it, then left the tent, threatening him with bodily injury if he moved before she came back.

When she returned, she found him standing exactly where she'd left him, not even trying to cover himself now. The slightly glazed look in his eyes told her the anesthetizing herb had done its work. She handed him a steaming cup and told him to drink its contents slowly while she addressed the rest of him.

Like a suspicious child, he sniffed it first and made a face. "What is this?"

"Ginger and Valerian. Don't burn your tongue."

"It smells horrid," he whined.

"If it makes you feel better, does it matter how it smells?" she snapped back as she broke the seal on a little ceramic pot. The scent of apricots filled the air.

"You're going to make me drink nasty tea, again, and put whatever-that-is on me so I can walk around smelling like a basket of fruit. Grand," Jex sighed, sipping at the liquid and trying not to grimace. "Do you intend to leave any of my masculinity intact?"

"It could be worse. That could be dandelion and milk thistle tea and I could make you smell like an old lady's sachet." Vasi reached towards him, fingers covered in light pink ointment. Jex hopped back a step, sloshing tea down his bare chest. He hissed and tried to brush it off as it burned him.

She rolled her eyes. "Or I could just let you suffer, if it saves your precious pride."

"Give me the damned jar. I can do it myself," he insisted, eyeing her as he backed away another step.

"You're not putting your dirty fingers in my jar."

"I'll wash them first, or buy you more when we get to Rowan, but you're not rubbing ointment on me like I'm an infant!" His face reddened, whether in embarrassment or pique or both, she couldn't say, and he reached for the jar.

"Considering that's exactly what you're acting like—" Vasi advanced on him, but held the container just out of his reach. They circled each other and when Jex's back was finally to the tent flap, he began retreating again. A shadow loomed outside and the canvas was jerked aside. Captain Bohlale stood in the entrance, a frown on his face.

"Mouth, hold yourself still so's the kvinna can treat you, or we'll be in this place all damned day!" he thundered, "Pardon my language, Kvinna."

Jex jumped and spun toward him, dropping the now-empty tin cup. Vasi took the opportunity to reach up and seize his ear between thumb and forefinger. It was a tactic learned over many years as Master Apothecary, treating uncooperative patients. He snarled an expletive not meant for polite company and started to struggle, but stopped immediately when she gave the lobe a warning pinch with her nails.

"Hold still and you'll leave here with that ear in its rightful place."

The wounds were treated and covered quickly after that, despite an enormous amount of complaining on the part of her unwilling patient. He was smart enough not to move in the face of the stoic guard captain, but it didn't stop him from scowling at them both in fury. The expression softened as the herbs began to take effect and by the time Vasi had finished, the mage looked more content than angry.

"Get dressed," Vasi said at last, clearing up the little scraps of bandaging and putting things back into her pack.

"And what do you tell her for taking care of your sorry self?" Captain Bohlale asked, still blocking the exit. With a roll of his eyes, Jex turned to Vasi. "Thank you, Kvinna de'Curande, for your assistance."

She snorted and tossed another jar at him, which he caught deftly. "Put this on the rash." Then she stalked out, calling over her shoulder, "And stop scratching at it or it'll get infected and scar."

CHAPTER TWELVE

The cry arose shortly after dawn.

A frightened kitchen maid, deathly pale and trembling violently, fled the cellar in search of a guard. The closest man on duty happened to be Gaylan Krihamre, who in turn had summoned the Captain of the Imperial Home-Guard.

Taking one look at the peculiar scene, the man immediately shut the door to the small room and posted a sentry, leaving strict instructions to allow entrance to no one until he returned. He had then gone, as quietly as he could, to the High Mage's quarters, thankful to find him already awake and taking breakfast with his brother.

Eryk listened silently to the surprisingly calm and concise report and, with the half-asleep Jordin following in his wake, returned with him to the room in question. They arrived within a quarter hour of the initial alarm, to find a small crowd already gathered in the narrow hallway. Frightened whispers chased one another through the tightly packed group, rumors already passing from mouth to ear and out into the palace.

With a nod from his commander, Gaylan stood aside, allowing them to enter. The High Mage stopped on the threshold and had a brief, whispered conversation with the guardsman before closing the door behind himself. The onlookers were sent away, though many lingered just out of sight, hoping to glean more details to add to the gossip.

The storage room was small, windowless, and seldom-used, holding little beyond cobwebs and a few casks of wine covered with dust. It reeked of death and decay, with an undertone of something sickly sweet, like rotten fruit.

On the dirty floor, amidst a scattering of silver sand and rings of melted wax, sprawled the partially decomposed body of a naked child.

He lay on his stomach, face turned away from the door. His clothing, the ragged tunic and trousers of a scullery boy, lay carelessly discarded in a corner. There were long scratches down his exposed back and unidentifiable wounds on his buttocks and what could be seen of one thigh. Pale, fat maggots wriggled in the wounds, making the skin appear to undulate in places. Curiously, the scratches, though jagged and deep, were bloodless.

Covering his nose, Jordin bent and turned the corpse over, only to rear back with a startled "Diu!"

A silver coin had been branded into the center of the boy's forehead, the flesh around the edges black and peeling. His sightless, milky eyes stared at the ceiling in evident terror, slack mouth opened on a silent scream. Long scratches to match those on his back marred his thin chest as well.

And his tongue was missing.

"Goddess preserve us," Eryk breathed, crouching to examine the body. "So young for such a violent end."

"Diu," Jordin repeated shakily. He rubbed his clammy palms on his trousers and turned to address the waiting captain. "Did your men see anyone come in or out of here?"

"No," he swallowed thickly, "and I don't recognize the boy. He's not one of my trainees. Perhaps the cook will know him."

"Eryk, have you ever seen anything like this before?" Jordin asked his brother.

The High Mage shook his head. "This is a ritual sacrifice of some kind, but that's all I can determine. The boy has been here too long for me to discern anything else."

Jordin wrinkled his nose. "Ritual magic? So a mage did this."

"Not necessarily, but it's the most likely explanation. Really, though, anyone with a bit of skill and access to the right information could do it."

"That's rather less than helpful, brother."

"I'll send to the Tower for Perimos and Antilles. They know more about ritual magic than any mage alive and hopefully they can shed some light on this." Eryk rose to his feet and removed his cloak, beginning to drape it over the body to afford the poor child some measure of dignity. "Antilles should be on his way here in any

case with his findings from our little encounter on the journey here. In the meantime, we need to find out who this boy is. His mother must be worried sick by now.”

“Wait a minute, what’s that in his hand?” Jordin stopped his brother before he could draw the cloak over the corpse. Disgust forgotten, he crouched down beside the body and coaxed the clenched fist open. An elaborate braid of black hair lay crushed in the mottled palm. It appeared to be human.

“It’s too long to be his,” Jordin mused, picking it up gingerly between thumb and forefinger, “and the color isn’t quite the same, so I imagine it belongs to... what, the target of the ritual? And the coin there is Atromorese. Interesting.”

“Isn’t it just,” Eryk replied bitterly.

* * *

The pain-numbing leaves were gone, as was the ointment for the rash, which had slowly spread down his back. He’d stopped vomiting, but only because there was nothing left in his stomach, and had grown quiet and listless. Sweat stood out on his ashen face and his eyes kept going in and out of focus. Enari continued to ride beside him and was the only one able to coax him to drink a little from time-to-time.

“I dun’ a think he can ride much further, Kvinna,” Captain Bohlale said very quietly. They rode together, a little ahead of the rest.

“He has to,” she replied, “The sooner we get to Rowan, the sooner he can see a proper physician. This is beyond me, Captain.”

“What does he have, do you think? Is it... catching?” He glanced around at his men, who had been distancing themselves from the mage as the day wore on. The novice was determined and had taken it upon herself to tend him it seemed, and in spite of his surliness.

“Should the little mistress be so close?” he added with concern.

“I doubt it’s contagious. Otherwise we’d all have it by now. As to what exactly ails him, I have my suspicions.”

“Which be what?”

Vasi looked uncomfortable. “I think he spent the night with the wrong woman before he joined us and now he’s paying for it.”

The captain immediately disagreed. “Nah. I’ve seen men with the whore-pox, pardon the phrase. This be something different. It’s like the poor sod has all the symptoms of every pox all at once.”

“But what could possibly cause it, besides, well, a poor choice in bedfellows?” Vasi asked, “He’s eaten and drunk nothing different from the rest of us, though even if he had, these aren’t the symptoms. It can’t be a reaction to aspion venom, either. I can only conclude this is something from before he joined us. What I can’t explain, however, is why it’s taken so long to manifest.”

Behind her, the mage dry retched weakly. She knew he was exhausted; he’d lain awake all night, coughing and tossing fitfully. As of that morning, his fever had gone up dangerously and the last time Enari offered him his canteen, he’d simply turned his face away from her.

That was what had truly pushed Vasi’s worry into grave concern. It was hot enough for him to dehydrate, and that would kill him before his illness did.

“Magic, perhaps?” Captain Bohlale offered, “I’ve heard it’s possible, with the right spell.”

The kvinna bit down on the denial that sprang instantly to her lips as scraps of *The Seventh Door* flashed through her mind. Was it possible? She supposed it could be, with the proper ritual, but why would anyone go through all the trouble and effort? Had someone taken the expression ‘a pox on you’ and made it literal in this case?

Goddess, she hoped not, because no one she knew could treat magic used like that.

* * *

The sun was sinking in the west, casting a pink glow over the outer walls of the Imperial palace. The little party had arrived at last, and not a moment too soon. Exhausted and acutely feeling the strain of the last days, they picked up as much speed as they could coax from their weary mounts.

Jex had started drifting in and out of consciousness an hour or so outside of Rowan and had to be tied into his saddle after a tumble was only narrowly averted by Enari's quick reflexes and Phetos' awareness of his rider. None of the fearful and superstitious guards would ride double and though the novice had offered, she was refused. She was too small to keep her charge from falling, Captain Bohlale explained to her kindly, and if the man fell, he'd take her with him, risking injury to them both.

Just outside the gates, they threw a cloak over the mage and pulled up the hood, not wanting to start a panic by being seen bringing an obviously ill person into the city. Enari remained beside him, holding Phetos' reins, though she needn't have bothered. The horse was intelligent enough to have followed her without protest.

Vasi again donned the black and white garb customarily worn by the kvinnas and had taken charge of their party. Once at the palace gate, she presented the seal Anya had sent with her letter to the sentries. They were waved through quickly and directed to the stables by a courteous, and very young, lieutenant. A few of the older soldiers tried to peer under the cloak at Jex, but Captain Bohlale had ridden between them as if by accident, and then they were past and in the palace proper.

A messenger had been sent on ahead to announce their impending arrival, and with instructions to discreetly seek out the High Mage and a physician. The High Mage met them in the courtyard just as the captain dismounted and cast his reins to a waiting stableman.

Enari stared as he approached, mouth open in shock. Eryk Alycon had to be the biggest man she'd ever seen and at the moment, he looked extremely worried. If such a great man as he could look so scared...

Noise drew her attention back to her companions. Jex had come around again and succeeded in both shaking off the cloak and untying himself, in spite of the captain's order for him to remain still. As Captain Bohlale reached for Phetos' bridle, the animal shied and pranced away, snapping his teeth. The mage swayed and would have fallen if he hadn't managed a feeble grab at the pommel. The captain cursed and backed away from the skittish stallion. When the animal settled, he reached out again, but instead of simply shying, Phetos reared up. He whinnied shrilly and lashed his hooves.

This time, Jex failed to stay mounted.

Enari watched in horror as he was thrown from the saddle, tumbling across the cobbles to lay unmoving in an unnaturally-twisted heap. The High Mage had reached them by then and he ran to Jex, dropping to one knee beside the unconscious figure.

Without thinking and completely without fear in that moment, Enari slid down her horse's side and raced forward. She reached up and caught hold of the bridle straps just as Phetos readied himself to rear again. Hauling his head down with all her slight weight, she gave him a stern shake, the way she'd seen Jex do. Thus captured and rebuked, he stood blowing and stamping, but began to calm as she stroked his nose. A large hand reached over her shoulder and took the bridle from her and she turned to find a man in a dusty uniform standing behind her.

"I've got him, girl," he said and Enari got out of the way, turning to find Eryk and Captain Bohlale lifting Jex between them. They'd rolled him carefully into his discarded cloak and were using it as a litter. He looked dreadful and there was a small smear of blood on the cobbles where his head had lain.

"He needs a physician, the fool," Vasi said, joining the two men. More stable hands appeared to take the horses and a few women began leading the Zyrite guardsmen into the kitchens for food and ale.

"Master Illyrian should be waiting in Jex's rooms." The worry in the High Mage's voice was reflected in his eyes. Turning to one of the servants who had stopped to stare at the commotion, he ordered, "You, get that door and then go to Master Illyrian. He'll be in Battlemage Xander's quarters on the fourth floor. Tell him we're coming up, and be quick."

The man raced away and they followed.

A spot of blue caught Enari's eye and she hurried over to where Jex had fallen. In the chaos, the small pouch he'd been collecting missives in had fallen from his tunic and now lay in a muddy hoofprint. She picked it up, finding it heavier than she'd expected, and after brushing away what grime she could, slid it into a pocket before hurrying after her Sura. There would be time enough later for questions about the contents.

It was a mercifully short distance to Jex's room and the only difficulty had been the landing between the third and fourth floors. Once within, they lay him out on the bed and Vasi ripped away his tunic, showing the High Mage and Master Physician the ugly rash, rapidly explaining what she'd given him to treat it and its utter lack of effect. They grimaced and Master Illyrian made a disparaging comment about improperly trained healers

that earned him a few hard looks. The unconscious mage was stripped naked in short order and Eryk covered his mouth in shock at the sight of his ravaged body.

Jex remained out cold through the whole affair, which was likely a blessing. Everyone but Vasi was shoed from the room and the door was closed firmly behind them. The High Mage disappeared, leaving Enari alone to wait. She found a bench a little way down the hall and sat, tucking herself into the corner and drawing her knees up to her chest.

By the time full dark had fallen, Jex was beginning to hallucinate from infection and fever. Shortly before midnight, the physician slipped from the room, bringing Enari out of her light doze. He went to the High Mage, who had returned while she slept, and whispered in his ear. The big man went pale, the skin around his eyes growing taut. While the two spoke, Enari snuck past them and into the rooms beyond.

Jex lay on his side in the center of the bed. He was quiet at the moment, but his eyes roved behind closed lids as if dreaming vividly. His skin was pasty, except where livid purple smudges underlined his eyes, and sweat stuck his hair to his skull. His grimy clothes had disappeared, leaving only the thin white sheet to cover him. It had been folded down to his waist and something with a bitterly medicinal aroma had been plastered over his chest and back, covering the irritated and broken skin.

Enari stood with her back against the wall for several moments, frozen. She'd never seen anyone so sick in her entire life, not even when plague had swept through the Temple some years ago, and she wondered with despair if he was going to die. Her stomach knotted at the thought of losing someone she'd grown to like as much as she liked Jex. He'd saved her life, after all, and been kind to her despite her odd ways and her silence.

"All-Mother, please don't let him die!" she pled silently.

"Sparks," he muttered suddenly, face going tense. "Red eyes...dun a mach dorcha..."

Enari leaned over him, straining to catch the words, but they sounded like gibberish. The part about red eyes, however, stirred something in her mind. Part of a dream? She felt another icy tingle of fear for him.

There was a gentle knock and she jerked upright, whirling as the door opened to reveal Master Illyrian's apprentice. He greeted her cordially.

"Master Illyrian will be back shortly, but he sent me in to watch Battlemage Xander. You may retire if you wish. I believe the High Mage is waiting to escort you and your Sura to your rooms. They are in the hall." He held the door open and gestured somewhat impatiently for her to exit.

As she moved, Enari caught sight of herself in the dressing table mirror and wrinkled her nose. After the long day, she was a mess; rumpled clothes, dirty face, tangled hair...she looked like a wild creature. Longing for a bath and a bed rose in her on the back of a yawn, but she didn't want to leave.

The physician's apprentice, interpreting the distress and indecision on her face for what it was, promised that Jex would be well cared for. A little guiltily, yet knowing she needed rest, she left in search of her Sura.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The door banged open, rebounding from the wall hard enough to rattle the contents of shelves across the room before slamming shut. A ceramic pot teetered uncertainly and finally tumbled to the floor and shattered, filling the room with a noxious odor.

“It didn’t work, you lying old witch!”

The voice was shrill and filled with complete and utter rage.

“You said you wanted revenge, and from what I’ve heard, you got it.”

“I wanted the bastard dead!”

The old crone shrank down into her chair, putting up a gnarled hand to shield her face. “I told you everything I know!”

“Then you were wrong.”

“Your summons may not have been appropriate—”

“—Or your information was incomplete. You have one chance to tell me what I need to do this correctly.”

“The Book,” the crone babbled, “You need The Book. *The Seventh Door!*”

“I have the damn book! I preformed the sacrifice as prescribed, used the implements outlined in the ritual, and the child’s soul was accepted. He even gave me this.” The moonstone pendant was dangled in front of the old woman. “Why is the mage still alive?”

“You used a child’s essence to curse a grown man?”

“Yes.” For the first time, the speaker sounded uncertain.

“Your sacrificial offering must resemble the target of your curse,” the witch explained sullenly, “Otherwise it doesn’t work, no matter how nicely you ask. I was quite clear on that point.”

“Black hair, green eyes, and common-born. I even had a lock of the mage’s hair. How much more ‘resemblance’ is required?”

“Idiot. There isn’t enough power in the soul of a child to inflict lethal harm on an adult. Didn’t you read the ritual completely before you started?”

The silence was answer enough.

“You nobles,” she continued, “you’re all alike, thinking the rules aren’t for you. I’m surprised the power or the thing you summoned didn’t double back upon you for such clumsiness.”

There was a thoughtful pause and the speaker took a deep, steadying breath. “I think I deserve some sort of recompense for the risk I took in summoning Him without the proper information. And for the mess.”

“I’ll tell you this. The mage isn’t going to die. The thing you summoned will only linger until the power of the boy’s soul is used up, then It will have to return to whence It came. There’s your ‘recompense’. No charge. Now, get out.”

A stray beam of light glinted on metal and the old woman opened her mouth to scream.

The sound never left her throat.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

For once, Enari slept without dreams.

She awoke much later than normal, to find herself in a strange room. Late morning sunlight, far too bright, poured through the open window beside the bed and gauzy curtains that looked nothing like her own rippled in the incoming breeze. It didn't smell right, and it was hot. She was used to waking to the humid scent of rain and flowers or, more recently, the dust and smoke of travel, but all she could smell now was... well nothing, really. For a moment, she lay sleepily blinking at the ceiling, trying to remember where she was.

Then it all came back to her in a rush; she was in Rowan, in a guest room at the Imperial Palace. Her room, and the Temple, were a province away to the south. They'd arrived the previous evening and Jex had been desperately sick, maybe even dying.

She sat up and started to yank the sheets away.

"Calmly, little miss," said a female voice. The accent was familiar, even if the speaker was not. "The palace isn't a fire."

Enari looked around in alarm, searching for the stranger in her bedchamber.

The speaker turned out to be a young Zyrite woman in an amethyst gown. Her dark hair was covered by a crisp white kerchief and her eyes shone a bright and sparkling blue. She rose from her chair near the door and crossed to Enari's side, sitting down on the bed at a respectful and nonthreatening distance. Her posture and smile were welcoming, and meant to soothe.

"I be Babirye Krihamre, little miss, and I'm assigned to serve the kvinna and yourself. Anything you need during your stay, you come to me. You be Enari, yes?"

She nodded and offered the woman a tentative smile of greeting. Babirye's was the first friendly face she'd encountered since coming here, and reminded her a bit of home. It was hard not to warm to her.

"Come. There be breakfast for you in the sitting room and your Sura's waiting. It be just her and I, so you can come out in your nightdress if you wish."

She motioned for Enari to precede her and they entered the next room to find Vasi sitting at a small table and holding a cup of tea in one hand. She was dressed in a fine black gown with elaborate white embroidery Enari had never seen before and her hair was done in a soft style that framed her face. The breakfast fare laid out before her was light; fruit, bread with accompanying butter and jam, and of course, tea. Vasi refused to start her day without at least one cup and Consorts help anyone who tried to rush her through it.

"Kvinna, here be your apprentice. Need you anything from me?"

"No, thank you," Vasi replied. She raised the delicate cup to her lips and inhaled the pleasant aroma. "This is one of the few things I ever missed about Rowan."

Babirye drew out a chair for Enari and waited for her to sit. She did and the serving woman poured her a cup of tea, holding up a little dish of sugar and another of milk for Enari's approval. She nodded yes to both and they were added, lightening the deep brown to a cloudy, milky perfection nearly as pale as the cup itself. She smiled her thanks and the woman smiled back, accepting the her silence without offense.

"I've never understood why you drink tea at all," Vasi teased her apprentice, "That's really nothing but sweetened milk."

"Would you fancy something else, little miss?" Babirye asked with concern, "I can find something different if you would prefer."

Enari vehemently shook her head and picked up her cup, trying to hide her discomfort. She'd never had anyone wait on her before and she wasn't entirely at ease with the experience. At home, the majority of her meals not eaten with Vasi were eaten in her own room alone. It was a privilege the Abdesa had granted after seeing how poorly she fared in the common dining hall with the other girls.

"Please don't take offense at her silence, Lady Krihamre. My apprentice doesn't speak."

"I suspected as much. My little bror is without speech and the young lady acts much as he does, so I understand. And please, just Babirye will do, Kvinna."

Vasi was appreciative of the woman's easy acceptance of what would be seen as, at the very best, a curiosity. Thus far, she had been quick, insightful, and almost prescient concerning their needs, and Enari seemed to find her more than acceptable, which was unusual. Her apprentice was normally agonizingly shy and uncomfortable with strangers. But that seemed to have changed, starting with Battlemage Xander for some reason, handsy git though he'd been. Regardless, it was a promising start to their time in court and would hopefully ease the girl's transition somewhat, Goddess willing.

They ate in silence broken only by the clink of cup against saucer. Enari barely picked at her breakfast and Vasi could tell her mind was not on her food. The faint circles under her eyes announced a restless night and the combination of empty stomach and fatigue were going to make for a very long day.

"We're meeting Tora Aelani after breakfast, but if you wish to go and check on Battlemage Xander after that, you're welcome to do so," Vasi said, hazarding a guess as to what distracted her apprentice. The way the girl's face brightened told her the presumption had been correct.

"If she's not hungry, I would be happy to help her dress for the day." Babirye turned to Enari after getting a nod from Vasi. "I've found something that should fit you nicely, if you'd like to come and see."

"*What's wrong with my normal clothes?*" Enari wondered as she followed the serving woman back into her room.

As soon as she saw the yards of green and cream fabric, however, she knew exactly what was wrong with her normal clothes. The dress and linen undergown were simple by court standards, but compared to her everyday brown, it was a work of art. If she'd donned her own garments—even the one dress packed for her—she would stick out like a sore thumb in this elegant place.

"It be a gown that belonged to Baronessa Imily's youngest," Babirye explained, holding up the confection of satin and lace for Enari's inspection. "You and her girl be of a height, but she be a little broader, I think. Let's see if it fits."

It was odd to simply stand still and have someone else dress her, but navigating all the laces without help would have been impossible. Lady Krihamre was patient, explaining the necessity of a corset with an apologetic smile and a promise not to lace it overly-tight. Enari hated the thing at once, but there was nothing to be done. The cut and style of the dress negated going without.

Beyond that unpleasantness it was peaceful, with only the occasional sound from beyond the window marring the quiet. Babirye touched her no more than she had to and Enari very much appreciated the maid's consideration.

She watched in the mirror as her hair was brushed and braided, then coiled atop her head. A few strands escaped and curled against her cheeks and Babirye left them there. The finishing touch was an ornamental comb the same green as the dress.

"Very lovely!" she pronounced, standing aside so Vasi, who had been watching from a chair near the bed, could see her handiwork.

The *kvinna* was more than a little shocked. She'd always known her apprentice was exceptionally beautiful, but under the maid's skillful hand, the young woman had been transformed. It was a proper lady, no longer a half-wild novice, who stood before her.

Enari seemed just as surprised. She stared hard at her reflection, tilting her head and reaching up to gingerly touch her hair.

"Can I see now, Babirye? Please?" whined a child's voice from the doorway. A dark-haired girl skipped into the room and stopped dead when she caught sight of Enari.

"You look like the Vintyri princess in my books," she whispered, staring in a mixture of awe and excitement. "Sarene said it was just a baby-story, but you're real."

The older women laughed and Babirye chided the girl gently, "She be as human as you, Torina. Introduce yourself and don't be rude!"

Remembering her manners, the *torina* curtsied. "I'm Kylan. Who are you?"

"Her name is Enari, my lady," Vasi provided, "She does not speak."

"Oh. Why not?" The question was blunt, but not discourteous.

"Honestly, I'm not sure. She just never has."

"That's alright," Kylan announced. She turned back to Enari. "Astraeus doesn't either, and he's the best secret keeper I ever met. Do you like to read?"

She nodded, charmed and a little overwhelmed by this bundle of energy and exuberance that confronted her. The little girl changed topics almost as randomly as Jex did and her smile was just as infectious, despite the absence of two front teeth. She was reminded a little of the first-year novices.

“Good! I can show you the library later!” She clapped in delight. “Are you coming to meet my mother?”

“They’re just going now. Would you like to show them the way, Torina?”

“Come on!” Kylan reached forward and grabbed for Enari’s hand.

Almost in a panic, Enari withdrew her hand into the voluminous sleeve of her gown, letting it cover her fingers. Kylan barely seemed to notice, grabbing hold and practically dragging her through the sitting room and out into the hall. Vasi and Babirye followed at a more sedate pace.

“How old be your apprentice, Kvinna?”

“Eighteen and a half. Nineteen in Janua,” she answered, watching the girls. Kylan was chattering nonstop and, possibly due to several weeks spent with the talkative battlemage, Enari didn’t look in the least put out by the rapid-fire words. She had, however, managed to tuck both hands into her sleeves. Black hair and red disappeared around the nearest corner.

“Well, your girl be not without a shadow, if she won’t mind the company of one so young,” Babirye laughed. She bid Vasi good morning, and reminded her that she was at their disposal if they were to need anything.

* * *

Kylan raced into Tora Aelani’s day room ahead of her guests and ran straight to her mother, ignoring the ladies arrayed around her.

“Mama! Mama, look! The kvinna brought her apprentice, and she’s a Vintyri!” she shrieked. “Sarene said they weren’t real!”

Aelani looked up, embarrassed, and put a hand over her daughter’s mouth to quiet her. The long expected kvinna stood in the doorway and at her side, or rather, mostly behind her, was a younger woman.

“Kylan!” the tora scolded, “Where are your manners?”

“I’m not being rude. Her name is Enari and she looks just like the princess in my story, see?” Kylan held out her book and opened it to a depiction of a striking fire-haired woman in a gown of forest green. She was peeking out from behind a large and gnarled tree, fey eyes wide and watchful. Aelani had to admit, the kvinna’s apprentice did look remarkably like the picture.

“She is right, Your Majesty,” Vasi ventured, “That very picture has caused my apprentice some...difficulty at the Temple.”

“I can well imagine.”

Aelani motioned for them to enter and they obeyed, each dropping a deep curtsy as they passed the threshold. A few of the ladies stared at Enari in unabashed interest and the poor girl began to blush. Anya, who’d been sitting near her mother, rose and embraced the kvinna and her apprentice in turn, arms lingering longest around the novice.

“Mama,” she said, “May I present Kvinna Vasi de’Curande of the Cyrilan Temple and her apprentice, Novice Enari Namelum.”

“You are most welcome, ladies,” Aelani responded, graciously inclining her head to them. “We are most pleased to have you here. I understand you had some difficulty towards the end of your journey?”

“Yes, my tora. One of our party was, and still is, gravely ill.”

Aelani sighed and closed her eyes. “Poor Jex. I do hope he’ll be alright. He and I have an arrangement of sorts that was to commence upon his return. My youngest is quite disappointed, as am I. Master Illyrian assures me that he will live, however, and that is a great relief. Goddess speed his recovery, for I have need of him.”

“I’ve been considering that very issue. Your Master Physician is a busy man, as he bluntly informed me last night, and has many other patients to tend. Enari and Battlemage Xander became quite friendly on our journey here and it was she who tended him when he first fell ill. May I be so bold as to offer her for his care?”

Enari glanced at her, startled. Vasi had indeed thought carefully about the proposal before making it. This would give Enari a place to be unnoticed, if she wished, and provide a task to occupy her time, at least for now. It would also give her the opportunity to put her training to practical use.

“Is she skilled enough to care for him, Kvinna Vasi?” Aelani asked worriedly, “Please do not think me callous, because I do very much care what happens to him, but I also have plans for Battlemage Xander and will need him at his full strength as swiftly as possible.”

“Yes, Your Majesty, more than skilled enough. With your leave, of course. I would not suppose to entrust a direct servant of yours to the care of someone you don’t approve,” Vasi answered, inclining her head. “The two formed a bond of sorts on the way here, and I know my apprentice will give him the care he requires.”

The tora turned to Enari. “Do you feel confident you can mind him properly? If he’s anything like my brother the High Mage, he will be a most difficult patient once he awakens.”

She nodded firmly, her expression confident.

“Then so be it. Now, Kvinna, what is it you need of me? I know my daughter insisted you be here, and I’m not ungrateful for your presence, but I honestly feel fine.”

“I won’t impose on you, Tora Aelani. I would merely like to examine you regularly, to make sure nothing is amiss. I will be as unobtrusive as possible. Have you time now?”

“You have my thanks for that, and I do have the time.” The tora rose to her feet and beckoned Vasi to follow her into her private chambers.

“Torina Anya, would you or one of the tora’s ladies be so kind as to show Enari where Battlemage Xander can be found?” Vasi called over her shoulder.

“I can show her, Kvinna Vasi,” Kylan offered.

“You have my thanks, Torina.”

Enari and Kylan returned to the hall, and Enari felt immense relief when the heavy door was closed between her and all those eyes. Some of the women had begun whispering amongst themselves as soon as the tora and her Sura were beyond hearing. Perhaps court would not be so different from the Temple after all. Both places, it seemed, were full of those with nothing better to do than gossip.

“Enari, is he really that sick?” Kylan whispered as they walked.

The older girl nodded grimly, feeling her stomach knot as she pictured his face the night before.

* * *

The High Mage was just leaving Jex’s rooms when they arrived, Master Illyrian at his side.

“He should recover fully within a fortnight,” the master physician was saying, “I was able to break his fever near dawn.”

“*You broke the fever, did you?*” Eryk thought, a little contemptuously. “*Your apprentice sat with him all night while you slept in your own bed.*”

“I am very pleased to hear it,” he said instead, “but shouldn’t someone stay with him?”

“High Mage Alycon.” Master Illyrian drew himself up to his full height, chest puffing out as he did. “I am a very busy man, as is my apprentice. We have many patients who need our attention, what with the typical summer sicknesses at full tilt. Too many for one of us to play nursemaid to a single, unconscious mage with the whore-pox.”

The High Mage considered any number of scathing remarks to the pretentious twit, but chose silence as the better part of valor. He’d seen his niece and another girl approaching down the hall and didn’t want to fight with the physician in front of them. So instead of calling up a gale and blowing the little man out the nearest window, Eryk simply nodded. Master Illyrian spun on his heel and started off, strutting like a bantam rooster before a flock of hens.

“Uncle Eryk, this is Enari. Mama and Kvinna Vasi sent her to take care of Jex.” Kylan looked between her uncle and the direction the master physician had gone. “Why is he so...so...” She threw up her hands, mimicking a gesture of her mother’s. “He’s like a mean old goat sometimes!”

Trying not to laugh, Eryk turned his attention to the young woman behind his niece. She shifted back a step when his gaze settled on her and nervously averted her eyes, but not before he saw their amber-gold coloring.

He stared hard at her. Hair like spun fire, ivory skin, pointed ears; she looked like...but that was impossible. Tanith had vanished long ago and as far as he knew, she’d had no living family. He’d have to ask Vasi more about this peculiarly familiar girl, when there was time.

“I am,” he started, clearing his throat. “I’m pleased to meet you, Enari, and I am sorry for my discourtesy in not introducing myself last night. If you’re Vasi’s apprentice, I have every confidence in leaving Jex to your care.”

“Is he going to be alright? He won’t die, will he?” Tears shimmered in Kylan’s eyes and Eryk knelt, hugging her fiercely.

“No, my dear, he isn’t going to die. You may go in and see him if you want, but he’s asleep so you must be very quiet.” Taking her hand, he gestured for Enari to precede them.

She grimaced as furnace-hot air struck her face. Rolling her eyes, she strode to the windows and shoved them open, though she left the curtains half drawn. The breeze that rushed in was warm, but not nearly as stifling as the air inside the chamber had become. The palace physician must truly be half-witted if he thought a stuffy, closed room was anywhere near conducive to healing. Eryk raised an approving eyebrow at her, but said nothing.

Moving briskly about the room, she emptied the washbasin of its murky contents, refilled it with clean water, examined the pile of supplies left haphazardly on a table, and made a list of the things she still needed. She returned to Eryk, ducking her head, and handed him the scrap of paper.

He almost laughed when he saw the messy scrawl. Most ladies prided themselves on fancy, delicate penmanship, but this little novice seemed utterly unconcerned with such niceties. It was rather refreshing.

“Are these all the things you need?”

She nodded, still not looking up into his face, and Eryk had to fight an urge to lift her chin so he could study her more closely. Instead, he put the paper into his pocket, promising to have the items brought to her as quickly as they could be found. When he asked if she required anything else, she shook her head no. They turned towards the bed and found Kylan kneeling on the edge, petting Jex’s hair and murmuring to him.

“Why don’t we let Enari get to work?” Eryk suggested, laying a hand on his niece’s shoulder. “You can come back and visit him later, alright?”

Sniffing back tears, Kylan slid off the bed. The High Mage hoisted her in his arms and together they left the room. Enari was at last alone with her friend and, unfortunately, first true patient.

As she turned away from the bed, something in the mirror stopped her. Squinting, she moved to one side and edged closer, bringing Jex’s reflection into full view. What she saw froze her blood.

Weirdly glistening black smudges, like wisps of greasy smoke from a crematorium, hovered around him. They squirmed grotesquely over his chest and a circular patch marked his brow just above and between his eyes. Enari suspected that if she pulled down the sheet, she’d find more of them about his other injuries. Watching the ones she could see slowly twist and undulate made her nauseous. She closed her eyes and shook her head, hoping they’d be gone when she looked in the glass again.

They weren’t, and if anything, they were stronger, darker.

She spun to face him, and saw nothing on his sleeping form. He groaned quietly and shifted onto his back before subsiding. When she looked over her shoulder into the mirror, his reflection bore the marks plain as day.

Obviously this was no normal malady, but the only alternative was magic and she’d never heard of anyone using it like this. Curses, she knew, could be cast by someone with enough skill and focus, but those killed swiftly, or simply brought bad luck. This shouldn’t even be possible.

Enari moved slowly to the side of the bed, not wanting to wake him, and put her hand on his chest.

Images exploded in her head and she was catapulted back into the dreams she’d had on the road.

A lightless room, coins clinking on a dirty table, the laughter of the crone...and then the vision shifted. A different chamber now, dancing shadows cast by half-melted candles and a pale hand scratching its nails across the naked chest of a child’s corpse... red eyes, a fanged grin in roiling darkness, the hiss of demonic laughter...

She yanked her hand away and stumbled back from him.

Turning to flee the room in search of Vasi or the High Mage or even the Master Physician, she swayed drunkenly for several steps before collapsing into blackness.

* * *

“You’re idiots, the lot of you.”

“Now, now, there’s no need for that! Just because the bloody High Mage intervened this time doesn’t mean he’ll always be around to do so. We can gather more support, present the idea again when we’re truly ready.”

“No. You’ve had more than ample time to gather that support and you were no more successful the second time you presented the idea, even without the High Mage to oppose you. You’ve failed me, and I warned you what would happen if you failed, Councilors.”

“You’re being hasty. Things like this don’t happen overnight, especially when the idea is so...distasteful to so many. You can’t possibly be surprised that they were appalled at the thought of marrying off a seven-year-old, royal child or not. They simply need time, and perhaps some additional incentive, to consider the benefits of your proposal. If you could find more coin—”

“Enough! I’ve waited long enough. You leave me no choice but to do this myself. I’ve no further need of any of you moronic, simpering slugs, and neither does the Grand Council.”

“Best watch your tongue. We know far too much for you to simply discard us like refuse. I know you think yourself above us, but I can still make your life immensely unpleasant should you choose to cross us. Even you aren’t untouchable.”

“Excellent point, Adipem. Lucky I planned for this, then, isn’t it? Pesusabael, they are yours. Deal with them as you wish.”

“Wait, wait! No, what are you doing? Please—”

“No one can hear you. Adipem, Hera, Hrivaldi, may Diu welcome you with open gates.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“But Papa, I could help! I could do so much more if I stayed here and we both know I’d make a much better Tora-in-Waiting than Kylan,” Sarene insisted. She’d been pleading with her father for over an hour, yet he gave no signs of changing his mind this time anymore than he had the last.

“Sarene, dearest, your mother and I appreciate your enthusiasm, but the decision is final,” Brinon said gently, reaching for his daughter’s hand. She snatched it away angrily and he forced down a sigh of frustration. His middle daughter had always been the most difficult and headstrong of his children and she had become particularly so over her impending marriage. He missed the sweet girl who’d followed him about, asking questions a mile a minute, and wondered if she’d ever return to him.

“You just want to get rid of me!” she accused, “You’re marrying me off to some nobody in a backwater country so that I’m out from underfoot.”

“Sarene, you know that isn’t true. Your marriage to Torin Reord will secure an important alliance between Davaria and Egalion, an alliance we desperately need with Tahir on his deathbed. You *will* be helping, more than you can imagine.” He smiled at her. “Your mother and I plan to live a long time yet and Reord’s father is old. Wouldn’t you rather be tora in a year or two rather than a Tora-in-Waiting for who knows how many years?”

Sarene folded her arms petulantly. “It isn’t fair. I don’t want to marry Reord!”

Brinon let slip a little of his exasperation. “Who would you rather marry then, daughter mine? A nobleman’s son? Battlemage Xander?”

Her eyes gleamed and she sat up a little straighter. “Yes! He would be much more to my liking and—”

He held up a hand, cutting her off. “It was a rhetorical question. He is a good man, but not a suitable match.”

“Why not?” she demanded, “I think he’d make an excellent tor someday, and the physicians say he’s going to live. He’s clearly hearty enough to provide a strong heir, probably even more than one.”

“First of all, the Grand Council would never approve your union. He’s fatherless, a commoner, and worst of all in their eyes, a mage. Granted, those qualities are no clear detriment to his character, but I can’t say that most would agree. Things are far too delicate to be upsetting sensibilities right now, my dear.”

“Our family has married both commoners and mages,” she reminded him, “and there have even been bastard tors before.”

“You know I don’t like it when you use such coarse language, Sarene.”

“You use it!”

He had nothing to say to that.

“Why does it matter what the Council thinks?” she pressed, “What’s the good of being monarch if you can’t make your will into law?”

“It simply isn’t done that way. This isn’t Atromore, for Consorts’ sake! Tors and toras in Egalion have not had exclusive power in centuries. The Grand Council was formed so that the entirety of the kingdom has a say in what happens to it.”

“I still think it’s a ridiculous waste of time. If I were tora, I’d make a decree and enforce it. My will would be absolute and the country would have no choice but to obey me.”

The declaration sent a chill through Brinon. It was that attitude above all that had influenced their decision to marry Sarene to the Torin of Davaria. Reord was an honorable man of strong moral inclinations and an even disposition. Brinon and Aelani secretly hoped that the pairing would instill a little more temperance in their daughter.

That same tendency, however, was also what had prompted him to consider a match with Min Ha at one point. Sarene would be more than capable of handling him with or without Nareina’s meddling. Aelani had been firmly against the idea and so an envoy had been sent to Davaria in the end.

“Sarene, there’s no use arguing about this anymore. Our decision has been made and you have been promised to Reord. Egalion will not break faith in such a manner, just to suit a passing whim.” Brinon stood up. “This discussion is over. I love you with all my heart, and I’m sorry you are unhappy, but there is no turning back.”

Sarene burst into furious tears. “If you truly loved me, you wouldn’t do this!” Still crying, she stormed from the room and slammed the door hard enough to knock several portraits askew.

* * *

The muffled sound stopped her in mid-step.

Laying her hand on the cool metal of the ornate handle, Enari pressed her ear to a door that looked very different from the others she’d passed in this hallway.

She’d regained consciousness to find herself sprawled on the floor of Jex’s sick room, head pounding and eyes burning. After assuring herself that he slept, she’d begun to wander in search of Vasi. It hadn’t taken long for her to become hopelessly lost in the maze of halls, and she at last found herself in a part of the Imperial palace that seemed much older than the rest. She’d been roaming up and down the deserted corridors for hours now.

She listened intently, but only for a moment. The beautiful singing called to her, tugged at her senses, and she pushed open the heavy door just enough to allow her to step inside.

Large, longer than it was wide, and paved in black and white marble, the space felt unusually open, though the dimness shrouding the corners made it hard to judge exact dimensions. Benches of dark, lustrous wood lined both sides of a central aisle, and tapestries hung on the walls. There were twenty-seven benches and twenty-seven tapestries on each side, and every one of the latter depicted a well known legend in great detail. Single candles, each in their own small niche, shone at intervals between the scenes of dragons, knights, and divine beings before which mortals knelt in supplication and worship.

When she squinted, she could see tiny white stars embroidered in the plush weave of the black runner that carpeted the aisle from where she stood to the head of the room. The vaulted ceiling high overhead was all but lost in shadow, with a glimpse here and there of old and carefully maintained paintings on the smooth plaster. The chamber was warm, but not as hot as the rest of the palace, and was lit only by the flickering of candles and the light of a single window, an enormous masterpiece of stained glass set in the wall behind the altar. The soft light filtering through the abstract pattern illuminated the floor in panes of color too numerous to count. When she took a deep breath, she could smell incense, beeswax, and more faintly, wood polish.

As beautiful as the chamber was, it was the haunting voices that captivated her full attention. She slipped into the closest pew, listening.

Seven men in cassocks so gray they were almost black knelt in a semicircle before the altar, just outside the fall of multicolored light. A statue of the Goddess stood upon it and a lit censer was at her feet on each side, the smoke drifting forth redolent of myrrh, frankincense, and something more subtle that she couldn’t place. The monks were chanting to the image, heads bowed, hands clasped on their knees before them. Though she didn’t understand the words, the voices were in perfect harmony, rising and falling in steady cadence. A quiet peace stole over her and she felt all the pent up confusion and desperate homesickness fade away. The room had the same kind of serenity she’d come to know in the sanctuary at the Temple and she found longed-for comfort in this sacred place.

“Lovely, is it not?”

Enari glanced up at the speaker, too relaxed to be startled by his sudden appearance at her side. He was dressed in the same cowed gray as the others, but his hood was pushed back to reveal his face. She had to look up a long way to see that face; he stood well over seven feet tall. Broad shouldered and flaxen-haired, the man was a giant.

He was of indeterminate age, but not old, she guessed. His weathered features had seen much sun and wind, his skin darkened by exposure to the elements. His faded blue eyes were gentle and there were deep crow’s feet at the corners. These were matched by pronounced laugh lines etched around his slightly thin mouth. His most prominent feature was a large and bulbous nose, the bridge crisscrossed with broken capillaries. When he turned his head, she saw a gold hoop dangling from his left ear.

The monk was not really a handsome man, but he was certainly not ugly. He looked, Enari thought, like one would imagine a comfortably retired general to look. And despite his size, he had an air of tranquility about him that immediately put her at ease.

“It is the ‘Lux et Tenebris’ they sing.” He looked to his brethren. “Though it is sung in Old Egali, and not many now understand it. Are you such a one, my child?”

Enari indicated she was not, her fascination divided equally between the song and the man beside her.

When he smiled, it brought a kind light to his face. “I shall translate. It is a song of mourning meant for the departed, but the words are well worth contemplation and may help with whatever is troubling you. May I sit?”

She moved down the bench to make room for him and he settled next to her, folding his large hands before him and closing his eyes.

His singing voice was deep and husky, smooth and mellow as sage honey, and the words flowed from his tongue with the ease of long practice.

“Light beside Darkness, gain within loss,
Strength mixed with weakness, life and death cross
The sweet with the bitter and hope between fears
Andehai after wandering, honor through tears

Harvest and sowing, the sun follows rain,
Knowledge from mysteries, peace despite pain
Joy tempers sorrow, calm comes from blast,
Rest after weariness cometh at last.

Near after distant, bright beyond gloom,
Love from longing, life from the womb
After long anguish, hurt turns to bliss,
Noble the course that led you to this.”

A sudden lump blocked her throat and Enari couldn’t breathe.

When the monk opened his eyes and regarded her, he was not surprised at her reaction to the prayer. The conflict within this small creature called to him, and if he could but bring her a small measure of peace, he would gladly do so.

“You are Enari, apprenticed to Kvinna Vasi of the Cyrilan Temple, are you not?” Seeing the puzzlement on her face, he continued. “Your coming was much discussed in the palace before you actually arrived. I know your Sura from...well, from long ago. I am Brother Lucrisen.”

It took her a moment to place the name, but then she remembered. This man was the Master Librarian and his domain was where the bodies of several Grand Council members had been found earlier that day.

As she’d wandered, Enari overheard more than one group of servants excitedly discussing the murders of the three powerful individuals. They’d been discovered torn to pieces in a locked reading room just after daybreak. Adipem Porcus, Hera Wastrel, and Hrivaldi Le’Quar were identified only by their crests, left hanging on a peg in the wall beside the door. The room was locked from within and the single window still bolted shut. Most unsettling of all, the words ‘Conspirators’ and ‘Traitors’ had been scrawled on the wall in what was presumably blood and a weird design marred the floorboards.

Theirs was not the first violent death to occur in the palace of late. Nearly a week before a young boy had been found in a cellar storage room, and people were still reeling.

From the details she’d been able to gather by eavesdropping in the shadows, it seemed both a tragic and mysterious event, if almost certainly unrelated to the murders of the councilors. The High Mage and even the Duque of Darmiad had been summoned to the scene, though no one else had been allowed to enter the room rumored to contain that body. The boy’s mother was said to be inconsolable and Cook had given her a whole week to go to her family in the city so she could grieve. Now that such an elaborate funeral was in the works for the dead council members at dawn the next day, with a mourning feast to follow, the kitchen staff was shorthanded.

But of everything she heard, the description of the wounds seen on the body of the black-haired, green-eyed little servant boy were unnervingly familiar. Scratches and bite marks, just like Jex, and from the state of the body when it was discovered, the poor thing had been dead for days. That put his murder quite close to when Jex began to get sick. There were too many similarities for there to be no relation between the two, especially since it was also being whispered that the boy had been a blood sacrifice for some dark ritual.

"I know not what troubles you, my child, but may an old man offer some advice?" He'd been watching her expression darken as she thought and it was clear that more than home sickness was bothering her. He took her silence as assent.

"Trust your gut, girl. If you think something is wrong or unnatural, then it probably is." Tapping a finger against her temple, he continued. "And trust your mind as well. You've been trained by one of the most brilliant healers I've ever known. Let her lessons serve you in your task, but don't be afraid to follow your own intuition. That may make the difference between life and death."

His words were cryptic, and she chalked them up to the musings of a pious man who spent his days amongst the whisper of books. Little did she know that they would one day be words that saved her life.

* * *

"I didn't think it would go that badly," Brinon told his wife later that night as they lay side-by-side in bed. "She's so angry, Aelani. Did we make a mistake, go wrong with her somewhere along the way? Our other girls are so sweet..."

She turned onto her side, her back against his chest. "I don't know, Brinon. She's not the happy, loving child I used to hold in my lap and I wish I knew what happened. You aren't actually considering breaking the engagement, are you?"

"No," he sighed, "Even if I were, you know the Council would never stand for it. They'd riot en masse and we have trouble enough as it is."

"Is Undabe still making a fuss over Ibiran?" That wasn't the trouble he meant and she knew it, but she had no desire to bring the unpleasantness of the past days into their sanctuary.

"When isn't the man making a fuss? I'm convinced he couldn't continue breathing otherwise, but I'm still more concerned about Sarene. You're her mother. Where did I go wrong in this and what can I say to make it right? She seemed contented to the idea, excited even, not so long ago and yet today she told me that I didn't love her." The hurt in his voice broke her heart.

"She didn't mean it, my love. I think she's just at that fickle age. Every other day, a new young man catches her fancy, but she'll grow out of it. As for what to say to her, I'm not sure. I don't feel like I know her anymore and I worry. She's so headstrong and wants everything her own way. I pray to the Goddess that marriage and motherhood will make her see things in a different light."

"Perhaps she inherited more from her grandmother than just looks," he grunted, putting an arm around her. He stroked a hand across her belly, feeling the strong movements of the baby beneath his palm. The little one seemed particularly active tonight.

Aelani reached down and playfully swatted his thigh, "My mother was certainly headstrong, but never to the detriment of her kingdom, and she loved you almost more than I do, so I don't know where you'd get such an opinion of her."

"Riane was a fine woman and an even better tora, but I'm still glad you got your father's temperament." Brinon pressed his lips to the place where her neck and shoulder met. "I love you, Aelani. Have I told you that today?"

He heard her smile in the dark. "Only a dozen times since dawn."

"Then I shall have to tell you two dozen times tomorrow."

"Hush and go to sleep."

* * *

"Sarene, why are you crying?"

She sat up swiftly, wiping her eyes on her sleeve and glowering darkly at her younger sister.

Kylan stood in the bedroom doorway, dressed in her nightgown and holding a raggedy bear by one arm. With her hair unbraided and brushed out, she looked like a miniature of their mother and Sarene felt a stir of anger and loneliness.

“Go away.”

Instead of leaving, Kylan came into the room and climbed up on the bed. She reached out and wiped a tear from Sarene’s cheek. The older torina’s expression softened.

“I wish you didn’t hate me,” Kylan said, finally breaking eye contact. “I love you, you know, and it makes me sad when you cry.”

With a sigh, Sarene put her arms around the girl and rested her chin atop her soft, baby-fine hair.

“I don’t hate you.”

“Then why do you always yell at me and send me away?”

Sarene squeezed her tighter. “You’re just little, and sometimes you irritate me to no end, always turning up in places you shouldn’t and listening in on private conversations. You’re a pest, Kylan, but I love you, too.”

“So why were you crying?”

“It’s not important.”

Kylan pulled back and looked at her solemnly. “You never cry, Sarene. Something really, really bad must have happened. Are you worried about Jex, too? I know you like him.”

“He’s going to be fine,” Sarene said with a shrug, releasing her sister and giving her a little push away.

“Assuming The Mute doesn’t kill him, that is. What was mother thinking, entrusting his care to an untried novice from the backend of nowhere?”

“Enari is nice, and she’s taking good care of him. Better than that grouchy Master Illyrian, anyway.”

“Master Illyrian has been formally trained.”

“So has Enari.”

“By the equivalent of a witch-doctor. I don’t like it.”

“He’ll get better, Sarene, you’ll see.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

His eyes opened and the sight that greeted them was a rather pleasant surprise.

On the mattress beside his arm was a puddle of red and gold hair, tousled and tangled above a peacefully slumbering face. Moving his hand took more effort than he'd dreamed possible, but he was able to raise it and touch her cheek.

Clouds and waving grass and heat of the sun. Little flowers, yellow and pink, the flash of white teeth in a sun-browned face. Dark hair ruffled by the wind and green eyes crinkled in laughter. Horse, dust, leather. Steady heartbeat against her back...

He trailed one finger along the petal-soft skin of her jaw. Oh yes, he'd definitely woken up to worse views than this.

Enari started and sat up quickly, blinking in bewilderment for a few seconds before her eyes cleared, darted to the mirror, then back to his face. A dark head popped into view from the floor beside her chair, and Kylan's shriek of delight nearly deafened them both.

"Finally!" she exclaimed, and began to cry.

The door opened and Eryk stuck his head in. He, too, looked pleased and relieved.

Jex glanced between the three faces in total confusion. He lay in a bed he'd only slept in once or twice before and he felt like someone had beaten him. Either that, or he was dead and this was what a hangover in Diu felt like. His head pounded dully, his throat burned, his body ached, and he was absolutely *starving*.

When he tried to sit up, he found that he lacked the strength. Enari's cool hand touched his bare shoulder fleetingly and he turned his head to look at her. He could manage that much movement, at least. She put a glass to his parched lips, but pulled it back when he tried to take it from her, shaking her head. He gave in with a grumble and drank gratefully when she offered a second time. She allowed only a few sips before returning it to the table and he pouted at her, still thirsty.

"It's good to see you finally awake," Eryk said, coming in to sit on the edge of the bedside table. His niece leaned against his knee and he absently petted her hair as she wiped her face on the hem of his shirt. "We were beginning to worry."

"What—" it came out a barely audible rasp and Jex cleared his throat. It hurt, but when he spoke his voice was stronger, "What are you talking about?"

"How much do you remember?" Eryk asked him, "Or rather, what's the last thing you remember?"

Jex considered, then shook his head. "Not much. After I started getting sick, things are pretty hazy."

"You were in bad shape when you got here and you've been unconscious or asleep for ten days now."

Jex closed his eyes as his sense of time clicked sharply back into place. Ten days? He probably should be dead, but seeing as he was alive enough to feel how much everything hurt... And on another note, who had...

"Enari's been taking care of you," Kylan offered before he could finish the thought, "She let me help, but only sometimes." The little girl giggled. "You snore and talk in your sleep, Jex. The words are funny and no one understands them. Not even Uncle Eryk."

It was then that Jex became acutely aware of his nakedness beneath the single, suddenly flimsy sheet. His eyes met Enari's and both their faces heated in understanding of the fact. He looked away first, but not before he caught the way her eyes flicked to the vanity mirror and back.

* * *

She wasn't sure what to do. Whenever Jex fell asleep, which was every few hours now, the crawling black haze grew darker and stronger, like it was feeding on him and could only do so while he was unconscious.

They thought she was mad. Enari could see it in the furtive, worried glances they gave her when they thought she wasn't looking. None of them could perceive what she saw: not in the mirror and not when they touched him, and she knew of no way to show them.

So she turned to the Imperial library for guidance. It was the largest collection of knowledge in the three kingdoms and housed a copy of many of the books one would find at Turrus Arcana and the Cyrilan Temple.

The place was immense, dim, and best of all, nearly deserted. It was one of the few rooms in the palace to take up more than one floor and its center was open, overlooked by a second and then a third level. Every moment her increasingly demanding patient allowed, Enari wandered the stacks, a small and forlorn phantom passing through patches of light and shade. The library was an easy place to lose oneself, and she did so quickly and with a certain feeling of liberation. A few times, she saw other patrons and monks in gray, but none were ever close. Her unhappiness diminished to nothing more than a dull ache as she scanned the titles in row upon row, case upon case, floor upon floor, of books.

She poured over every morsel she could find about magical rites and curses, both theoretical and practical. Everything pointed her in one obscure way or another to a tome called *The Seventh Door*, but it turned out to be the one book she couldn't get her hands on. It had gone missing sometime in the past month, but no one knew exactly when. Servants, guards, and library assistants had been questioned at length, but none seemed to know anything of importance. So she was left to follow whatever leads she could turn up, and they weren't painting a very helpful picture thus far.

As she climbed the stairs to the third floor, mulling over Jex's most recent outburst of petulance, she thought she heard someone call her name. The summons was faint, almost a whisper, but when it came a second time, she knew it hadn't been her imagination. Gathering her skirts, she hurried up the last of the marble steps.

The quiet voice drew her on and it was as she was passing a dark corner that she felt a touch on her arm. She whirled, only to find herself alone. The hairs at the nape of her neck stood on end and she had the distinct impression she was being watched, but there was not a soul in sight.

The book had been on the topmost shelf of an ancient-looking glass fronted case and, being the only spine in the row without a soft coating of dust, had immediately caught her eye. Coran did his best to keep all the tomes clean and in good repair, but the library was just too vast for his efforts to be completely effective, with or without an army of assistants.

She'd had to find a stool to stand on in order to retrieve it, and even then, her reaching fingers had been several inches shy of their goal. Looking around furtively and still seeing no one, she'd stepped from the stool onto one of the shelves, praying silently to the Goddess that her weight wouldn't bring the whole thing down on top of her.

Standing on the cabinet's middle shelf, she was just able to pull the book toward her with the very tips of her fingers. It was a large volume, bound in brilliant red leather with lettering done in gold leaf. It was nearly as thick as her palm was wide and she needed both hands to carry it.

After safely acquiring her prize, *Treatise Maledicta*, Enari retreated to a window ledge and began to read. While it might not have been the tome she was seeking, it shed enough light on the subject to confirm her worst suspicions. She didn't stop for hours, and the more she read, the colder she felt. By the time she finally glanced up, only a quarter of the way through the *Treatise*, it was nearing noon and she knew her charge would be waiting for his meal.

* * *

"Kvinna Vasi says you're good practice," Kylan declared. She was sitting cross legged on the bed beside him, a half-finished book in her lap. He'd declined her offer of reading aloud for the first time in days.

"Fantastic," Jex griped, "Is she hoping you'll kill me so she won't have to keep coming to look in anymore?"

Enari's face flushed scarlet and she turned away from them, focusing her attention on something he felt certain was going to make him even more miserable.

Kylan slapped at his leg. "Stop it! She's been really nice to you. I wish someone was that nice to me when I'm sick!"

"You're a daughter of the Imperial house. They have to be nice to you," he retorted, "I'm just a mage with a big mouth. They clearly don't care what happens to me." He shifted restlessly and turned over with a groan. "Can I get up yet, Novice Namelum?"

Enari stubbornly ignored him. This was a battle of wills that had been going on since he woke a week ago.

Kylan rolled her eyes and started to get off the bed. “You are the meanest, grouchiest person in the whole palace right now. Sarene is better company than you and she’s having her monthly! I’m going back to Mama’s room.”

“I don’t think your sister would like you sharing that with everyone, Kylan. That’s generally something a woman considers her private business. Also, we have lessons,” he reminded her. Bed ridden or not, it had been determined he was well enough for that duty at least.

“Not when you’re being cantankerous.” She put her back firmly to Jex and addressed Enari instead, “I like that word, ‘cantankerous’. I read it the other day and I think it fits him.” She flounced out, taking the only book with her.

Jex heaved a noisy sigh of irritation.

Enari came to the bed, a cup in one hand and a kit in the other. He knew that the cup would contain a potion of one degree of nastiness or another, though unlike Vasi or the infrequently-seen Master Illyrian, she made attempts to camouflage the vile taste. The box would hold liniments for a variety of his bits and pieces and leave him smelling like a flower or some kind of fruit. Just as Vasi had threatened, there was even one that smelled like an old lady’s sachet.

Enari had only used that on him the once and she’d done it in retaliation for an admittedly childish prank.``

Out of sheer boredom one afternoon, he’d projected the image of a large spider crawling up her sleeve and she’d spilled an entire basin of water on herself trying to slap it away. When he started to laugh, he lost his concentration and the thing vanished. Upon discovering it wasn’t real, she’d lost her temper for the first time that he’d seen and what came next caused him to immediately regret provoking her.

Eyes blazing in a fury that was rather enticing, she’d dug out the most horrendous smelling poultice she could find and he’d been helpless to stop her from using it. He’d later been informed his indignant shouting was heard in the kitchens three levels down and his choice of language had not been appreciated.

“You know, I can do this myself. I don’t need a nursemaid.”

Enari’s shoulders stiffened in frustration and she squeezed her eyes shut. Her lips moved soundlessly, something he hadn’t seen her do before, and he realized she was counting. It didn’t seem to help.

Setting the cup down on the bedside table hard enough to slosh a little liquid over the rim, she reached for the light dressing on his chest. The rash had subsided, much to his relief, leaving only a few bumps here and there that looked more like insect bites than something dreamt up by a plague demon. When she pulled the bandages away, she did so with less care than usual and they took some hair with them, making him flinch.

“Nani.” He reached out and caught her wrist. “I’m sorry.”

She shrugged, still not looking at his face and twin spots of color remained on her cheeks. A single tear dripped onto his bare skin and she brushed angrily at her face.

“*Perfect, you ass, you’ve made her cry. Some gentleman you are.*” Aloud, he said, “I know this isn’t your fault, and it’s childish of me to take it out on you. I’m sure you’d rather be doing something other than caring for a peevish, ungrateful mage. I am sorry.”

She waved a hand vaguely at him and started rummaging in the kit, but he tugged on her sleeve until she sat beside him.

“Look at me,” he ordered gently. She shook her head.

“Nani, come on. I said I was sorry!” He was starting to get irritated again. Part of him knew he was being irrational, but he couldn’t seem to help himself. He’d never done well on bed rest of any duration, and it was hot as Plamen’s forge in this damned room. He released her and thumped his head back against the pillows, which did nothing positive for his growing headache.

Enari jumped up and, in her haste, tipped over the box. The small pots and jars spilled out and rolled off the bed. She snatched at them and knocked against the table in the process. The cup teetered and fell to the floor, shattering in a spray of porcelain shards and hot tea. The brown contents began seeping into the carpet in a widening puddle as a few of the jars rolled away under various furnishings. Enari grabbed a towel and knelt to begin sopping up the mess. He could see tears falling in earnest now.

Eryk picked that moment to check in on him. He looked at the two of them and dismissed Enari with all the gentleness he could. The girl dropped the soaked cloth and fled the room, a pricked forefinger firmly in her mouth.

He contemplated the mess and the angry mage in silence.

“Don’t look at me like that!” Jex snarled.

“Are you truly so desperate for solitude?” Eryk asked mildly, leaning against the jamb.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, in the course of five minutes, you’ve managed to drive off two of the people who are the most concerned about you. I think that’s a personal best.”

“Shut it.”

“Jex, I know you’re bored, and tired of being in bed—”

“Don’t forget how hot it is in here,” he muttered.

Eryk continued as if he hadn’t spoken. “—but that’s no excuse for taking your frustrations out on those girls.”

“I know.” While he sounded contrite, his expression was still one of complete contrariness.

“I’ve spoken with Vasi and Master Illyrian. They think you can be up and around in the next day or two.”

“Thank the Goddess.”

“Indeed. Believe me, we’re all more than ready,” Eryk growled, “I suggest you take some time to consider how to thank Enari for her care and patience. Andehai knows she’s had far more of it than any of the rest of us.”

Jex turned his face away resentfully, but not before Eryk saw a hint of shame cross his features.

He continued more kindly, “She’s homesick, Jex, and in a strange place. Other than Vasi, the girl knows no one here but you and you’ve just shown her that she is unwelcome. Think on it.”

“Any other sage suggestions you’d like to offer?”

“Yes, actually. You might also want to ask her what’s spooked her so badly.”

Jex rolled to face Eryk, foul mood forgotten. “You mean the thing she does with the mirror?”

“Aye.”

“I’m glad I’m not the only one who’s found it odd. It’s like she sees something in it that terrifies her. Something the rest of us can’t see.” He paused. “You can’t see anything, right?”

“Not a thing, other than your sullen reflection. Ask her.”

“Why me?”

Eryk rubbed his face. “Because you’re the only one she seems willing to even make eye contact with. Let me know if she tells you anything.”

He turned away, letting the door close soundly behind him and Jex was alone.

And thirsty.

Cursing at the brown puddle on the floor and then at the broken cup, he began struggling his way out of bed.

* * *

Enari ran, fighting the tears down as she went. She knew he hadn’t meant to be unkind, but his tone and scathing comments had finally demolished the wall she’d been carefully constructing around her emotions. The loneliness and homesickness had been steadily building since leaving the Temple and today had just been too much. She missed her small east-facing room in the corner tower, the familiar courtyards and trees of the Temple, her books.

She wanted to go home and Consorts take this horridly crowded, hot, dusty place.

After a time, she found herself on one of the many terraces overlooking the city. A fountain stood in the center, sunlight glimmering across the serenely flowing water. Enari went to one corner and curled up on a padded bench, chin resting on her knees as she stared out over the patchwork of color that was Trigon Market.

Torina Anya found her there hours later, still staring vacantly at the horizon, her face hidden behind a curtain of loose hair.

“May I sit with you?” she asked, speaking quietly and halting far enough away to not startle the girl.

When she received a small nod, she settled onto the near end of the bench and reached out a hand, sweeping the hair away and revealing a blotchy and tear-stained face. Some women could cry and look beautiful, but she and Enari were not those women. The poor thing looked wretched, exhausted, and miserable.

“I heard what happened. Are you alright?”

Enari shrugged carelessly, but felt a little of her earlier sadness creeping back at the reminder. She had to return to him eventually and didn't know what to expect. Would he still be upset?

"You know," Anya mused, "He isn't actually angry with you. He's unhappy at his...oh, helplessness, I suppose. Men don't like to appear weak in front of a woman they admire. My father's the same way, but not so childish as Battlemage Xander has been. I suspect the difference has to do with age. They feel like it takes something important away from them, to be seen as less than invincible."

Enari pondered her words, but couldn't think how her caring for him while he was ill, through no fault of his own that she could tell, would possibly make him feel diminished in any way. Until today, at least, she'd thought he preferred her to Vasi or Master Illyrian and might even enjoy her company.

"I know it may seem like an odd thing, him being supposedly a man grown, but I suspect our battlemage is embarrassed. He's been forced to lie in bed and have an attractive young lady take care of him as if he were an infant. He has a touchy sense of pride, I think, and you see him every day in a way I suspect no one except for his mother probably ever has."

When she received a look of skeptical disbelief, she went on, "Treat him like a person, not just a patient, and bribe him if you must. I hear he's very fond of coffee. That might also be an excellent way of giving him whatever medicine he's so reluctant to take. Everyone grows tired of hearing his protests, so anything you can do would be most welcome."

The advice made her smile. Anya would make an excellent Abdessa someday; she always seemed to know the exact right thing to say in any situation and her levity was well-timed. Enari found that she took an enormous amount of pleasure at the thought of getting Jex to comply by bribing him or tricking him. It was a devious ploy and she loved it.

Anya patted her knee and rose, smoothing the wrinkles from her skirt. "Think on what I've said, Enari. Also, I want you to know you're not alone here. Come and see me whenever you like. You and Vasi brought something of home with you that I've missed very much and I would enjoy your company."

* * *

Jex was dozing when she returned that evening and someone had cleaned up the mess from the carpet, though not well. She eased the door closed behind her and crossed the room on silent feet, not wanting to wake him and risk any further unpleasantness. She folded herself into the big chair by the window to take advantage of the fading daylight and opened her book. She should really be reading the *Treatise Maldicta*, but just couldn't bring herself to wade through the arcane and often confusing text and had decided on another to pass the time.

In a moment, she was lost in the pages of *Dragons in the Mist*. Early evening deepened to twilight and she reluctantly pulled herself from the story long enough to light a candle and get something to drink before falling in again.

"What are you reading?"

The question startled her and she looked up sharply, nearly dropping the book. Her candle had burned down to a smoking puddle of wax, the remainder of the wick barely able to hold a tiny flame, and it was dark beyond the window. Her neck popped when she moved her head and she grimaced at the stiffness in her shoulders. The boning of her corset dug into her painfully and she jerked at it in annoyance.

Jex was watching her from the dimness, trying not to smile. While she slept, he had gotten up and dressed himself, a laborious but rewarding task after so long. He sat in a chair across the bed from her, a steaming mug in one hand.

"I didn't mean to scare you," he apologized. He offered her a tentative smile, rife with remorse, and she returned it with a smile of her own, though it was distorted at the last by a yawn.

"Go on to bed, Nani. I promise not to pour the evil tea out the window while you're gone," he joked, taking a sip and making an exaggerated face. "The tora would have my hide when it killed her lovely flowers and I'm far too handsome to die that way, don't you think?"

Just like that, the ugliness of the afternoon seemed to never have happened.

"I could fix that for you, if you like. Make it less uncomfortable to wear and no one would ever be the wiser," he offered when she stood up, tugging at the side of her gown again.

She tilted her head quizzically, hand still clutched around the fabric.

“The corset,” he elaborated.

Enari looked utterly mortified. His offer was completely and totally inappropriate and she knew it, but... Goddess the thing was torture. If there was anything at all he could do to make it even a little more bearable to wear, she'd let him.

Cheeks still flaming with embarrassment, she nodded.

“I'll need a knife, and you'll have to take the top of your dress down.”

She brought him the knife and began to unlace her bodice. He could see her fingers trembling just a little as she worked the ribbons loose.

“Turn around and I'll get the back first,” he instructed.

Enari complied, clutching the front of her gown over her chest. She felt his hands grip the bottom edge of the corset and tug to make a gap that was just wide enough for his fingers. There was the sound of ripping fabric as the blade parted a seam and she almost fell over backwards when he jerked the slender bit of boning down and out. He repeated the action, a hand on her hip turning her as he went and she was at last forced to lower her gown completely to give him access to the two stays in the front.

Once the last was removed, she took an experimental breath and smiled hugely when she didn't feel nearly so... compressed.

“There's something else—” His words were cut off by her mouth on his.

The kiss surprised them both. Enari hadn't known she was going to do it until her lips were against his and she couldn't explain to herself later what possessed her to be so bold. His fingers spasmed on her waist in shock, but he recovered quickly and pulled her close with a pleased murmur. She was warm and sweet and innocent, yet beneath the surface bubbled an inviting sensuality that he hadn't expected. He cupped her face in both hands, brushing his thumbs delicately over her cheeks as he deepened the kiss.

Then it was over and Enari pulled away, eyes saucer-wide and skin flushed pink. One hand flew up to cover her reddened mouth and Jex laughed throatily.

“Well, you're quite welcome.”

He helped her fix her gown and before she could withdraw, he took her hand and pulled her down onto his knee.

“Before you go, I'd like to talk to you about something.” His tone was casual, but his arm around her waist was firm and unyielding. “Well, a couple of somethings.”

Whatever it was he wanted, she wasn't going to be able to run away from it. So she waited for him to elaborate. It took him far longer than she expected, and he wouldn't look at her.

“I'm wondering if you'll tell me what you see in the mirror?” he asked at length, “I know you can't tell me, but will you show me? You have before, though I doubt you meant to. I wasn't expecting it when it happened and I imagine my mind was as wide open as yours. I'm sorry if it was overwhelming.”

When she looked at him blankly, he continued guardedly, not sure how she was going to take his revelation. He'd been led to understand that the Temple didn't test its novices for magical talent, so telling her she had a rather substantial gift would likely come as a surprise. Not necessarily a pleasant one, either.

“I have a little gift with psychomancy, which makes it easier to recognize in others and I suspect you have more than a trifling talent for it. I'll admit, I've never linked with an untrained psychomancer and it was...” he made a face, “very loud.”

It *had* been loud. And disorienting. She was glad it hadn't happened with anyone but Jex and only the once. She couldn't imagine experiencing that kind of onslaught every time she was touched.

“If you'll let me in, I can help,” he offered solemnly. He was asking to let him enter into a very private place and would understand if she refused him.

She nodded once, very slowly.

“Nani, you needn't do this if you'd rather not,” he reassured her, “I would never do anything you didn't want me to do and if there's something you don't want me to see, just imagine it behind a closed door. I'll respect that. Are you sure this is alright?”

Her nod was firm this time and she even smiled a little. Jex took her hands in his and raised them, planting a feather-light kiss on the tips of her fingers before pressing them against his temples. He mirrored the gesture, then tilted his head down so his forehead rested against hers. Even with her practically in his lap, he had to bend

forward to reach. The head-touching bit wasn't strictly necessary, but it made a deliberate link easier to open in the beginning stages.

And, if he was being completely honest, he enjoyed the physical contact with her.

Enari was, at first, acutely conscious of how close he was, but the discomfort faded quickly. He'd shaved in addition to dressing, she noted as her palms brushed smooth skin, and she could smell a faint hint of soap. His hair fell softly against the backs of her hands and his skin held a hint of fever still. She felt the pulse of his life's blood beating under her fingertips and that was the most markedly intimate aspect of all.

Her breath was warm as it passed across his face and he could smell the tea she'd been drinking earlier, as well as an arousing, spicy scent that was uniquely hers. His nostrils flared, taking her in and cataloguing her; the clean smells of sun and linen, a faint tang of sweat, and lilacs. Her skin was like silk heated by the spring sun and strands of hair tickled his wrist.

Their eyelids dropped at the same time and they were lost.

It was far easier than he expected to gain entrance to her mind and, prepared as she was this time, she responded more like a practiced psychomancer. Her innate gift was stronger than he'd anticipated.

The physical sensations suddenly dimmed beneath the burgeoning mental connection. They sensed one another as colors and music and textures and things less distinct. There were tastes, too, and that was strange. He tasted like dust, tears, smoke, and power both wild and dark. She was the burn of mint, the bitter sweetness of dark chocolate, summer rain and the sizzle of lightning. Unable to stop himself, he delved deeper into her mind, seeking that last and the images it conjured. He found not a single closed door to impede his progress and was humbled by her trust.

"I thought you wanted to see what was in the mirror."

Her mental voice startled him so badly he almost lost the connection altogether. Silvery laughter echoed in his head as she picked up on his surprise.

"Look, if you wish, but you're not going to like it."

She was right, and what she showed him turned his blood to ice.

Some of it only made a little sense, like a half-remembered fever dream, and that could have been because everything he saw was colored by her own fear. That simply added to the nightmarish quality.

"What exactly is going on here!"

The link fractured like a dropped crystal vase and there was pain in the breaking. Jex felt a jagged stab of White-hot agony shoot through his skull and Enari slumped against him for a second, fingernails digging into his scalp.

They turned to find Vasi in the doorway, arms crossed over her chest. The look she was giving Jex promised unpleasant things in his near future. He'd come to recognize that particular expression and knew it would be in his best interest to tread carefully, and with as much respect as he could muster.

"This, it's not what it looks like, Vasi," he stammered. Too late, he realized Enari was still in his lap and that his arms had linked themselves loosely around her waist.

"Then you'd better start explaining yourself, because I don't think you want to know what it looked like from here." Her voice was very calm and that worried him more than the clenched muscles of her jaw.

"I wanted to know what she keeps seeing in the mirror when she looks at me and this was the only way I could think of to find out. Also, did you know she has the gift for psychomancy? Strong enough that she probably could've trained at the Tower, actually." The words tumbled over themselves in his haste to expel them and thus have some chance of seeing the next dawn.

"Enari?" Vasi turned her still somewhat-displeased gaze on her apprentice. She nodded reluctantly.

"We'll talk about this in the morning. Go to bed now, and I'll see you at breakfast. I need to have a word with Battlemage Xander."

Enari shot an apprehensive glance at Jex as she rose, worrying her bottom lip between her teeth. She looked as if she'd linger, but he gave her a crooked smile and a shooing motion with one hand. Sparing a last glance at the scene she was leaving, she closed the door quietly behind her.

Silence descended once again and Vasi let it stretch till the young mage grew uncomfortable under her hard stare. When she finally spoke again, her voice was cold.

"We both know that what you did is forbidden, Jex. Eryk would be furious if he knew."

His shoulders stiffened. “Don’t tell me you haven’t noticed how afraid she is, or how she avoids being touched! How else was I supposed to find out? Until now, I don’t even think she knew the word for her gift and I’m sure she thought she was crazy, seeing the things she’s been seeing. Or rather, Seeing. So unless you think she could have drawn us a picture with some of Kylan’s pencils, I don’t know what you want from me.” As soon as he’d said this last, he winced. Damn his inability to keep the sarcasm to himself. Now he’d get a slap for sure.

“And what did you see?”

No slap? That was a pleasant surprise. “I... Vasi, I don’t really know. Or at least I don’t know how to put it into words that won’t make me sound like a lunatic.”

“Then you risked her for nothing. How typical for you to think of no one but yourself.” Scorn dripped from her words and it fueled his temper as her coolness had not. He leapt to his feet and took three quick steps forward to loom over her. She didn’t so much as blink.

“With all due respect, Kvinna,” he grated, “you couldn’t be more wrong. I didn’t—would never—risk her! Do you think me such a monster?”

“I think you take chances for selfish ends,” she retorted, “and tonight you engaged my apprentice in a forbidden act for what sounds like yet another.”

Jex stepped back and turned away, pacing to the window and pressing his forehead against the glass. His voice softened and it was clear her accusations hurt him.

“Please tell me what I’ve done to give you cause to think that. Was it taking an interest in her comfort on the road? Or helping her improve her riding skills when I could have let her continue to muddle along on her own? Perhaps it was saving her from the aspion?” He paused and took a deep breath. “Besides, I didn’t say I didn’t learn anything, I merely said it was hard to describe.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“So what is it about her?”

“About who? Careful!”

An exasperated sigh. “Stop moving and it won’t spill.”

“Don’t be unkind, Sarene. You try lying in essentially one position for weeks and then try not to move once you can.”

The soft clink of metal against ceramic continued unbroken for a time.

While Jex had managed to get himself up and dressed the night before, his fever had returned in the aftermath of his mental link with Enari. He’d reluctantly retreated to bed early that morning, but to everyone’s relief, he’d been much less disagreeable about it than expected.

“Well?” Sarene asked.

“Well what?”

“What’s so special about the little red-headed tart I threw out of here?”

“She’s not a tart, and that was very rude of you.”

“Just answer my question!”

“Nani’s a good person and I enjoy her company, when she isn’t pulling my chest hair out with those sticky bandages and— YOU VILE WITCH!”

Enari winced and tried to ignore them, bending her head over the tome in her lap again and squinting at the tiny and uneven scrawl that covered the page. Until now, she’d thought it impossible for anyone to have worse penmanship than herself, but she had found the one man in existence who did. The light in Jex’s sitting room was insufficient for the task of deciphering the spidery writing, but she persisted anyway, having nothing else to do until Sarene got bored and left.

The sound of a breaking dish came from the next room and she grimaced. On top of everything else that had already happened today, another mess to clean up was exactly what she needed.

She’d had another of those evil dreams again in the wee hours of the morning, which only seemed to compound her lingering headache. The ache had started behind her eyes shortly after Jex had been in her mind, and she was forced to assume that either the experience itself or the sudden way in which the link had broken was to blame.

Jex, aching and feverish, had proved to be rather docile so far, yet she still found her patience with him was short. All she wanted was to lose herself in the library and see what more she could find on psychomancy. The single tome she’d been able to snatch up this morning seemed to be more concerned with vague theory than the affects it could have on the user.

Then Sarene chose to make her unbearable presence known.

Less than half an hour earlier, the torina had breezed into Jex’s room with a tray of soup and bread and ordered Enari out as if she were a common servant. This had become a daily occurrence once he was deemed strong enough to take normal food, and she’d been particularly discourteous that day.

Their bickering started the instant Enari closed the door and they showed no signs of stopping.

“You did that on purpose this time!”

“You’re being horrid!” Sarene accused.

There was a rattle of crockery as something was slammed down.

“So dumping hot soup on me was your solution?” Jex bellowed at her.

“The all-powerful battlemage can’t even hold a bowl of soup on his own, and here I’d been told you were getting better.” Sarene’s tone was sweetly poisonous. “Do you want me to fetch your mother bird to come feed you?”

“Leave Enari out of this. You had no right to speak to her as you did, either.”

“You’re horrid,” the torina repeated.

“And you’re an insufferable, inconstant bitch. It’s a wonder anyone can stand your company.”

“Says the man who is so unimportant to everyone that he’s been left with only two little girls to care for him. With one of your ‘caretakers’ being a dumb mute, I’d say no one gives a damn—”

The sound of a slap cut the air and there was a feminine shriek of pained outrage. Enari dropped her book and stared at the closed door. Had Jex just done what she thought he had?

“How dare you!” Sarene screamed, confirming her suspicion. “How dare you strike me, you, you—”

“Get out,” he ordered frostily.

“You can’t order me around like you do her,” Sarene stated. Her voice lowered so that Enari could barely hear. “Or is that her appeal? Does she follow your commands like a cowed child? I’m a grown woman and I’ll leave when I’m good and ready. This is *my* palace, not yours.”

“You’ll leave now, even if I have to throw you out. I’ve had enough of your abominable behavior for one day.”

“Me, abominable? You’re the one who—”

She heard the sound of a brief struggle, then the door opened and they strode past her, Jex firmly holding the torina’s upper arm and using it to propel her forward. Even in his current state, he was strong enough to move her despite her resistance. He thrust her out into the hall and shut the door in her face, before leaning forward and thumping his forehead against the wood a few times. His knees buckled and he slid along the wall to sit heavily on the floor.

“Diu. I almost miss the biter she used to be.” As if suddenly remembering he wasn’t alone, Jex turned his head to regard Enari. “You heard all of it, I imagine.”

She nodded.

“I’m sorry, Nani. She had no right to speak to or about you as she did. You’ve done nothing to justify her treatment.” He shrugged helplessly. “She runs hot and cold like no woman I’ve ever known.”

Enari shifted uncomfortably, not really wanting to hear about the other women he’d ‘known’. What they’d shared the night before—and not just the mental bond—was making her hyperaware of a lot of things she’d never paid heed to before.

Like the number of admirers he’d collected in his brief time at court and the stir of jealousy she felt whenever she saw one of them.

Since he’d regained consciousness, there’d been a steady parade of concerned ladies coming in and out of his rooms. His most frequent visitor, other than Kylan, who didn’t count in this instance, had been Chimaka Addae, Lady Krihamre’s twin. The glares she gave Enari and the possessive way she touched Jex left no mystery as to the nature of their relationship.

“Perhaps she’d like to come and care for him awhile, see what he could really be like.” Enari knew the thought was unkind, but couldn’t help herself today.

Jex began struggling to his feet and she automatically rose to help him. After several attempts, they got him upright and he leaned on her a little as they retreated to his bedroom.

Upon reaching the bed, he collapsed across it in a boneless sprawl. He was sweating and hot to the touch again, but whether from the argument, the exertion, or his illness, she couldn’t tell. She quickly stripped him out of his boots and tunic, and for once he let her do it without protest. The spilled soup truly had burnt him, she saw, and she was quick to retrieve a bit of salve to ease the sting.

As she straightened up from tending the minor wound, the pouch she’d picked up from the stable yard the day of their arrival fell from her pocket and landed on one slippered foot.

“What was that?” Jex murmured. His eyes were only half open, but he’d seen the flash of blue.

She picked it up and showed it to him, feeling a little guilty for not returning it sooner. She hadn’t meant to keep it, but in all the chaos, there’d been no opportunity to return it. He took it from her with a smile.

“Thought I’d lost this, which would’ve been exceedingly unfortunate on several accounts.” He raised an eyebrow at her. “Have you been snooping, Nani?”

She shook her head and, on impulse, reached out and touched his temple. The link sprang into being with a little spark of static electricity and, despite the uncomfortable sensation of feeling his headache in addition to her own, she was able to show him how she’d come by the pouch. When she pulled back, he was grinning tiredly.

"I'm glad we can do that, even if it is prohibited. Makes you not being able to speak much less of an issue." His expression suddenly sobered. "Have you found another bag like this here in my room? It would have been about the same size, but probably black instead of blue."

She hadn't and her negative answer seemed to disturb him deeply, though he chose not to explain. Instead, he shifted into a sitting position and patted the bed beside him. She knelt on the mattress, facing him expectantly.

"Would you like to see what's in here?" he offered.

She shrugged, but he could tell her curiosity had been piqued. The fact that she hadn't opened it in all this time spoke highly of her integrity and trustworthiness. Not that he'd doubted them.

"Enari."

He touched her cheek and his eyes were grave in a way she'd never seen them. If nothing else, the use of her given name was evidence of how deadly serious this was.

"You must swear never to breathe a word to anyone about what you see here, or what I tell you. It could cost not only my life, but my mother's and sister's as well."

Gaze steady, she drew a forefinger in an X over her heart. He opened the drawstring and upended the pouch between them, spilling the contents across the dark coverlet.

In addition to the small pile of missives he'd picked up along the road, the silk pouch contained several other, and quite curious, objects.

Amidst the folded bits of parchment, she spied three elaborate twists of what looked to be human hair; two dark auburn and one raven black. There was also a worn silver coin that she didn't recognize, and a steel ring with markings etched around both the inside and outside of the band.

"If you'd be so kind as to take these," he indicated the papers, "to the High Mage when we're finished here, I'd be much obliged. Show them to no one but him. I doubt they contain anything of vital importance, but it's best to be safe."

She gathered them up and slipped them into an inner pocket before returning her attention to the remaining items.

"Do you know what this is?" He slid the ring onto the middle finger of his right hand and held it up, turning it side-to-side so she could examine it.

The play of light across the metal was mesmerizing. The markings curled through and around one another in sinuous loops, broken in many places by small hash marks. She guessed they were an accounting of one kind or another. Three triangular black stones shimmered as his hand moved.

"It's a signet of sorts, indicating my rank in the Obscuri Brotherhood," he explained, smiling thinly as he examined the ring. "I'm a senior runner for the Shadow Lady. One of her best, and these," he plucked up the three twists of hair, "are to remind me of the fact. They were cut from me, my mother, and later, my sister when I was taken into the Brotherhood. I was five and just a lookout then. There's a charm on them that allows the owner to be tracked no matter where they are. The lady takes a sample from every inductee and his or her family as... well, an insurance policy, I suppose, against one of us going rogue or stepping out of line. It's quite ingenious of her, I must admit, even though most of us hate her for it."

"And this," he picked up the coin, "is the only thing I have of my birthplace, and it's probably the most dangerous thing I own. If it were ever made known that I'm Atromorese by birth, I'd probably be lynched or something equally unpleasant and I don't even want to think of what would be done to my family. 'Our kind' aren't welcome in Egalion, not after the mess Iradi made of things with Tor Dorian, so banishment is the kindest thing they could hope for after I was dead." He put his hand over hers and squeezed gently. "You're now one of a very small handful of people who knows, and every one of them has sworn to keep the secret. I'm trusting you to do the same, putting our lives in your hands, as it were."

He closed his eyes and leaned his head back against the headboard. "So, Nani, now you know what I truly am. A spy, a thief, and an outlander." His expression turned dark. "And apparently, an enormous prat as well, after that pleasantness with Sarene. I've never hit a woman before today. You must think I'm dreadful."

As a matter of fact, she thought just the opposite. torina or not, Sarene needed someone to stand up to her. Maybe it would do the spoilt brat some good in the end to know she couldn't bully everyone around her. He'd also trusted her with his life, and though she knew many would condemn or turn him over to the guards, it

didn't change her opinion of him in the slightest. She knew what it was to be different in a society where anything out-of-the-ordinary was so often feared and viewed with mistrust.

With a small smile, she stroked his hair back from his face and he leaned into her touch with a tiny groan.

"Such pretty hair," she thought idly.

"Not nearly as pretty as yours," he mumbled, "but thank you."

Enari frowned down at him. *"I thought you weren't going to listen?"*

He'd made the promise that morning; until she was able to control her gift, he would respect her privacy and keep his own mind closed to her.

"Sorry. You're loud sometimes. I can't help it." He continued, barely above a whisper. "Your hands are always so cool. I think they're the only things in this entire damned province not burning...or maybe that's just me." He was asleep in moments, but she stayed sitting on the bed next to him, her thoughts chasing themselves in jumbled circles.

* * *

"High Mage Alycon?"

Eryk looked up at the apologetic page standing in the doorway to his study.

"Yes?"

"There's a young lady here to see you. Novice Namelum, I believe. I know you're otherwise occupied, but may I show her in or would you prefer I send her away?"

"No, no, please send her in, Talon."

With a curt nod, the man withdrew, leaving the door slightly ajar. His footsteps retreated across the heavy carpet of the room beyond.

"Novice Namelum?" his guest asked curiously.

"I haven't had a chance to ask her Sura about the name, so I don't know." Eryk rubbed his eyes. "I'd be interested in your thoughts once you've seen her, however. You're one of the few who remember Tanith well, and this girl...well, you'll see."

The young woman in question was soon hesitating on the threshold, fidgeting nervously with one sleeve. She jumped when Talin closed the door behind her.

"Novice, it's a pleasure to see you again," Eryk greeted her. The two men rose to their feet and she dropped a shaky curtsy, ducking her head shyly. From the corner of his eye, he could see Antilles appraising her speculatively. She eyed him uncertainly in return.

"How can I help you, my dear?" Eryk asked kindly, trying to ease her discomfort. She was such a skittish little thing and it was almost painful to watch. He pulled out a chair and gestured for her to sit. Her gaze darted to Antilles and back as she approached.

The man lounging across the table from the High Mage had a riot of chocolate brown curls tumbling down over his forehead and around his ears. His olive complexion glowed with health and his black eyes danced merrily as he watched her. He was taller than Jex and broader, but not as big as High Mage Alycon. She guessed he was near Jex's age, but it was hard to tell; he had one of those faces that looked perpetually young. It was a trait common among the Darmese.

"Ah," the High Mage laughed, "where are my manners? Novice Enari Namelum, may I introduce Adept Antilles Denier. He's just arrived from Turris Arcana." More quietly, he added, "You may speak freely in front of him."

Enari inclined her head and Antilles reached for her hand, bowing over it and planted a courtly kiss on her knuckles. Eryk smiled at the crimson blush that suffused her cheeks.

"Is Battlemage Xander well today?" Antilles asked. His voice was surprisingly light for such a big man, Enari noted, and his accent was much less pronounced than she'd expected. Many of the kvinnas from Darmiad retained their accents even after decades in the Temple and could be a little hard to understand.

"I hope he isn't giving you too much trouble. He's known for being a horrendous patient at the best of times, so you must have the patience of the All-Mother Herself to put up with him for as long as you have."

Enari's blush intensified at the compliment and she perched gingerly on the edge of the offered chair. An uncomfortable silence descended on the room and Eryk frowned. Why wasn't she saying anything?

It took him a moment to remember the girl was mute and he mentally cursed himself for allowing the silence to stretch. Before he could speak, however, she produced a handful of folded parchment scraps. Reaching across the table, she placed them in a precarious pile before him.

“Are these from Jex?”

She nodded.

“I’d meant to ask him about them.” Eryk sighed in relief. “I’m glad they weren’t lost in all the pandemonium. Do you remember how many other mages he spoke with while you traveled?”

Enari’s brows furrowed and she gnawed on one knuckle absently as she thought, then held up both hands, fingers spread.

“Only ten?” It was the High Mage’s turn to frown. “There should have been at least fourteen.”

“It’s possible I encountered the others on my way here,” Antilles provided.

He produced a few parchments of his own and the two men perused them quickly before the High Mage sat back, apparently satisfied.

Antilles turned back to Enari. “May I have your permission to visit Jex?”

Enari lifted one shoulder in a shrug. There was no reason for him not to have visitors, so long as he was feeling better when he woke. Perhaps this Adept Denier would see something like she had, and thus lend a new perspective to the mystery of the dark marks.

“Excellent. I’ll come by after dinner, then.”

At last taking her leave of the two men, she shut the door securely behind her on the way out. The antechamber was empty and she was able to slip into the hall unnoticed.

“Quiet little mouse, isn’t she?” Antilles commented.

“Aye,” Eryk agreed, “Vasi says she’s never made so much as a squeak since she was born. No one knows why.”

“Curious.”

“Very.”

“She could be Tanith’s twin, were it not for the age difference,” the adept said carefully, watching the High Mage for his reaction.

“So it isn’t just my imagination. Good.” Eryk’s expression was neutral, but Antilles wasn’t fooled.

“And Kvinna De’Curande has told you nothing of her past, or her family?” he pressed.

“There really hasn’t been time. With everything that’s happened, Vasi and I haven’t spoken more than a handful of sentences to one another in the month and a half she’s been here, which is a pity. I’d forgotten how much I enjoyed her company.”

“In regards to said goings-on...Perimos should be here by month’s end at the very latest I think.”

“Why so long?” Eryk asked.

Antilles sighed. “He mentioned something about a ‘minor disturbance in the observatory’ that delayed his departure.”

“I swear by the Five, if my observatory isn’t exactly how I left it, I’m going to skin him alive. There’d better not be so much as a scorch mark on the stone.”

Antilles snorted out a laugh. “You should ride home slowly then, and take the long way ‘round. I hear Davaria’s capitol has lovely winter festivals that go from midwinter to the beginning of spring. That should give him ample time to put everything to rights. I wish he’d been more careful, though, because I certainly could have used his help this morning.”

Eryk felt his minor irritation darken into despair.

Brinon had sent for him at dawn, not even an hour after Antilles had arrived, and the news had not been good.

Yet another body had been found, this one in the tor’s own study.

Thankfully, Brinon had come across the scene before anyone else, and he’d kept the servants out with the excuse that he had sensitive business to attend to and that he must under no circumstances be disturbed. He’d sent a priest, who were a discreet lot by nature, to fetch his brothers-in-law and no curious crowd ever assembled.

The smell of decay had been absent here, as the corpse had not lain in the room but overnight. The golden light of dawn illuminated the tableau, casting a cheerful glow over the sad sight.

Collin Fin, personal secretary, confidante, and close friend of the tor's for nearly five decades, sat at his desk, slumped over a pile of parchments. A quill was still clutched in one hand and his sallow cheek rested on a half-finished letter. His death had not been a violent one, like those of the council members, but it was certainly unnatural. One glance at his body proved that.

His tongue had been removed, same as the boy's, and a braid of dark hair had been wrapped around one finger. It was impossible to determine its owner, however, as the coloring and length were common enough.

"Goddess preserve us," Antilles breathed, "Is this like the others?"

"Only like the first," Jordin provided, "The set after that were, ah, messier."

"Poor Collin. He was my second cousin on my mother's side, you know. His family will be devastated." Brinon bent over the body and reached to close the dead eyes. He hesitated at the last minute and looked to the mages. "May I touch him?"

Eryk deferred to Antilles, who nodded. "I know your aura, sire, and a simple touch won't contaminate the scene in any case. Go ahead."

"Good-bye, my friend," he murmured, "You shall be much missed."

"What was he writing?" Jordin asked. He eased the page from under Collin's cheek and his eyes scanned the elegant script. They snapped up to Brinon, shocked.

"I thought," the duque began, "that you weren't going to send Sarene to Davaria until next spring."

Brinon's face colored, but he didn't look away. "I wasn't, until all this confusion with the killings, the unrest in the Grand Council, and the stirrings from Ibiran started. Under the circumstances, however, it seemed prudent to write to Hadrian regarding the possibility of an early winter wedding."

"Aelani agreed?"

"I haven't spoken with her yet."

"Ah."

After a lengthy discussion, it was decided the best course of action would be to present the secretary's death as a heart attack. If it were revealed to be otherwise, the tor feared an uproar. Four suspicious deaths were bad enough, but add a fifth he argued, and fear would run rampant and that was the last thing they needed.

* * *

"He says you've been really sick, Jex."

"Not that sick." Typical Jex-Xander-downplay-and-dismiss.

"I hate it when you lie to me. I've already looked at you, you know."

Enari halted with her hand on Jex's bedroom door. She'd pushed it open only a crack when she'd heard voices, and now debated whether she should enter or retreat. Curiosity got the better of her in the end and she leaned forward to put an eye to the narrow space.

Jex stood near the window with Antilles Denier and they looked as if they'd been arguing. Jex's eyes were bloodshot and he wiped his nose on his sleeve once before Antilles offered him a handkerchief.

Jex sighed again and his shoulders sagged a little. "Alright, but I'll be fine in time. Thank Enari for that."

"The little novice from Cyril?"

"That's her."

"She's gorgeous," Antilles observed casually, "Have you...?"

"Aye to the first, nay to the second."

"But you want to."

It was a statement rather than a question and Enari felt her face heat.

"Maybe."

Antilles shook his head. "I know you better than that, Jex."

"I suppose you must after all this time. We both know I wouldn't have asked you otherwise."

"I'm sorry, you know. So, so sorry."

"Don't."

"Jex—"

"Don't!"

Antilles embraced him fiercely and Jex allowed it for a moment before pushing him away with a sigh and a little smile.

“What?” Antilles asked, frowning.

“We’ve an audience.”

Turning almost casually, Jex’s eyes focused on her and she knew she’d been caught.

He beckoned. “Don’t be shy.”

Antilles started in surprise when she tentatively pushed open the door, but greeted her warmly when she reached them. She stared at the floor, cheeks burning, until Jex tucked a hand beneath her chin and raised it. There was no anger or even irritation in his expression, and in fact, he seemed more amused than anything.

“Kylan’s habit of eavesdropping is rubbing off on you,” he teased, tracing his thumb across her lower lip. “Did you learn anything interesting?”

“Leave the poor girl be,” Antilles chided him. He addressed Enari with a sympathetic wince. “I’m sure you’ve learned by now when it’s best to ignore him.”

“She’s far too polite for that, Antilles, unlike some people I know. Well, Nani, I suppose it’s time for you to have your nightly way with me, isn’t it?” He dodged the elbow Antilles jabbed at him, a smug grin turning up the corners of his mouth.

Glad to have something to do that didn’t require her to look at either of them, Enari began fussing with her kit, all the while listening to the conversation behind her.

“How much news do you get, cooped up in there all day?” Antilles asked.

“Not nearly so much as I’m used to, I’m afraid. Why?”

“I’m not just here to report on the ambush, though the findings are interesting enough to warrant the trip.” His eyes darted to Enari and he hesitated.

“I trust her.”

“People in the palace are dying.”

Jex shrugged. “People do that.”

“Not like this. They’re ritual killings, I’m almost certain, though rumor blames some of them on Ibiran rebels and some on Atromorese infiltrators. People are scared. Eryk has sent for Perimos.”

“Diu. How many have there been?” Jex demanded.

Antilles’ shoulders slumped, “Four, so far. A kitchen boy and three Grand Council members.”

“Which ones?”

“Um... Adipem Porcus, Hrivaldi Le’Quar, and Hera something.”

“Hera Wastrel,” Jex finished sourly, “That hag was one of the councilors promoting the idea of marrying Torina Kylan off to Min Ha. The child is seven.”

Antilles made a face. “That’s repulsive.”

“Makes you wonder why anyone could possibly want her dead.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“Jex, will you read to me before lessons?”

Kylan flopped down beside him in the shade and dropped a thin volume onto his chest. Sighing, he sat up, catching the book before it could fall into the faded grass.

His fever had broken again in the early hours and he'd ventured out of doors after breakfast, needing to feel a little sunshine on his skin after so long abed. He'd been shocked to find summer already beginning its grudging yield to autumn, and the day was gloriously warm instead of stifling. Nature was busily plying her paintbrush and everywhere he looked was a touch of red or a splash of orange. If anything, the changes made the carefully maintained spaces even more peaceful.

Enari, strangely reticent to look him in the eyes, had declined his invitation to join him and he secretly suspected she too needed a little peace and quiet. Most likely she'd hidden herself away in the library somewhere or was visiting with Torina Anya. The two women obviously enjoyed one another's company and he was glad she had another friend here. Anya was also a willing participant in Enari's psychomancy lessons, making a sort of game out of it as she told him they'd done with reading when Enari was small.

Thus leaving them to their own devices, he'd come out of doors alone and after hours of dozing in the grass, he felt immensely better. While the things Enari had shown him still disturbed his dreams, the mystery of the ugly black smudges on his aura seemed less threatening in the heat of the day. He still hadn't had the chance to discuss the situation with Eryk and it was clear that Vasi had said nothing of their conversation, but he hoped to speak with them both that evening.

In the meantime, he intended to enjoy his mobility and freedom, short-lived as they might prove to be.

Jex examined the book Kylan had given him and grinned. “*Tahir's Lover* is not an appropriate story for a girl your age. Where did you get this?”

“Enari left it in your room.”

He *had* wondered what she'd been reading that morning and why she'd flushed so prettily when he'd asked her. Books seemed a safe topic between them... unlike the mirror. After that night, she'd refused to show him any more. Whenever he tried to push her for details, she either pretended not to hear him or decided it was a good time to poke and prod at his mostly-healed wounds.

He could take a hint.

“Pick another one,” he told the girl.

Obviously prepared for this reaction, Kylan produced another book and held it under his nose triumphantly. “How about this one?”

“Better.”

“You, you don't think they're baby-stories, do you, Jex? Sarene says they are.”

He smiled down at her. “Of course not. It's very important to know the legends and stories of one's own people and between you and me, your sister could use a few more ‘baby stories’ in her collection.”

“Good.” Kylan scooted closer, heedless of the grass stains she was getting, and leaned her head against his chest. “Now read, please. Can I turn the pages?”

“If you'd like.”

“Papa and Uncle Eryk always let me turn the pages.”

Swallowing more laughter, he opened the book and began to read.

Sometime between chapters five and seven, Enari joined them. She had a basket over one arm and hesitated when she caught sight of them, clearly expecting Jex to be alone. Kylan was the first to spot her.

“Enari!” she cried, “I looked for you *everywhere* this morning, but I couldn't find you.” She motioned towards the grass on Jex's other side. “Will you read with us? It's getting really exciting, and he reads good.”

“I read well,” Jex corrected her. She stuck her tongue out at him, but he ignored her and instead held a hand out to Enari. She took it, letting him pull her down beside him. Kylan put her head back against his chest, wiggling a bit to get comfortable, but Enari held back, her leg just barely touching his.

“Only a few more chapters, Kylan, and then we have lessons. I promised your mother, remember?”

“Oh, all right,” she pouted, “but you can’t stop in the middle of a chapter like you did last time. And no falling asleep!”

“As you command.”

Picking up the book again, he resumed reading. He certainly was an excellent storyteller, Enari observed. His voice wove magic into the tale and drew her in despite her reservations. When she hesitantly leaned against him, her pose mimicking Kylan’s, Jex drew up his knees to balance the book and put an arm around her. Midnight and fire spilled across his tunic, gray eyes and gold fastened on the slowly turning pages.

Enari’s eyes fell shut and she let the story sweep her away. So entranced was she by his voice that it took her several moments to realize the tale had changed quite dramatically.

“And clasping her tiny, elegant hand in his, Tahir stole her away in secret to his inner chamber, not daring to release her until they were within and the door was safely bolted against all trespassers. Then he drew aside the velvet hangings on the great bed, revealing an expanse of crimson silk that never seemed to end. Layalie watched enrapt, motionless, and waiting with bated breath for his command...”

“Oh, Goddess, please no.”

“...His face was dark and still as he gazed upon her, like that of a man who has embraced his fate. ‘Lie there,’ he said softly. Without a word, nor with a single hesitation, she lay down on the bed at her lover’s behest. Eyes closed, she felt his softly trembling hands touch her body in desire. He stroked her face with infinite tenderness and promise, and at last there was the lingering press of a kiss upon her blushing lips...”

“It is. Oh no no no. I’m going to die.” Yet she couldn’t move. Dared not move. She sat, breath held, head against his shoulder. His voice was no longer animated as it had been before. It had dropped an octave, sliding across her like velvet and silk and all the sensual things of the tale he was bringing to life.

“...Layalie lay in a sort of expectant rapture. Then she shivered at the feel of his hand moving with impatient passion among her skirts. He drew away the silken finery, little-by-little, layer-by-layer, until she was naked upon the bed in which tors and toras had coupled with their paramours for ages out of memory. With a quiver of exquisite joy and deepest yearning, Tahir touched the warm softness of her nude and perfect body. And he had to come into her at once, to seek Andehai as man has always done within the body of a woman. It was a moment of purest harmony for Tahir and Layalie, his lover.”

His lips were right against her ear, his voice barely more than a whisper. She stared, unseeing, at the page before he quietly closed the book.

“I thought you should hear it as it ought to be read,” he explained, “Don’t be angry at Kylan when she wakes for telling me you were reading it. She didn’t mean any harm.”

Enari’s breath was coming in short, rapid little gasps and she couldn’t seem to get enough air. Humiliation warred with an unidentifiable tingling heat inside her, but she didn’t know which was winning. His hand ghosted up and down her arm, soothing and arousing at once.

“Are you very angry with me, Nani?”

His fingers touched her jaw, lifted her face to study her expression. Very slowly, not entirely sure if she meant it, she shook her head. The smile he gave her was dazzling and something in his eyes made her catch and hold her breath. His head tilted and he leaned towards her.

On the far side of him, Kylan stirred and stretched. The strange little moment burst like a soap bubble and normalcy crashed back around them.

* * *

“Jex, this is hard!” Kylan complained, dropping her forehead into the parchments spread out in the grass before her. Each was covered in Jex’s elegant, looping script and though he’d written carefully, the symbols were foreign and the little girl had been struggling to copy the same few for nearly an hour.

“I never promised it would be easy,” he informed her around a mouthful of pastry. “Atromorese is a complex language, with a completely different alphabet than Egali, but you blabbed to your mother and insisted on being taught. I’m obligated now.” He reached into the basket Enari had brought with her and pulled out a sealed jug. Pulling the cork, he sniffed it apprehensively.

“This is just cider, right?”

Kylan snatched it from him and took a gulp before handing it back. “Just cider.”

“Why thank you, my devoted taster. If there’s any poison or medicine in there, you’ll be the first to know.”

Enari and Kylan both rolled their eyes.

“Enari wouldn’t poison you, silly. She loves you too much,” Kylan said absently, staring down at the page before her with a scowl of frustration.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Enari hide her face behind her hands. Kylan, of course, was oblivious to the discomfort her comments had caused.

“Though it would be pretty smart to put your medicine in it,” she mused, “That’s what I would do if I were her, since you’re such a baby about taking it. Argh!” With a shriek of aggravation, she pounded her fist into the grass in an unusual display of temper.

“I hate this!”

“Kylan!” Jex snapped. He had absolutely no patience for temper tantrums.

“I’m sorry!” she wailed, and broke into hysterical sobs.

She threw herself into Enari’s arms and the older girl rubbed her back soothingly, a look of sympathy crossing her face. Jex closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose.

Enari held Kylan until she quieted, then used a sleeve to wipe her sweaty and tear-stained face. Knowing Kylan wouldn’t be released until she’d done at least a little work, Enari drew one of the pages and the wax practice tablet into her lap. She took the torina’s hand in hers and guided the stylus over the scratched surface. The copy was wobbly and a little crooked, but it was better than the little girl had been able to make on her own.

Jex stared at her, pastry and cider forgotten. “That’s... that’s actually very good, even if the last one is backwards. You didn’t tell me you knew any Atromorese.”

She didn’t, or at least, hadn’t until she’d observed some of their lessons. It had been easy enough to pick up from watching the pair, and she found she was even able to read a little, though it was a laborious process and she often came across symbols she didn’t know.

“I think that’s enough for one day,” Jex announced into the silence. He climbed a little stiffly to his feet and bent to pick up the scattered remnants of the afternoon lesson. “Kylan, go on ahead and take all this with you. You’re free, once it’s put away properly, and don’t think I won’t check.”

Kylan accepted the armload of objects, then skipped away from them, disappearing quickly before her tutor could change his mind. He gave Enari a hand up, twining his fingers through hers instead of releasing them once she’d gained her balance. She looked at him askance but made no move to pull away. It was actually rather comforting the way her hand completely disappeared in his larger one.

“That was kind of you.”

“I could tell she was at the end of her patience for the day and so were you.”

“Still,” he leaned over to pick up the basket, “she has to learn to do it on her own.” Swinging their clasped hands between them, he headed in the opposite direction Kylan had gone, deeper into the garden instead of back to the palace.

“It’s too nice to go back indoors just yet,” he explained in answer to her questioning look, “There’s a little pond around here someplace that should be just about perfect for idling away the rest of the afternoon.”

The idea appealed to her. Even though it was early autumn, the afternoon had grown unusually warm. He led her to a back corner of the vast grounds, pushing aside a fall of wilting jasmine to reveal an oasis.

A small stream trickled into a pool in the middle of the secluded clearing. Soft, thick grass dotted with tiny yellow and purple flowers carpeted the ground and Enari found herself wanting to remove her shoes and feel the blades under her bare feet. A moss covered, but still rather scandalous statue caught her attention, recalling the warmth of Jex’s breath against her ear as he’d read the erotic words of *Tahir’s Lover*. She stared at the thing, unable for a time to look away from the lovers forever immortalized in stone.

As they approached the water’s edge, Enari had no more warning than the sly look that came over his face before he lunged at her. He caught her around the waist, pulling her towards him before bending and sliding an arm under her knees to scoop her up. She began to struggle when it became clear he intended to toss her into the water fully clothed.

“Don’t you dare!” she cried, kicking her legs and slapping her palms against his chest.

Jex only laughed. When she felt him release her, she fisted both hands in his tunic and leaned back. If she was going in then so was he. He realized her ploy too late and toppled in after her with a shout.

They surfaced together, sputtering and gasping for breath.

“You,” he panted, “are an evil little minx!”

Her waterlogged skirts tangled around her legs as she tread water and she felt one of her slippers come loose and sink. Her scowl only made him laugh harder and she splashed water in his face. He splashed her back before she could get out of range and the ensuing battle was boisterous, but short-lived.

It wasn't long before Jex was out of breath and called for a ceasefire. Enari graciously accepted his surrender, though she couldn't keep a triumphant smile from her mouth. That would teach him to start a war he couldn't finish.

They waded out of the pond and he helped her wring most of the water from her gown before they collapsed side-by-side on the soft grass. Enari flopped onto her back, sprawling out in a most unladylike fashion and tilting her face to the sky. Eyes closed, she basked in the warmth as the breeze began to dry her sodden clothes. Jex lay next to her, silent for once.

Slowly, the serene atmosphere began to change. Jex turned onto his side to face her and his eyes dropped to where her damp gown clung to her breasts. He licked his lips unconsciously and she tried to cover herself, but he stopped her.

“Don't, Nani.”

His hands moved, fingers gliding over the skin of her neck to twine in her wet hair and cradle the back of her head. He leaned forward and she instinctively closed her eyes.

There was no Kylan to interrupt this time.

He pressed a kiss to the corner of her mouth. Then another. The third time, she turned to meet him.

The kiss was long and slow and sweet. He pushed gently and she could taste a lingering hint of spiced cider, crisp and tart, in the embrace of his lips. She shuddered and he backed away.

“Cold?” he asked softly.

She shook her head, dazed and a little breathless.

“Good.”

Raising a hand to stroke her cheek, he began to trail soft kisses along her throat and behind her ear. She felt his breath warm her water-chilled skin and instinctively moved into him. He pulled the delicate lobe of her ear between his teeth, nibbled, nipped, sucked. She turned her face and his mouth was covering hers again.

This kiss was needy and desperate, spinning out of control so quickly she could barely comprehend what was happening. He traced the seam of her lips with the tip of his tongue and she parted them on a gasp, granting him the entrance he sought. She wanted him closer, wanted to feel the weight of him atop her, wanted... whatever came after.

He felt her shiver again and pulled away reluctantly. “You *are* cold.”

She shook her head but he released her anyway, taking her hands and pulling her to her feet.

“We'll go someplace warm and get you out of those wet clothes.” There was a promise in his words that made her insides quiver and he swatted her backside playfully as she started to leave the garden.

Grinning teasingly up at him, she gathered her wet skirts and darted away, daring him to give chase. She could hear the squelch of his boots as he pursued her and she ran faster, ducking down a side path in the direction of the palace.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

They stole away to his rooms, slipping through corridors empty of life at the height of a sleepy autumn afternoon. Music and distant laughter floated through the air from some far wing of the palace, or perhaps from the city beyond, but they passed not a soul.

As soon as the door was locked behind them, Jex began backing her towards the bedroom. His hands clutched at her hips and his mouth ravaged hers until she could barely breathe. Gasping, tugging feverishly at the ties of her bodice, he pulled it down to free her breasts.

Enari helped by shrugging her arms out of the sleeves and letting the fabric pool about her waist. Though he didn't speak, she could see his desire in the boiling, swirling emotions that filled his mind and it took an enormous amount of mental effort not to be dragged under.

Her bottom hit a small table and impatiently, Jex reached behind her and swept it clear, ignoring the sound of breaking glass as the contents struck the floor and something shattered. The strong scent of wildflowers filled the air.

Grabbing the back of her thighs, he lifted her up and sat her on the hard surface before eagerly bundling her skirts out of the way and stepping between her legs. She wrapped them around his hips, drawing him even closer. The only sound in the room was their ragged breathing and the rustle of clothing.

As he began to pull his tunic off over his head, pain lanced through his chest from front to back and it was like nothing he'd ever felt. He staggered and doubled over, sucking in a pained breath. Enari scrambled off the table to kneel beside him, even as she hastened to slip her arms back into her gown. His face had gone ashen and he was sweating profusely.

It was happening again and she felt the familiar helpless frustration. Every time he showed signs of improvement, it was fleeting. He simply wasn't recovering like he should and even the pompous Master Illyrian was at a loss. No one could explain why a previously healthy young man was taking so long to regain his strength.

"Goddess," he groaned in despair and embarrassment, covering his eyes with a trembling hand, "Whatever this is, I'm not...and when I least expect it, it hits me like a kick to the guts."

She touched his face. "*Should I get the High Mage?*"

"No, no. I'll be alright. Just...just let me sit a minute." He scrubbed at his face with both palms. "After everything, it seems I'm to be unmanned before you as well. You must be very impressed."

"*Perhaps Master Illyrian—*"

His laugh was short and bitter, broken by a wet cough he hadn't had before. "That stuck-up ass? The last time I tried to speak with him, he told me to stop wasting his time."

That sounded about right.

Suddenly, he cried out in agony and toppled forward onto his hands and knees. He dry-heaved once, twice, then began to vomit violently.

What came spewing from between his lips, however, was not his lunch, nor anything she'd ever seen the like of.

The fluid was dark, viscous, and flecked with crimson, and wherever it hit, the rushes hissed, blackened, and disintegrated. It continued to come long after his stomach should have been empty and Enari could do nothing but watch him retch onto the marble floor, every muscle in his body straining to expel the noxious stuff.

Eventually, it stopped and Jex collapsed face down, just barely missing the thick puddle. It roiled as if alive and began to gather itself. Enari stared in dawning horror at the figure that coalesced before her.

It wasn't large, standing only as tall as a man's elbow, but it was monstrous. The skin was perfectly black and glossy, seeming to absorb the light around it. Overlarge, leathery wings unfurled from between the hunched shoulder blades and wicked, claw-tipped fingers and toes gouged furrows into the stone beneath its feet. It grinned at her, revealing rows of rotten, serrated fangs and red eyes smoldered at her balefully. The reek of the thing was indescribably foul.

“Mortal Seer,” it rasped, forked tongue licking out to taste the air, “you stand before Rhazlanakad. Pledge your allegiance and I may yet spare your life.”

Rhazlanakad. She’d seen this one’s sigil on a page etched with runes of warding and obscuring in the *Treatise Maldicta*. It turned out that in addition to containing secret rituals and eldritch knowledge, it had also been a book of demons.

This was Plague, one of the Greater Maelstrom, and he could only enter the mortal world if summoned. Someone had called him here with a blood sacrifice, the ultimate sin in the eyes of the Goddess and Her Consorts, and sent him after Jex. Images from her nightmare of a dead little boy and burning eyes flashed through her mind and she scrambled back.

This... this was wholly beyond her. She was a novice, a healer—not a mage or warrior. Scores of men and women far greater than she had fallen in battle with the Maelstrom in the last Great War. This being would crush her like an insect underfoot, and a quick death would be the kindest outcome she could hope for.

“Trust your gut, girl. Don’t be afraid to follow your own intuition. That may make the difference between life and death.”

The Master Librarian’s words came to her in a rush, accompanied by a calm that seemed to come from outside herself. Everything around her slowed, and it was as if she had a lifetime to make a choice. She could go for the High Mage, or Vasi, or even the Master Physician, but Jex would be long dead and devoured by the time she returned with help and that was if any help could be found.

Or she could follow the quiet whisper in her soul telling her to stand and do battle. She knew they could both die here—would very likely die here—but she refused to run. If this was her end, then so be it; she would face it with honor and dignity. Tanith’s daughter would not go down without a fight, nor leave a vulnerable friend to face such peril alone.

At the thought of her mother, something flowed into her and she suddenly felt as if her body was no longer under her control. Yet she wasn’t frightened. The presence was warm, familiar, and she took comfort from its strength. Whatever this was knew what it was doing, and so, offering up a silent prayer to the Goddess, Enari closed her eyes and let her arm extend of its own volition, palm out and fingers spread, in the direction of the dark creature. The other hand settled on Jex’s back and she was dismayed to find it still. There wasn’t much time to do what must be done.

“You have no power here!” Rhazlanakad shrieked, “You’ve passed beyond the Gates!”

A soft, feminine voice that blew in on a breeze through the open window answered.

“Her sire granted me a single boon on the night of her creation, and its use was not limited to this life. While I have not the strength to banish you, creature, I may hold you until the work is done.”

Tears coursed down Enari’s cheeks. She had no doubt that this was her mother here with her now and wondered if it had been her mother guiding her all along, giving her the gift of Sight when she’d looked into the mirror, and leading her to the *Treatise*...

A single white blossom, blown up from the broken vase on the floor, slid across her forehead like a gentle kiss and her breath hitched on a sob.

“Mother?”

The flower was only the first of many. The gentle breeze became a gale that sent papers flying and a cascade of leaves and petals whirling around the demon in a spinning cloud. He swatted at them angrily, but his clawed hand seemed to rebound without making contact.

“Weep not, daughter. There is no time for grief now,” the voice breathed in her ear, “Do what you must, but be quick. His power returns when the last petal falls.”

Rhazlanakad continued to scream curses and threats, yet remained bound in place, able to do nothing but watch from his prison of whirling greenery and paper.

Recalling what Vasi had taught her, Enari rolled Jex onto his back, then tilted his head and pinched his nose shut. She made sure his mouth was clear before covering it with her own and blowing until she felt his chest rise.

After the third or fourth breath, her own lungs were heaving, but she continued to force air into him as hard as she could until there was no more. Exhausted, she pulled away. It would have to be enough.

Jex inhaled sharply and his eyes flew open, but for a moment he saw nothing but fire. Then it fell aside and he found it had only been Enari’s hair across his face. A trio of tears pattered onto his cracked lips and he licked

them away, tasting more than the expected salt on his tongue. His eyes traveled up her face and found it wasn't Enari staring back at him.

The change was subtle, just a slight blurring of her features, as if he were looking at an older face overlaying her girlish features, but it was disconcerting. He also thought he could detect a faint silver-gold halo around her.

"Little time remains," advised a voice he didn't recognize, "and there is much you must hear. You are an errant spark, cast adrift on the night of your birth into a world that has long awaited your coming. Whether you will catch fire or die out, temper or destroy, is up to you. Today you come into your true power and today you face your first true test.

Before you stands Rhazlanakad, Plague, and he is one of the Greater Maelstrom. You've met before, though you do not remember. He will be free once the last petal touches the earth and you must send him back to whence he came."

With that, Enari's eyes rolled back and she collapsed. He caught her and laid her gently on her side, then looked up at the fuming Plague. Their eyes met, and fire roared to life in his veins. It was more power than he'd ever felt in his life, and he knew exactly what he was going to do with it.

Jex rose to his feet and took a step forward. A ball of flame, blue-white instead of the usual yellow and red, crackled to life in his left hand.

So this was the thing responsible for his suffering? Well, it wouldn't be standing on mortal soil for long. He had every intention of sending it back to Diu where it belonged in as unpleasant a fashion as he could manage.

"Wait," the demon hissed, trying to move back. "I yield. You are free of me, but we may yet be able to palaver, you and I." It sent an angry glower at the few petals that still spun around it. Most had fallen into drifts of white and green around its feet.

"I know better than to make deals with the Greater," Jex told it with a sneer. "We learn that lesson early."

"Perhaps, but you're also wise enough, I hope, to know the power it took to summon me." A single leaf now remained in the air, and its flight was rapidly slowing. "And to know the power I could give you if under your command. We could be great, we two."

"No thank you. Your kind are notorious deal-breakers, Rhazlanakad, and I've no desire to be enslaved when you find a loophole I didn't consider."

The final leaf touched the stone and the demon spread its wings. "Be it on your own head then, mageling. I am only the first of many! My brother, Pasusabael, already stalks the halls of your pathetic stronghold and his coming shall make mine look like a pleasant spring shower."

Jex hurled the ball of fire as it leapt forward and it streaked towards the gloating creature with a howl. The detonation when it struck shook the stones of the walls around them and engulfed Rhazlanakad in a pillar of flame.

There was a brief and wordless shriek of pain and outrage, and then both the fire and the demon were no more. All that remained was a blackened patch of soot on the floor in the shape of the creature's sign. Jex strode forward and obliterated it before turning back to Enari.

She lay on her side, eyes closed and breathing shallowly. Upon close inspection, he found no obvious injuries and her features were entirely her own once more. It appeared he now had something else of import to discuss with Eryk and Vasi that night.

First, however, they needed dry clothes and rest. With a weary sigh, he bent and carefully hoisted her into his arms, silently thanking the Goddess that his bed was mere steps away.

* * *

The moon had already risen when Jex awoke, feeling better than he had in what seemed an age. He stretched lazily and sighed. His body ached a little, yet it was no longer the pain of illness but rather the burn of muscles well used.

Movement drew his attention and he turned his head to find Enari, still fast asleep at his side. He stilled, barely daring to breathe lest he wake her.

She lay on her back, face turned slightly away from him and one arm flung over her head. Moonlight fell across the bed, illuminating her delicate features and glittering in the fiery strands framing her face. The blanket

he'd managed to pull over them before falling into bed was nowhere to be seen and her undertunic had bunched up, revealing her strong legs to mid thigh. He'd stripped her of her gown and loosened the ties of her corset once they were safely in his room, but having found her ankle-length chemise to be mostly dry, he'd left it.

A draft from the open window cast a few tendrils of hair across her cheek and she murmured and shifted restlessly, turning on her side to face him. Her hand brushed his as she settled and for just a moment, he saw into her dreams. The images made him smile; she was dreaming of him and the pond.

Goddess, but she was beautiful, and so tiny and vulnerable-looking in the center of his bed. It was hard to believe that this was the same girl—nay, *woman* who'd stood over him to do battle with one of the Greater only hours before.

But she had, and because of that courage he now had the privilege of seeing her thus. His heart ached a little at the thought and it was a new experience for him. He'd always prided himself on not letting that particular element get involved in situations like this...but he also wasn't in the habit of self-delusion, either.

Since that first meeting on the plains of Tesriel, he became a little more lost with each passing day. Enari had remained unfailingly kind and patient, no matter how boorishly he'd behaved or how much Kylan tugged and chattered or how poorly some of the other women had treated her. He could admire that kind of strength of character; it was a trait he rarely encountered and he found it surprisingly appealing in her, even if he tried his best to ignore his feelings.

And not just because of her dragon of a Sura, though Vasi de'Curande would be deterrent enough to any sane man.

There was his own history to consider as well—his prior relationships, to use the term loosely. His past was littered with the corpses of abandoned romances and the bones of whirlwind flings. A lot of hearts had been broken but not one of them had ever been his. He was in the habit of taking a lover for a time and then moving on to the next once he grew bored, although he always made sure his partner enjoyed the experience while it lasted. He understood any reservations Enari might have about being involved with him like this, but...

For the first time in his life, he could see himself giving up all others to be with her and only her.

"Jex? Is something wrong?"

He'd become so lost in thought that he hadn't noticed when she awoke. He sat up swiftly and flicked a hand out, lighting a few of the candles in the room and igniting the logs in the hearth to lessen the darkness. Neither missed the slight unsteadiness of the gesture.

Raising herself up on an elbow, Enari tilted her head and studied him with some concern. She absently tugged at the hem of her chemise, trying to cover her exposed legs and her tongue swept out to wet her dry lips.

"I'm sorry, did I wake you?"

She shook her head and shivered slightly, eyes darting swiftly to the mirror and back to his face.

"The Greater?" he guessed, and she nodded.

Jex rose and crossed the room to retrieve a bottle from the cupboard. Splashing a small measure of its contents into a glass, he hesitated briefly before adding more and returning to her side. He bade her drink and she did, grimacing at the taste and handing it back to him half-empty. He drained the glass and set it on the night table before facing her again.

Her hand ghosted over the back of his. *"Tell me."*

"You saved my life. Again."

"You'd have done the same for me."

"Without a second's hesitation," he agreed, "but Black Goddess, you should have gone for help! Yet you stayed and faced him alone."

"I wasn't alone."

"Yes, about that—"

"Please don't. Not tonight." The plea echoed in his mind and showed in the sudden anguish on her face.

"We need to talk about what happened, and Eryk and Vasi need to know, too."

Enari looked away from him and folded her arms stubbornly. She started to consider retiring to her own room.

Sighing in defeat, Jex put a finger beneath her chin and turned her face towards him again. "As you wish, Nani. We can discuss it in the morning."

She nodded and leaned into his side. His arm slid around her and he pressed a kiss to her temple. It lingered and when she looked up, she found him watching her the same way he'd been in the garden. The fire burning in the depths of his emerald eyes stole her breath and all she could do was stare back, mesmerized. Staying, letting this continue would be foolish, and if Vasi caught them—

Gently, Jex lowered his face to hers and the image of Vasi's displeasure evaporated.

His kiss felt just as good as before and she twisted to face him, seeking to bring herself closer, but in the process accidentally pulled away. He raised one raven eyebrow and opened his mouth to speak. She knew that if given the chance, he'd spoil the moment with one silly line or another; he just couldn't help himself. So before he could say anything at all, she moved onto his lap, her chemise riding up as her legs spread to straddle his and she wound her arms around his shoulders.

With a faint groan, he grasped her hips and pulled her hard against him, his eyes sliding shut in pleasure. One of his hands slipped into her hair and he tugged gently, drawing her head back. His kisses descended along her exposed throat, but Enari quickly trapped his face in both hands and guided his mouth back to hers. When she experimentally flicked her tongue against his, it caused his breath to hitch and grow ragged.

The muscles of his thighs shifted under her and then she was being pressed back and down into the soft mattress. She opened her eyes to find him gazing down intently, cheeks flushed and breathing rapidly. One of his knees rested firmly between her legs and she was suddenly very aware of herself in a way she'd never experienced.

"I wish you could see how beautiful you look right now," he whispered, the corners of his mouth tugging up in a smile. "Stunning as the Goddess Herself."

Lowering himself carefully so as not to crush her smaller frame beneath his weight, he kissed her again. Her arms came up to circle his neck as his hand skated down the front of her body, caressing her breasts through the thin material covering them. Sensations unlike anything she'd ever even dreamed of chased up and down her spine, radiated out to the tips of her fingers and toes, made her skin prickle. She was no longer able to focus on anything but his mouth and hands on her.

Never breaking their kiss, his hand left her breast and began to draw her skirt upwards. Enari tensed.

"*Slowly,*" she touched his cheek, "*please.*"

He brought his hand back to safer territory and she relaxed again. Tangling her fingers in his hair, she ran her nails lightly along his scalp and down the back of his neck. He jerked against her with a little moan, and she repeated the gesture, happy to discover her touch could affect him so strongly.

"It always has," he murmured, "I've just not acted on it."

"*Show me how,*" she entreated him.

"Gladly."

This was going to be better than he'd ever dared hope and he planned to savor each second. She'd be the first lover to come to his bed with so much inexperience but he thrilled at the prospect of being the one to teach her.

Jex smiled at her and took her hand, pressing it over his heart before turning it palm up and pressing a kiss to the inside of her wrist. Her lips parted on a sigh as his mouth moved across her heated skin. He could feel the flutter of her racing pulse beneath his lips and the way her body trembled in anticipation drove him on.

Slipping a hand beneath her bottom, he pulled her closer and rolled his hips against hers, letting her feel his desire. When she arched into the movement, he did it again and neither was able to suppress a full-body shiver as the contact sent a jolt of heat sizzling through them.

His mouth moved, trailing a line of open-mouthed kisses from her throat to the flat of her chest, grazing over the top of one breast where it peeked above the neck of her chemise. He lay his cheek there, enjoying the smoothness of her skin and watching as the emotions played across her exquisitely expressive face. There was confusion, uncertainty...but the open desire that finally replaced them all was almost too much.

He made short work of the ties holding the front of her corset closed, drawing the fabric apart and out from under her before dropping it over the side of the bed.

"Stand up," he requested softly.

She complied and in a moment he'd divested her of both undergown and smallclothes and she stood before him gloriously nude. A scarlet blush began at her breasts and rushed up to color her cheeks. His gaze roamed, pupils dilating with arousal as his eyes traced the swells and hollows of her body.

Embarrassed, she started to cover herself, but he shook his head and she reluctantly lowered her hands to her sides.

“Let me look.”

And he did.

For several long minutes, he stared at her as if trying to memorize every feature. Perhaps he was, but it still took every ounce of her self-discipline to keep from fidgeting as the moment stretched.

His visual tour at last reached the apex of her thighs and he looked a little startled. She felt her cheeks redden further and she looked away. He reached out, but stopped just short of touching her and she couldn't find the courage to move that last inch.

“You've no hair here,” he observed with interest.

Her brow furrowed. “*Is that customary?*”

“Generally, yes, but some women...remove it.” He glanced up at her face. “Do you?”

“*No. There's never been any to remove.*” She looked suddenly uncertain. “*Does it bother you?*”

“Mmm, no. Just wasn't expecting it is all.”

Jex leaned down and kissed her hard, and she submitted completely to his questing mouth. He brought his hands between them to cup her breasts, feeling the weight of them. They filled his palms to overflowing and he began to caress them in tightening spirals. Reaching her nipples, he rolled them between his fingers until they peaked.

“Do you like that?” he whispered.

“*Yes!*”

He bent a little at the waist and his lips slipped around a taut nipple. Her hips jerked and she clutched at his shoulder with one hand and pressed his head closer with the other. His tongue swirled and his mouth pulled, the tempo and strength of the suction ever-changing. Her heart pounded and she knew he must feel it, probably even hear it, as it raced. Then he withdrew, releasing her with a soft *pop* and the sudden rush of his retreating breath made her want to cry in disappointment.

Her frustration was short-lived, however. The wet heat of his mouth settled on her other breast, and it was matched by a burst of equally wet heat between her thighs. The spring of arousal in her belly coiled tighter and she began to tug at the waist of his trousers.

His stilled and then straightened, studying her for a moment before stepping back and pulling the knot loose. Letting the last garment between them fall away, he kicked it aside and came back to her. In her arms once more, he pressed himself against her and reveled in the supple warmth of her skin.

A hundred impulses clamored at him, a thousand needs demanded to be fulfilled, and *right now*. He wanted to bury himself in her, feel her body, mind, and soul surround and welcome his, to let himself be lost. It would be strange to make love to a woman who wasn't enthusiastically vocalizing her pleasure, but he suspected that Enari's silence would only heighten the other aspects of their joining. Even now, her body was telling him what her voice could not, shouting her desire with every shift of her hips and press of her mouth on his.

The slickness between her legs made her restless, and she was eager to move, so while he nibbled and teased, she began an exploration of her own. She spanned the width of his shoulders with shaking hands and ran her nails down his back. When she feathered her fingertips through his sparse chest hair and over his nipples, it tore a groan from deep within his chest so beautiful it nearly stopped her heart.

Though she was still too nervous to look down, she was curious; he could feel the little tendrils of her thoughts and questions as she considered him. It was endearing, this mix of interest and shyness and he was more than willing to indulge it.

He carefully guided her hand down to his erection and pressed it there. Her fingers closed and a rush of pure lust momentarily obliterated every other thought. He took a ragged breath, Adam's apple bobbing as he swallowed convulsively.

Enari watched his expression closely as she touched him. His length beneath her fingers was thick and hard, the flesh exquisitely and pleasantly smooth. Lower, she felt a velvety pouch of skin and when she gave it an experimental squeeze, his whole body went rigid. She ran her grip down to the base of his erection and back up, delighting in the drawn-out groan it pulled from him. He pursed his lips when she rubbed a finger over the glistening tip, using the moisture she found there to slick her way as she measured him again. A few more strokes and then his hips began to thrust.

"Nani, I—ah! If you don't s-stop, I'm going to—"

The sound of his voice, hoarse so close to his breaking point, was magnificent. She wanted to find out what else she could do to him and how far she needed to push before that last filament snapped. She stroked him faster, squeezed just a little harder, and he swore.

Clenching his jaw and squeezing his eyes shut, he fought to hold onto the tatters of his self-control. He had to have at least some relief from this torment, delicious as it was, before he lost all reason and simply took her.

Grasping her arm, he jerked it up, pinning it to her chest.

"This first time is for you, and your pleasure. Time enough for me later."

So saying, he ran one finger between her breasts and down her stomach to circle her navel until she squirmed away with a smile. Then, watching her face for the slightest hint of uncertainty, he moved his hand lower and was gratified when she widened her stance to give him better access. He could smell her arousal now and the desire to feel the burning, slick heat it promised nearly drove him mad.

Carefully, he eased his middle finger into her wetness and stroked upwards to the bundle of nerves nestled there. Her eyes went wide and he did it again before daring to enter her. She bit her lower lip and her eyes rolled up into her head. He hesitated, afraid he'd hurt her, but then she pushed toward his hand.

It wasn't long before her muscles began to accept him and he inserted another finger. The added pressure would bring her closer to her climax, he knew, and he curled his fingers in search of just the right spot. He rubbed at her slowly and deeply, and when he found it, she bucked as if struck by a lash. Instantly rubbing the spot again and adding the circle of his thumb over her clitoris, he set up a steady rhythm, pleasuring her until she was shaking. He licked his lips, sensing in the incoherent jumble of her thoughts that she was rapidly approaching her peak.

When she reached it a few seconds later, she tensed and her inner muscles tightened. She held her breath for a long moment, then relaxed almost bonelessly and he eased her down with a slow caress of his fingers. He waited until she looked up at him again before sticking the fingers in his mouth and swirling his tongue around them. Her eyes went round in shock.

"*Jex, that's filthy!*" she admonished him, clearly taken aback by his action.

"If you think that's filthy, just you wait," he promised. A small, wicked smile turned his lips up at the corners.

She felt a twitch against her belly. His eyes asked, and she nodded.

With a sound of relief, he bent his knees slightly, hooked his hands under her thighs and hoisted her up. Lifting her weight seemed to cost him nothing and she abruptly felt vulnerable and small. She wrapped her arms and legs around him, clinging as he took her back to the bed.

Jex looked down the length of her body as he laid her gently atop the sheets. He settled between her thighs and then shifted to sit back on his ankles. With a pull at her hips and a prayer to the Consorts, he rocked forward and began to fill her.

She was tight and hot and dripping wet, and how he was going to last for more than a moment or two was a mystery. He slid into her one slow fraction of an inch at a time, and she began to pant softly. The sound made him tremble and the needy expression on her face was one of the most stunningly erotic things he'd ever seen.

But then her face scrunched up in discomfort and he froze for an instant before slowly pulling back. Withdrawing from that intoxicating heat before he was completely inside her was an act akin to torture.

"*I'm sorry!*"

"Don't be. There's no hurry." He *was* in a hurry, but he could control himself for the sake of making this experience as perfect for her as possible.

His reassurance seemed to soothe her, and she pulled him closer, so close that not even air remained between them. He planted kisses along her jaw and up to her ear, waiting for her to relax before beginning to sink into her again.

When her whole body tightened up and she bit her tongue nearly hard enough to draw blood, he pulled out of her completely. She turned her face away, tears of embarrassment prickling to life behind her eyelids.

"It's alright," he insisted, brushing his lips across her cheek. "The first time can be uncomfortable. Let's try something else."

She nodded and he rolled them over so that he was lying on his back with her sitting astride him. He ran his palms soothingly up and down her sides, then dug his fingers into her ribs until she made a face and captured his hands.

"We can stop if you want," he offered.

She rocked her hips in answer. His thumb rubbed over her nipple and she leaned into the touch.

"Go as slowly as you need to, then. Tell me how I can help, how to touch you, where you want me. You're in control, Nani."

"I don't know what to do."

"Whatever you like."

Taking a deep breath to steady her nerves, she slowly and gingerly moved over him. His fingers tightened on her hips, but he allowed her to set the pace as he'd promised.

The muscles inside her clenched as she began to take him in and then her legs flexed as she rose once more. When she slid down on him again, a little more this time, she circled her hips and shuddered at all the subtle changes in pressure.

They both felt it when he reached her maidenhead, but she didn't hesitate. With determination burning in her eyes, she thrust down, impaling herself in a single motion. She paused there, hands braced on his chest and breathing harshly as she fought to adjust to the sudden sensation of fullness.

Jex rose to his elbows immediately, searching her face for the pain he knew she must feel. She shook her head, trying to tell him she was fine. And it was true; the stinging burn was already fading and in its place was a swelling, all-consuming need to move.

He was relieved and told her as much, prompting her to smile down at him in adoration. Something deep within her seemed to know what to do and so she let that part of her take over. She pushed him back until he lay prone once more.

As she rose and fell above him, she let her hands travel a familiar path, recalling nights she'd dreamt of him and how this might be. Sliding her palms up her hips and belly to the fullness of her breasts, she squeezed them a little harder than he had dared and half-closed her eyes to enjoy the sensation.

Jex almost forgot to breathe as he watched Enari touch herself confidently and without shame. It was a sight that would stay with him until he died...assuming the lust didn't kill him here and now. Of their own accord, his hips moved under hers.

"Harder!" she demanded.

"I can't. I don't want to hurt you." he bit out, gritting his teeth, but she began to roll her hips in a way that had his reflexively snapping upwards for a second time.

She was pulling at him, fluttering little contractions that circumvented his good intentions and went straight to his baser desires. He'd let himself coil too tight and her demands robbed him of the strength of will to hold back.

Pulling on her hips and driving deeply into her body, he set a rhythm that sent currents of fire chasing along his spine.

He was close, so very close, but she needed just a little more, so he snaked a hand down to where their bodies joined. Her head flew back and he rubbed at her in time with his thrusts. It wasn't long after that he felt the first ripple of her muscles around him.

And that was all it took.

She faltered and her nails dug into his forearms. He continued the stimulation she needed and she hit the peak of her climax hard a second later. For a trio of heartbeats, he watched in fascination before dragging her down and kissing her fiercely.

It was a primal, savage thing. She bit his lip and he tasted blood, but it didn't even give him pause. He bit her back, ravaging her mouth in a way he'd restrained himself from doing to her body.

At the last instant, and almost too late, he withdrew from her and spent himself in a release that left him breathless and shaking. They lay in a tangle for a time before she sucked in a shaky breath.

"That was...oh."

Jex snorted out a quiet laugh. "I'm glad to have pleased." He studied her face, an uncharacteristic look of doubt coloring his expression.

"I *did* please you?"

Instead of answering, Enari nestled into his side. He gathered her up and she put her head on his shoulder, raising one leg to cover his thighs and slinging an arm across his stomach. She smiled contentedly and it turned into a yawn that cracked her jaw, but she was too tired to cover it or to even be embarrassed by her lapse in manners.

Their kisses resumed, languid and tender—some nothing more than the moth-wing brush of lips over skin—as the afterglow of lovemaking faded. Her body spooned against his perfectly and she was a pleasant warmth in the cool dark. The last thing Jex remembered was the press of her lips on the underside of his chin before sleep claimed him.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Luckily for them both, it was Eryk and not Vasi or a servant who found them some hours later.

He halted in the doorway, taken aback at the sight that greeted him, though why he should be surprised, he didn't know. Jex was notorious for taking a new bedfellow on a whim and this wasn't the first time Eryk had stumbled upon the aftermath. At least there was only one this time, they were mostly covered by a blanket, and the room wasn't in shambles.

The sight of Vasi's apprentice sprawled across Jex's chest, however, stirred a protective, fatherly disquiet deep in his gut that none of the others ever had. His former apprentice was indiscreet to a fault betimes, and just as careless. If he hurt her... he'd have to talk with Jex about this before it got even more out of hand.

Then something else drew his notice, and his misgivings were temporarily forgotten.

Perhaps it was the relaxed set of his features as he slept, the easy way he was breathing, mouth open and snoring, or the rosy tinge of his skin in the morning light. Somehow Eryk knew that whatever had plagued the young man for so long had passed.

He backed out of the room as quietly as he'd entered, shutting the door and sending up a prayer that one of them would be up and dressed before anyone else came upon them like this.

He'd definitely be having a chat with Jex later.

* * *

"Eryk?"

He looked away from his contemplation of the sunrise and smiled wanly at Vasi, his face half lit by the pink-and-purple glow. She gently closed her bedroom door behind her and crossed to his side. Her fingers settled gently on his arm,

"It's a pleasant surprise to see you so early, but you look as if something troubles you?"

"*Oh, if only that were so easily answered.*" Aloud, he feigned nonchalance. "Troubles me? Why, nothing—"

Vasi raised a hand to silence him and shook her head, "You may be able to fool others, Eryk, but not me. Never me."

"Never you," he echoed. There was an odd quality to his voice, something akin to defeat at the acknowledgement. The High Mage sighed and covered Vasi's hand with his own larger one, squeezing once before letting the hand fall back to his side.

"Many things trouble me, Vasi, but your apprentice most of all this day."

"Enari?" Her expression turned solemn. "Has she offended you or overstepped her place in some way? I will speak to her—"

"No, no, nothing like that," he hastened to assure her, forcing a laugh. "It's more her singular appearance. She... looks like a woman I knew once. Almost her mirror image, in fact." He said this last as if to himself and turned back to his study of the dawn sky. "Who is her mother?"

His forced indifference rang thin and brittle, even to his own ears.

Vasi wasn't fooled, either. "A woman named Tanith. She came to us from... uncertain circumstances." A brief pause. "But you knew that already."

"Alas."

Vasi allowed her hand to slide down his arm, then laced her fingers through his. "How did you know her? The *kvinnas* knew little and even the *Abdesa* was able to learn very few details of her life before she came to the Temple."

"She was at *Turris Arcana* for a time,"

His hesitation before answering brought a small knowing smile to her face. "You were involved with her."

“Black Goddess, Vasi, there really is no fooling you, is there?” His attempt at lightheartedness fell flat and they both heard it. In all the long years of their friendship, there had been no hiding a truth, however dark or painful, from one another. It was the blessing and the curse of true confidantes.

She didn't answer, merely waited for him to go on. Eryk took a deep breath and continued soberly, “I loved Tanith more than life itself...the way you loved Gregor. I can see that now and it makes me ashamed of my behavior all those years ago. We've never spoken of it, but Vasi, I want you to know how sorry I am.”

It hurt more than she expected to have that past ugliness brought into the light at last. The wound was old and one she thought long since healed, but to hear him speak of it now dredged up all the old pain and it bit with razor clarity.

Gregor de'Curande had been a fellow mage, three years her senior and a brilliant Ethermancer. Many wagered he would be High Mage after old Rillaine passed, though there had been a good number of bets on Eryk as well. The two men had been fierce competitors, but they had also been close friends. From childhood, Vasi, Eryk, and Gregor were inseparable, having come to the Tower within days of one another. Where you found one, you would find the other two nearby. She had many good memories of their adventures and trials together.

But as they neared the end of their apprenticeships, the relationship between Vasi and Gregor had blossomed into something deeper and Eryk was devastated when he learned of it. She'd been unaware of his feelings for her and the bond between them was destroyed in one night of revelation and harsh words.

Gregor and Vasi had wed the year she turned twenty and the day had been bittersweet, as the man who had been their dearest friend refused to attend the ceremony.

Their marriage was blissful, but brief. Gregor had been out on a field expedition and killed in a bandit ambush not long before Eryk was chosen as the next High Mage. Vasi had left the Tower shortly thereafter, unable to bear the memories. She'd found solace at the Cyrilan Temple and taken the vows of a kvinna on her twenty-fifth birthday. Time and distance had slowly healed her friendship with Eryk and while they corresponded regularly, they had not seen one another since the day she left Turrus Arcana.

And they never spoke of Gregor.

His eyes were anguished as he watched the memories play over her face. “Vasi, can you ever forgive me? It took me too long to see anything beyond my own pain, but I know that my actions were shameful. I regret that he's not here so that I may seek his forgiveness as well.”

A single tear slid down her cheek and she leaned her head against his shoulder. “I forgave you long ago, Eryk, and Gregor did, too.”

He put an arm around her, squeezing gently.

“Will you tell me of her?” Vasi asked after a time, “I don't even know her family name.”

He exhaled slowly. “That would explain the confusion with Enari, I suppose. Tanith Hithaerien was a powerful mage and a beautiful woman, but it was more than that. She called to my soul from the first, in a way no one ever has. Except perhaps...but no. We were together for such a short time and she brought me a great deal of joy and solace, not to mention a measure of peace. Is she...is she still with you?”

Vasi shook her head sadly. “I'm sorry, Eryk.”

“What happened?” The question was hoarse, uttered barely above a whisper.

“She died giving birth.”

His shoulders sagged and he covered his eyes with a hand. Vasi let him brood for a moment before prodding him gently.

“‘Confession eases all’, as they say.”

He chuckled, a hint of bitterness coloring the sound. “It is a pathetically short tale, I'm afraid.”

“I would hear it, if you would speak.” She led him to the small breakfast table she usually shared with Enari. It briefly occurred to her to wonder where her apprentice had gone, but she pushed the thought aside for the time being.

He watched her fix two cups of tea and it was some time before his voice breached the quiet. He began slowly, haltingly. This tale would be a baring of his soul.

“I met Tanith about twenty years ago, when she came to the Tower. She seemed but a child at the time, arriving alone and without a single possession. Goddess, but twenty-three feels like ten lifetimes ago.” He chuckled ruefully. “I think I'd been High Mage for perhaps half a year at that time and it was still my duty to

test those seeking entrance to Turrus Arcana and permission to study there. This was back before I had Jex to assist with such things.”

“Black Goddess knows what you see in that popinjay, Eryk.”

“He’s a very talented mage and an excellent judge of talent,” Eryk argued, “But as I was saying... When Tanith was ushered into my office, my breath stopped.”

“She was certainly striking,” Vasi agreed.

Eryk snorted and lifted his cup to his lips. “That she was. Those eyes of hers... I’ve never seen any like them until I met Enari. I thought I was seeing Tanith’s ghost when I saw your apprentice.”

“I had wondered at your reaction to her, but haven’t had a chance to speak with you about it. We’ve all been a bit... busy.”

“Don’t I know it. I’m sorry if I distressed either of you.”

“I don’t think she even noticed. She had attention for nothing but your handsome emissary by that point, I fear. Such cow’s eyes I’ve never seen, to be sure. Although I doubt she’s even aware of her own feelings in the matter.”

Eryk highly doubted that after what he’d stumbled upon, but it wasn’t his place to tell that particular secret. Enari would tell her Sura when she was ready.

“I do wish you’d speak with Jex about her, Eryk,” Vasi continued, “He’s, what, six and a half, seven years her senior? He’ll break her heart without even realizing.”

Eryk’s smile returned, bringing deep creases to the corners of his eyes, and he held up a hand to stop her. Vasi thought, not for the first time, how handsome his face was when he smiled. Even as they aged, he’d only grown more pleasing to look upon.

A pang of regret touched her heart. Of all the ways things could have been... but here they were and none could change the past. They made their choices long ago and both had responsibilities now. But that logic, however sound and rehearsed, never silenced the part of her heart that still longed for him and what could have been.

“I imagine I looked at her mother much the same way, but I’ll speak with him, if eases your mind.”

“*Sentimental fool*,” she thought affectionately and squeezed his hand a little tighter.

He returned to his tale. “Tanith surprised me enough with the strength of her magic and talent in wielding it, that I didn’t hesitate to grant her entry into the Tower. It didn’t take long for me to fall for her, either, although she didn’t reveal her own feelings for quite some time. She was so private and self-possessed... and young in a way that made me ashamed of my own thoughts. I overheard several mages, rejected suitors I imagine, complain that she was an ice maiden or that she must prefer her own sex. There were also those that whispered she was one of the Vintyri.” He snorted derisively, “Idiots.”

“Many kvinfos thought her fairy-born as well, and they claim the same of Enari. It’s rubbish, but you must admit their features are unique. Do you know where Tanith’s people are from? ‘Hithaerien’ isn’t a surname I’ve ever heard and it certainly doesn’t sound Egali.”

“She was reticent on the subject of her heritage and I wasn’t inclined to press her. Too preoccupied with other things.” After a brief pause, he swallowed audibly and braved the question she knew he’d been working himself up to ask.

“Tell me of her last days?” His eyes pleaded with her for the truth.

Vasi settled back in thought. “I’ll tell you what I can, but Tanith and I weren’t terribly close, not until the very last. She came to us the fall Aelani and Brinon were crowned... when was that? 787?”

“88,” Eryk corrected, “She was crowned the second of Mara.”

“Ah yes. The years have such a way of blurring together after awhile. When she came to us, her pregnancy was impossible to miss. She just appeared at the gates one evening with nothing but a coin purse and her cloak. You’ll think me ridiculous, but for some reason I was struck by that cloak and it’s the most vivid image I recall of that night. It was beautiful, black velvet lined in midnight blue silk, embroidered with these tiny golden stars...” Vasi trailed off at a short bark of laughter from Eryk.

“I often wondered what became of that. It was a gift from Aelani at my Induction ceremony. I thought I’d somehow misplaced it and she scolded me for years after for my carelessness.”

“I kept it for Enari after Tanith passed. I believe she has it with her, if you wish it returned.”

“Goddess, no! It’s hers now. But continue.”

"I was the one who showed her in, and I remember having the impression that she'd traveled far. She requested an audience with the Abdesa and produced some kind of token, though I didn't see it until the night Enari was born, and was granted admittance immediately."

"What kind of token?"

"A little silver locket with odd writing in it. Enari wears it and I'm sure she'd let you see it if you or Jex asked her. Anyway, Tanith stayed with us, working in the Apothecarium and helping to train some of our novices in small magics, until Enari came in the dead of winter. The... her labor did not go smoothly, she was so small and hadn't been in good health, but I'm sure you don't wish to hear of the women's details in such matters."

"Please, Vasi."

"As you wish." She huffed out a breath. "It's a strange tale. The babe was turned and she bled a great deal. I was the midwife attending her and we had a chance to speak of many things through the long night. When the little one finally came, it was such a dark and pitiful thing. she never took even a single breath, despite my best efforts—" She hastened to explain as Eryk opened his mouth to protest. "No one, except perhaps Tanith herself, suspected she was carrying twins. The second baby didn't cry, but I certainly did when she opened those golden eyes and blinked up at me. She was so weak and small, we feared we would lose her, too, and Tanith lingered only long enough to hold them and name Enari."

Silence descended, but just when Eryk thought she would say no more, she began again, softer than before. "I mourned Tanith's death, even though we hadn't been close. She was a special person, in many ways."

Eryk felt the old sadness and anguish flood his heart, like blood from a half-healed wound reopened by a knife. "Did she name the father?"

"No, but only because she couldn't with certainty."

"What do you mean? When were they born?" There was an edge to his voice.

"The fourteenth of Janua, 789, but I suspect Enari and her sister were at least a month early."

"That would put her at the Temple for only a few months. And we were together in Rowan for my sister's crowning from early spring until... until she left in Junn." He stopped, and she watched while he silently counted the months. A frown drew at the corners of his mouth and deep creases appeared between his brows.

Vasi looked away from him but remained silent.

Eryk leaned across the table and caught her arm. "I was the only one, Vasi! Tanith was never unfaithful to me, nor I to her!"

Vasi gently loosened his fingers. "Not by choice, dearest. Something happened while she was here with you in Rowan." She put a hand tenderly to his cheek. It was chilled and a day's growth of stubble scraped against her palm. "This will be hard for you, Eryk, and I don't wish to cause you unnecessary pain. Leave the past to lie in the past."

He shook his head violently. "No. I need to hear it all."

Vasi's eyes did not leave his as she finished the telling of her tale and the compassion and pity he saw in their hazel depths cut him to his soul.

"Tanith confided much to me during the hours we walked up and down the birthing room, though I cannot say how much was truth and how much was spoken in delirium. She was raped while here in the palace and fled as soon as she realized she was pregnant. With the timing," Vasi lifted her shoulders in a small, helpless shrug, "there's no way to know the identity of Enari's father."

Eryk looked horrified and too shocked to speak.

"I'm sorry."

"She was a talented seer," he protested weakly, "Why didn't she scry the identity of the man who sired her children?"

"Oh, I'm sure she could have, but knowing what I do now I think she was afraid to find out it wasn't you. I didn't know till now the name of the lover she left behind—she never told me—but I knew just from looking at her that the loss weighed heavy on her spirit. I was... intimately familiar with all the signs by then. She loved you with all her heart and it devastated her to be parted from you."

Eryk turned his face away and began to weep softly. "She was here at my request, and I didn't protect her. Why didn't she...oh, Tanith. Perhaps that was the punishment for my sin against you and Gregor."

Vasi pushed back her chair and swiftly rounded the table to put her arms around him. He rested his head against her bosom, clinging like a small child. She gave him time to compose himself, murmuring to him as she had to countless frightened novices and stroking a hand over his hair.

He finally looked up and met her eyes, wiping his own with a sleeve. "Is she mine, Vasi? Is Enari my daughter?" His expression was a mix of yearning and anguish. It broke her heart to watch him, yet she couldn't bring herself to give him false hope.

"I don't know, Eryk. She resembles only her mother. I can't tell, but you would know better than I. Do you recognize features other than Tanith's? Anything of you or your sister's family?"

"I haven't spent enough time with her to even guess." He spread his hands, the gesture feeble and uncertain. "How do you suggest I proceed?"

"I believe Enari has suffered for the want of family. She's never been told of her twin, but I think a deep part of her suspects. She lives as if a piece of her is missing, somehow. For as long as I've known the girl, she's been silent and withdrawn, utterly self-contained and often oblivious of those around her. She jumps when touched or spoken to loudly, as if it pains her." Vasi smiled her crooked smile, quietly relieved to move beyond the sad memories. "I think if you wished to be a father to her, she would accept it in time. But I suggest you use caution. It may not be good for either of you if too many learned of your connection to her."

Eryk sat back in thoughtful silence, contemplating her advice. Suddenly, his eyes narrowed and he turned back to her.

"There's something you're not telling me, isn't there?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Vasi's stomach dropped.

She hoped in rushing through the end that his thoughts would be led away from what she had so carefully omitted. But, as he could not hide from her, she could not hide from him either. Pressing her lips together, she turned away and began to rise.

"Eryk, it is getting late and I have an appointment with Aelani."

He caught her arm and pulled her gently, but inexorably, back to him. "You said Tanith came to the Temple in the fall. When exactly?"

"I don't precisely remember—"

His eyes blazed, "When, Vasi?"

Resigning herself to providing him the last pieces of the tale, she threw up her hands, "The end of Octem."

"788?"

"Yes."

"The twins were born the fourteenth of Janua, 789?"

"Yes, but as I said, I'd wager the Imperial treasury that they were born early. They were most likely conceived in Mai."

"While attending Aelani's coronation." Eryk ground his teeth in frustration, "It shouldn't have taken Tanith from Junn to Octem to get from Rowan to Cyril. That's four months for a journey that takes, even walking, eight weeks. But where...?" He turned his eyes back to her and she could see in their depths that he knew she knew the answer.

"Old Tvan," she whispered.

The answer clearly shocked him.

"By the Five, why would she go there?"

"The Zyrites believe that in Old Tvan, one can commune with spirits or engage in...dark magic. Things forbidden."

"And you believe such superstitious blather?"

"I didn't."

"What changed your mind?" He was clearly skeptical and had pulled slightly away from her.

"When the first girl was finally born, it was near midnight and I knew from looking at Tanith that she was slipping away. For hours she had been delirious, talking nonsense, but then her thoughts seemed to clear. She demanded I give her the babe, even though I'd already told her she was gone. When I did, she pulled back the swaddling and looked down at that peaceful little face and smiled this smile that made her look a thousand years old. She said she was so sorry, but that they would be together soon. I took the child as her pains resumed and Enari was born less than a quarter hour later." She hesitated.

"Goddess, Vasi. Just finish it!" Eryk sounded as exhausted as she suddenly felt.

"When Enari opened her eyes, every candle in the room snuffed out except for the one at the bedside and I swear to you there was something in the room with us. I took Enari to Tanith, happy to tell her that this daughter had survived, but I don't think she even remembered I was present. She took Enari from my arms, and the last words she spoke were to her. I've never been able to make sense of them."

"You said she'd been delirious."

Vasi frowned. "Yes, but in that moment she was completely lucid, for just an instant."

"What did she say?"

"I don't know."

Eryk rubbed his temples in exasperation. "Now you're the one talking nonsense. You said she was lucid and she spoke. What did she say?"

"That's just it, Eryk. It wasn't Egali, nor any language I've heard spoken in the three kingdoms. I—" Here she balked, unwilling to lay open her deepest suspicions for the fear he would think she'd gone round the bend.

Eryk took both of her hands in his. They were trembling and clammy and he chafed them vigorously, trying to dispel their chill. “We’ve been friends a long time, and we have always been honest with one another.”

“Eryk, I think it was Vintyri.”

“Do you remember the exact words?”

“I’ll never forget them. ‘Dusan, gade a ak pe’teson chemen jan fi pa kapa. Fi nire eskaintza zure oparia. Fi zivot za tvoje, dra’jena.’” Speaking the strange words caused a shudder to run through her and a chill draft whispered through the room around them.

“And then?”

“And then she was gone.”

“Puzzles within puzzles,” Eryk commented distractedly, rubbing his tired eyes.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Footsteps approached, boot heels clicking a quiet, steady cadence on the polished floor and someone whistled a cheerful melody. Enari smiled but didn't look up from the book spread open across her knees. She knew it was Jex before she saw him; his walk was as self-assured as the rest of him.

"Nani?"

His shadow fell over the pages and she finally glanced up, tucking a wayward strand of hair behind her ear and leaving a small smear of ink on her cheek in the process. Jex, dressed in a tunic of striped green and black, fitted green trousers, and a black doublet, leaned a hip against the wall next to her. Sitting in the wide window ledge as she was, they were almost eye-to-eye. Faintly, she could smell the scent that was uniquely him; part cedar and sandalwood from the soap he liked and part clean male. Between that and his damp hair, she assumed he'd just come from a bath.

"You've got ink on your face, Bookworm," he observed. Licking his thumb, he reached out and rubbed at the smudge.

Enari wrinkled her nose and pushed his hand away, fighting a smile. She swiped a sleeve across her cheek and then tilted her head for his inspection.

"Better." Jex kissed the spot, then plucked the tome from her lap and turned it spine up. "*Treatise Maldicta?*" He raised his eyebrows and whistled. "Pretty dark material, love."

Enari rolled her eyes and stuck out her tongue, reaching out to reclaim her book and sticking a piece of string between the pages to mark her place. She was almost finished, having spent a great deal of her time in the library lately.

It had been three weeks since their encounter with Rhazlanakad and Jex had awakened the following morning claiming he felt completely himself. In another day, he'd begun the rest of the work he'd agreed to before leaving for Tesriel. Their time together was much curtailed as a result.

His afternoons were still consumed with teaching Kylan, which Enari happily assisted with, much to the relief of both parties. It turned out that someone was needed to mediate when patience and tempers began to wear thin. The youngest torina was making strides in her ability to write the symbols correctly and could sometimes decipher them, but she was still struggling with the language as a whole. Jex confided to Enari in secret that he wasn't overly confident she would master it, and the best he was hoping for now was basic proficiency.

Sarene still made the occasional appearance and seemed to take great pleasure in badgering him about his 'lover' or 'whoever you sneak off to at night'. She made sure Enari was within earshot, as if hoping to wound her with the talk. Jex endured it all in silence, for which she was grateful, but the torina never seemed to tire of her game. She continued to go out of her way to be as cruel to Enari as possible, but only when no one was looking.

Evenings were still her favorite times and they were most often spent in the servants' common room with Gaylan and Babirye. Enari would sit snuggled against Jex's side, sharing a tankard of ale or a glass of wine with him while the two men tried to outdo the other with jests and stories. Babirye taught her embroidery, an art to which she took quickly after all her lessons with Vasi over the years, and Jex surprised them all by demonstrating his own skill with a needle. It earned him a bit of teasing, but he bore it cheerfully enough.

Afterwards, they retreated to his rooms or sometimes to the gardens if the night proved particularly fair. They'd returned to the little pond in the secluded clearing several times and lay in the grass, watching the stars wheel overhead. He told her of his life at Turrus Arcana and the friends he had there. Enari treasured the quiet togetherness of those times.

A handful of nights, he'd disappeared into the city at dusk and not come back until just before daybreak. He refused to tell her where or why he'd gone, only that it wasn't to drink or wench as she first feared. Upon returning, he'd sneak into bed with her, his clothing smelling of smoke and metal, apparently unconcerned that Vasi was just on the other side of the wall.

When she tried to touch him, he would gently push her hands away and simply hold her, raining fierce, insistent kisses across her skin as if it might be his last opportunity to touch her. Somehow he was always able to slip out before they could be caught together.

Pleasant and quiet as the days had become, mornings were now an entirely different matter. Those belonged to Tora Aelani, and she was proving to be rather a demanding mistress. Intelligent and enlightening, but demanding.

Mornings were also proving to be the most troublesome for Enari.

Jex had brought her with him at first, and while the tora herself had been nothing but kind, once she and Jex disappeared behind the closed door of her study, Enari felt completely out of place. She grew tired of the strange looks the ladies gave her and the unsubtle whispers from behind their hands. So she had begun to slip out of her room long before Jex came looking for her, seeking solitude and a place where others wouldn't stare. He stopped trying to coax her into returning after Anya pulled him aside for a private word.

That's how she'd ended up in the library, with the *Treatise* spread across her lap. Although the Greater, and thus the source of Jex's illness, had been dealt with, she felt compelled to read to the end.

Jex cleared his throat and she blinked owlishly at him. For a moment, she'd forgotten he was there.

"Aelani dismissed me early and Kylan is off with Torina Anya. We've the rest of the day to ourselves," he informed her, eyes sparkling with promise.

Enari returned the look, gazing up at him through lowered lashes. Her cheeks started to color under his knowing smile and he could hear her breathing quicken. They hadn't made love since that one feverish night, and the tension building inexorably between them ever since was nearing the breaking point.

The picture she made, sitting in the sunlight with her cheeks flushed and eyes shining, was too much to resist. He stepped closer and Enari's knees parted to make room for him.

He kissed her slowly, but deeply. Parting her lips with his tongue and coaxing hers to his mouth, he hummed in contented pleasure. Her arms went around his neck and she leaned eagerly into the kiss.

His mouth left hers after a time and began moving down her neck, warm and firm, and by now he knew well where and how his touch was wanted and he took full advantage of that knowledge. When he nosed aside the neck of her tunic to nip at the swell of her breast, she sighed and pushed at his shoulder.

"Not here. Someone might see."

"We're alone. Most people are too lazy to climb that many stairs." He rocked forward so she could feel his desire, before dropping to his knees and beginning to press little kisses up the inside of her calf. It felt wonderful and Goddess, she didn't want to stop him, but—

"Jex."

"Oh, alright." He rose reluctantly, trailing a hand between her thighs as if by accident. "I was planning a little jaunt out of the palace in any case and thought that, seeing as Vasi isn't here to run me off, you'd like to come along. Rowan is a beautiful city, and I know you've seen very little of it since, well, you've been stuck inside with me all summer."

Enari's eyes lit up at the prospect. She had long wanted to explore the city, but hadn't yet found the courage to venture out alone. Even if she'd dared, she had no idea where to go and would likely have become lost in moments. Thus, she had settled for finding places in the Imperial palace from which to view the various districts. Now, to have someone actually offer to take her out into them was an opportunity she couldn't pass up.

"I'll wait here while you go and, ah, change your clothes. Take the book with you, if you like. I'm sure Coran won't mind if you have it."

Enari looked down at herself and was horrified. The simple, and unladylike, tunic and trousers she wore were rumpled and covered in dust from her climb into the window. She noticed a snag in one sleeve she hadn't seen before and grimaced. There was nothing nearby that was reflective enough for her to see her hair and face, and for that, she was thankful.

Jex offered his hand in a courtly manner and she took it, hopping down from the ledge. He looked like he wanted to pull her into his arms and continue seducing her, so, clasping her book to her chest and stealing one last kiss, she raced towards the main doors.

"Treatise Maldicta," Jex murmured to himself as he watched her go. "What could she possibly want with that?"

“The young lady is an avid reader, Battlemage Xander,” a low voice spoke from behind him, “and that best be all the two of you are doing in my library.”

Jex turned to find Coran Lucrisen emerging from a shadowy row to his left, pushing back the deep cowl of his robe. The man still moved like a phantom, Jex noted, which had always seemed somehow appropriate for a master librarian.

“I believe it. But I thought girls her age read about romance, handsome torins, and unicorns. The *Treatise* is a little...dry, isn't it?”

Coran folded his arms. “You read it when you were younger than she, during your first visit to Rowan.”

“How could you possibly remember that?”

“I remember a great many things that transpire in my domain, boy. You spent nearly as much time amongst the shelves as the girl does now.”

And he had. Jex had passed many an afternoon in the cool dimness of the library, his mind caught up in tales of adventure and mystery. Like Enari, he had scorned the overstuffed chairs and scattered tables for the broad window ledges. He'd read many things in this place, including the *Treatise* and its companions.

That last made him frown; those books had been on an uppermost shelf when he was here last—one that, even now, he needed a stool to reach. How had she gotten it down?

“Have you reorganized the tomes in your boredom, old man?” he asked, the obvious affection in his voice negating any insult.

“I have not.”

“Then how did Enari get that book? The shelf is at least ten feet off the floor.”

Lips quirking into a small smile, Coran gestured for Jex to follow him.

Halting in front of the case that had, until recently, housed the volume in question, Coran pointed at a short stool and then at a shelf midway up from the floor. On it, standing out clearly in the dust, were two small bootprints.

Jex began to laugh. “Clever girl. I'm relieved she didn't bring the whole thing down on herself, though.”

“She would have to weigh three times as much as you to manage that. A breeze through the open window would carry her off.”

“Best to keep the windows closed, then, if she's going to be sitting around in ledges,” Jex advised, “I wouldn't envy you the job of telling Vasi de'Curande that her apprentice had been swept away by the errant wind.”

“If I were you, I'd be more worried about her finding out what you get up to with her apprentice in said ledges, boy.”

* * *

Enari returned quickly, having hastily combed and braided her hair and changed into a clean dress. It was a simple gown dyed the color of ripe plums and the gold-and-cream belt she wore had been woven by Torina Anya herself for her last birthday. She had a few coins in the leather purse tied at her hip and they clinked softly as she moved.

She found Jex chatting amiably with the Master Librarian, the two men discussing the merits of a certain poet. Coran asserted that the writer was a foolish blow-hard, and Enari tended to agree. She'd read a few of the poems and found them ridiculous and insipid. Jex simply smirked and said that he often found the lines useful when speaking with women. She just bet he did.

Seeing her standing in the doorway, Jex unfolded his arms and pushed himself away from the wall. He looked her over and smiled in approval.

“I like the purple. It's very fetching on you.”

Enari blushed and glanced down, shuffling her feet in pleased embarrassment.

“If I see Kvinna de'Curande, I take it I am not to tell her you've absconded with her novice?” the blonde Tesian teased.

“I'd view it as a favor and be much obliged,” Jex said dryly. He took Enari's hand in one of his and caught up his staff in the other. She felt a moment of apprehension to see him carrying it, but quickly pushed the feeling aside. They started toward the door, his steps paced so she could easily keep up.

The sound of rich laughter followed them into the hall.

* * *

They left the palace grounds through a small and seldom-used gate in the western wall and headed into the city. The flagstone streets grew more crowded the further they went from the white stone walls. Enari gazed around in open fascination, making sure to stay close to Jex as she'd been instructed a half dozen times already.

As they walked, he began to tell her about the city.

They were in The Loom now but would soon cross over into Trigon Market. This part of Rowan was street after street of weavers, spinners, tailors, seamstresses, dye shops, and all manner of other craftsmen. She saw display windows with dressmaker's dummies modeling gowns, trousers, and tunics in every imaginable fabric and color. They passed walled courtyards and through many an open gate she saw men and women sweating over steaming cauldrons, stirring the contents with thick paddles. The air was fragrant with the astringent scent of lye soap and other, but not unpleasant, things. When they started to pass a yard full of chattering Zyrite women using long dowels to remove lengths of fabric from coloring vats, Enari stopped to watch. One of the workers looked up, saw her standing in the open archway, and nudged her companion.

"Would you like to see, mina?" the second woman called out, "Come in, come in and look!"

Enari glanced up at Jex uncertainly, but he shooed her on with a negligent wave of one hand.

"Go ahead. If you'd like to see what they're doing, I'm happy to wait."

She approached the women and was drawn into their midst. The one who'd first called to her explained the dyeing process, showed her the many colors in the metal tubs, and took her to see the finished product drying on lines in the sun.

"I only wish I could mix a dye to match your hair, my love," she said, touching Enari's head in awe. "We wouldn't be able to keep it in stock and I'd be a very rich woman." The others laughed and returned to their work. Ducking her head in thanks, Enari returned to where Jex was lounging.

"Satisfied?"

She nodded and they continued on, leaving The Loom at the end of the broad avenue and turning left into the market.

Trigon Market started out clean and organized, the street they traversed lined with tidy, well-kept shops and colorful stalls shaded by fluttering awnings. Here the scent of flowers filled the warm air, with the occasional waft of cooking meat or baked goods drifting out of open doorways. Ripe fruits and vegetables filled some displays, beautiful jewelry of gold and silver studded with precious stones caught the sunlight on others. The people perusing the wares, and the merchants themselves, were finely dressed and coin exchanged hands with regularity.

But, as they headed south and closer to The Wall, the booths became increasingly more shabby, the colors more faded, and the produce less fresh. Enari could smell refuse from the mouths of alleys they passed and a few dark, dingy taverns appeared. The people in this part of the market seemed less relaxed as well, hurrying from one place to another. Shifty-eyed men lounged in groups of three or four on the corners and ragged children chased one another through the dusty street. Enari reflexively covered her nose when the overpowering stench of hot tar and dead fish assailed her.

"We're not far from River Row," Jex explained, "Breathe through your mouth until we're past it, and it won't be quite so bad." His pace quickened a little and he kept her hand firmly in his.

In another hundred yards, the lane opened into a large square filled with rows of huddled booths and milling people. Jex started into it without hesitation and Enari followed, dropping his hand as she looked around with interest.

Halfway across the square, a glimmer caught her eye. She stopped to examine the bauble, picking it up and gently wiping away a bit of grime with her thumb. Unaware of her sudden halt, Jex continued to walk through the crowded square toward the far end where it emptied into the entrance of a large passageway.

Enari turned the object over in her fingers, peering closely. It was a thin silver ring with the image of a flowering vine engraved around the band. It was cool to the touch, despite having lain in the direct sunlight for most of the afternoon.

Hard, wiry fingers grasped her arm, pinching the skin, and a wheezy voice cackled behind her. "Pretty little maid, can thee spare a coin?"

Startled, she dropped the ring and it fell into the dirt at her feet. A hand groped at her belt and she struggled to break free. The voice tittered again, putrid breath washing past her ear. Enari jerked her head aside in disgust.

"Just one coin, lovely. Or a kiss perhaps?" Something greasy slid across her cheek and she felt bile rise in her throat. "A kiss from one so pretty could make a man forget his troubles..."

"Hands to yourself, friend."

The grip on her arm was suddenly gone and she whirled around, stumbling back against the table. She was barely aware of the woman who scrambled around the counter, snatched up the dropped ring, and scurried back into the relative safety of her booth.

The creature who'd accosted her was old and looked brittle as a dry stick, long unkempt hair dragged into his wasted yellow face. Half-healed scabs and at least one open sore spotted his sunken cheeks and he licked his flaking lips continuously, revealing a tongue spotted with lichen-like scales. The greasy thing that touched her had been that tongue and Enari felt the urge to vomit as she scrubbed furiously at her cheek with one sleeve. The man's filmy eyes bulged like a toad's and his wide slash of a mouth was hanging open in fear. As far as she could see, the wretch didn't have a single tooth in his head.

Jex leaned over him, one fist bunched in the neck of the man's filthy tunic. The would-be thief groveled shamelessly; he was sorry, good master; he hadn't meant to frighten the little flower. But he was so hungry and just wished to know, could she spare a coin for an old veteran down on his luck?

"So you can scuttle down to the tavern and drink?" Jex demanded, releasing the man with a scowl. "Or trade it to the Dust dealer around the corner? That's more likely from the looks of you. Neither the 'little flower' nor I have coin for that. Now be gone." And he turned his back.

The man's toady eyes flared with rage and he withdrew a wickedly sharp dirk from somewhere beneath his rags. He leapt at Jex's back, blade raised.

As if anticipating the act, Jex whirled on him and brought his staff to bear. He caught the man a blow to the stomach with the butt end that dropped him, gagging and breathless, into the dirt. Twirling the staff again, he swung it down on the back of the man's skull and he collapsed like a dead fish.

Jex bent and turned him over, checking at his throat for a pulse. Satisfied that his adversary was unconscious rather than deceased, he straightened, wiping his hand on his trousers.

"They get stupid in their old age," he muttered, "I'm surprised she let him get this bad."

The market had gone completely still and people were staring. The closest took several steps away from the angry mage and his downed opponent. Ignoring them all, Jex turned to Enari.

"Are you alright? Did he hurt you?"

She nodded then shook her head, expression clearly revealing her distress.

"I told you to stay close, Nani." He looked exasperated now. "I don't even want to imagine the things Vasi would do to me if I let anything happen to you. She seems the type to come up with some inventive punishments, and I think you and I would both mourn the loss of my manly parts."

"Good master, don't be angry. The lass only stopped to look at a sweet on my table. Tweren't her fault old Yeema is such a Dust-addled lout."

It was the woman who had retrieved the ring. She smiled winningly up at Jex, the folds of her stout face redistributing themselves as she did so. Jex glanced down at Enari for confirmation.

"Which one?"

Enari shook her head and glanced away, refusing to hold his gaze in her shame. People were still staring at them and she took a step closer to Jex, wanting to disappear. She hadn't meant to cause so much trouble.

The woman behind the table was happy to answer the question for her, however. She may have been old and half-blind, but there was no mistaking the affection in the man's face as he looked at the attractive young woman. Smelling a sure sale for what it was, she produced the little ring from a pocket, giving it a swift polish on the way, and held it out for his scrutiny.

"This be it, master. Pure silver it is and crafted by the finest smith in Vandt."

Jex grunted his disbelief. "I doubt that, but you say she fancied it?"

"Aye."

“How much?” He reached to his belt, opening his coin purse. Enari caught his wrist and shook her head vehemently. If she blushed any harder, she was certain she would catch fire. He ignored her.

“One gold, good master.”

“You’re joking. Woman, I may look like an idiot but I assure you I am not. That trifle is worth, at the very most, five coppers.”

She folded her flabby arms. “Add a silver to that and it’s hers.”

“Seven coppers.”

She shook her head. Shrugging, Jex took Enari’s hand and began to walk away.

“A silver for the silver!” the woman exclaimed, “And I’ll take no less for it!”

Turning back with a triumphant grin, Jex flipped a silver coin onto the table and she snatched it up before it stopped spinning. She placed the ring into his waiting palm.

Chuckling, she flung out one parting shot at their retreating backs,

“Careful which finger you put it on, good master. That pretty lass of yours might get the wrong idea, otherwise!” Laughter erupted from the closest booths.

“I’m sure it’ll turn your finger green before we reach the other side of the square and if it falls off after that, you’re on your own,” Jex teased, raising Enari’s right hand. He looked at the ring and at each of her fingers before slipping it onto the middle finger of that hand. Enari was surprised to find that it fit perfectly.

* * *

“They call this Tor’s Alley, if you can believe it.”

They’d walked another hour after leaving the market square and Enari was staring to get hot and thirsty. She looked at him skeptically.

“By my honor as a mage, I swear it’s the truth.”

She simply rolled her eyes and shook her head, lips turning up in an of-course-I-believe-you smile.

Jex chuckled softly, but the humor stopped short of his eyes. There was something dark and hard in them that she found more than a bit disconcerting.

“I don’t know *why* it’s called that. Royalty wouldn’t be caught dead here.”

They continued down the deserted street in silence. Enari noticed that, even though it had to be only mid-afternoon, the area was already in a shadowy twilight. She could see the outer wall over the roofs of the houses, standing like a dower sentinel less than a mile away.

“This is it,” Jex said solemnly, halting before a drab little hovel that looked much the same as those around it. The structure was one of many crammed together and leaning against one another tiredly on this narrow dirt track. The only things that set it apart from its shabby neighbors were the immaculately clean windows and the unchipped blue of the front door. He led her onto the tiny porch and she held her breath, more than half expecting the creaking boards to collapse beneath their combined weight. Jex hesitated with his hand on the door, then took a deep breath before pushing it inward. He stepped into the dim space and she had no choice but to follow him.

“Ama?” he called loudly, closing the door behind them. “Raela? Kara se hazid?”

“Sema? Dela se?”

They could hear movement from the next room and then a figure appeared in the doorway. When it stepped forward into the wan light, Enari could see ‘it’ was actually a very pretty woman of middle years. Her auburn hair was swept up into a neat topknot and the dress she wore was plain but clean and covered by a fresh gray apron. She was thin, more slender than spare, and her hands had the look of one who labored for a living.

Brown eyes shining with tears, she held out her arms and hurried forward. Jex embraced her fiercely, allowing her to draw his head down to rest on her shoulder a moment before releasing her and stepping back. The bright smile she favored him with revealed two rows of slightly crooked, but white, teeth. The expression faltered and her brows creased in a worried frown when she finally noticed her second visitor.

Jex took Enari’s hand and tugged her forward.. “Ama, hau da Enari, ze—”

“Egali will do, Jex. I can see your girl does not understand our words.”

The woman had a strange, hard-edged accent, though Enari recognized it as the one that crept into Jex’s voice when he was teaching Torina Kylan, but more pronounced.

Clearing his throat, he began again. “Ama, this is Enari. She’s a... friend. Enari, this is my mother, Zaya.” She dropped a half curtsy without raising her head. In her simple purple dress, she felt plain beside the woman and wished her hair was loose so she could let it fall to hide her burning cheeks.

Zaya smiled down at her, the uncertainty melting from her kind face. “I am glad to be meeting you, Enari. A friend of my boy’s is always a welcome guest in my home.”

Enari favored her with a shy smile but her eyes darted up to Jex and she shifted a little closer to his side, relaxing a bit when she felt his hand at her back. The gesture did not go unnoticed by Zaya and she gave the pair an appraising look.

“*‘Friend’ indeed,*” she thought.

“She doesn’t talk, Ama,” he explained before the ensuing silence could become awkward. “It’s...sort of complicated, actually.”

Zaya Xander threw back her head and laughed, the sound ringing and deep as monastery bells.

“How fortunate for you, my son! You talk enough for two already. I do hope she has a way to tell you when she has had enough of your prattle. Poor uma.”

“She’s an excellent and polite listener,” Jex responded with a sniff. He looked around the front room. “Where’s Raela?”

“At work, or with that boy of hers. I am never sure which. But come, come. The time is nearing for tea and Goddess knows how long my son is dragging you through the streets.” She pointed at Jex. “You should be carrying her back. Such short legs and little feet will tire from so much walking.”

“I’ll carry her back if she wants me to,” Jex said defensively. “I do try to be a gentleman most of the time, Ama.”

“At least some of my lessons did not fly from that head of yours. That is good.”

She led them into her kitchen, a small but tidy room with a cheery fire crackling in the hearth. She directed Enari to a chair but stopped Jex as he made to sit beside her.

“Ah, ah. This one is a guest, but you, Sema, can be helping me with tea things.” Zaya looked as if she were used to giving orders and having them obeyed without objection and to Enari’s utter shock, Jex did as he was told without a single complaint or mouthy remark.

“*Well that’s a switch.*”

Jex followed his mother into a small adjoining pantry and there was a faint rattling of crockery from within.

“She is very nice-looking, Sema, but young, yes? And such hair, like autumn in the Fengals!”

Zaya kept her voice low, but Enari could still hear their conversation. She felt her blush returning.

“Nineteen this coming Janua, and—” There was a solid-sounding thump. “Ouch! Ama!”

“Jex, for shame!” Zaya scolded, “You are a man grown and she is but an uma! Doesn’t this Tower of yours have zenis your age? I know the palace does, and the city. So how far along is she?”

“Of course, but—oh. Ama, no. No, no, no. It’s not like that at all!” Jex sounded mortified and Enari almost covered her ears. “Enari is, she’s the apprentice of the *kvinna* who was called to attend the tora. Vasi—ow!”

“This Vasi is a *kvinna* of the Cyrilan Temple. I know I taught you to speak with more respect than that.”

“Yes, yes. *Kvinna* Vasi is an old acquaintance of Sura Eryk’s and I was sent to escort them to Rowan. I met Nani then.”

Zaya snorted indelicately. “Nani, is it? Well, certainly she seems to be a lovely little butterfly. But I see how she looks at you. Eighteen is young...though not so young for her not to be wondering. Don’t you go and hurt her heart. I taught you better than that, too, and she seems very sweet. You’re telling me the truth, though? There’s no *gra-uma* in my near future?”

“No, Ama! She doesn’t—I would never—it’s not like that,” he protested weakly.

“If you say.” Zaya sounded unconvinced.

Enari wanted to crawl under the table and hide.

When the two returned to the kitchen, she tried to act as if she hadn’t heard every word. The guilty look on Jex’s face told her she wasn’t doing a very good job, although Zaya seemed completely unaware that anything was amiss.

Mother and son struck up an easy conversation and it quickly became evident that Zaya was nearly as garrulous as her boy. They discussed a wide variety of subjects, ranging from politics to art, and Jex spoke a very little about his work for the tora. Enari was surprised to learn that Lady Xander was quite well educated.

Jex also told his mother about the bodies that had been found in rooms of the palace and their certainty that they were ritual killings of some kind, though the motive and purpose was still unclear. He did not, however, mention his prolonged illness or the way in which it had resolved.

When discussion turned to debate or grew particularly intense, Jex and his ama had a tendency to fall into their native tongue and at such times, Enari found her mind wandering, letting the words flow around her like water around a stone. They eventually reverted to Egali, bringing her attention back to the present, but as afternoon faded to dusk, she began to drowse.

“Sema, it is nearly dark and your lady-friend falls asleep at my table,” Zaya commented, gesturing towards the darkening window.

Jex rose to his feet with a curse. Distracted by the sight of the fading sunset beyond the glass, he wasn't swift enough to dodge his mother's hand.

Enari jumped at the sharp sound, nearly dropping her teacup, while Jex blinked and rubbed his mouth. He looked completely taken aback and it was clear he had no idea what had just happened. His bewildered expression was almost comical.

“Such language in front of ladies!” Zaya rebuked him, shaking her finger under his nose. “You shame me with your mouth, and don't be thinking you are too old for me to paddle for it, either, Jex Xander!”

He held up his hands, palms out, in an attempt to appease her. “I didn't think, I'm sorry.”

“You should stay. It is dangerous out in the dark.”

“If it were just me, I would, but, well...Kvinna Vasi doesn't exactly know her apprentice is out,” he admitted.

“Ah. I will let her paddle you, then, and pray to the All-Mother that is all she does. I'd certainly like to have little gra-umas someday. Which reminds me.” Lady Xander turned to Enari. “Come with me a moment. I have something I think you will be needing, despite what my son tells me.”

“Ama—”

“Hush. We will only be a moment.”

Taking a candle from a nearby shelf, she lit it in the fire, then took Enari's hand and helped her to her feet. They left Jex in the kitchen to wait and his exasperated sigh followed them out.

Zaya led her down a short, dark hallway to a little room at its end.

“Wait here,” she instructed, then ducked inside.

When she returned, she handed Enari the candle and opened the box she'd retrieved. She withdrew a woven cord on which dangled a carved soapstone amulet the size of a walnut.

“You are too young for an uma of your own,” she said kindly. She slipped the cord over Enari's head and tucked the charm into the front of her gown.

“The spell needs to be renewed once a season, but any healer can do that for you, or come back and I will do it. Wear it and be safe. Now, I'm sure my boy grows impatient to be off and you should not stay out in the dark.”

They returned to Jex, who looked back and forth between the two suspiciously, though he asked no questions, for which Enari was immensely thankful.

At the door, Zaya bent to plant a kiss on each of her cheeks. “I know you must be leaving, but you are always welcome here, with or without my boy. Come and see me again, Enari.”

On impulse, Enari hugged the woman tightly and the embrace was returned without hesitation. For a brief instant she was enveloped in warmth and the scent of cinnamon. The sensations evoked flashes of half-remembered things, fragments that were gone as quickly as they'd come, leaving her a little less warm in their wake.

“Walk safe,” Zaya whispered to her son, hugging him in turn. He promised they would and waited on the porch with Enari's hand in his until he heard the click of the bolt sliding into place.

True night had fallen on Tor's Alley, with only a few pale squares of light cast by nearby windows to illuminate the way ahead. The far end of the street was utterly dark, a patient maw waiting to swallow them whole. A dog barked in the distance and they heard the hiss and yowl of fighting tomcats somewhere much closer. Tipping her head back, Enari gazed at the stars that were clearly visible in this poorly lit part of the great city.

“We shouldn’t dawdle,” Jex said in a low voice. He moved down the steps, putting them on a level when he faced her, and bent to pull a dagger from the top of his boot. She hadn’t even noticed it before and wondered what else he had hidden on his person.

Holding it up, he took her hand and curled her fingers around the leather-wrapped hilt.

“Do you know how to use this?” he asked seriously.

When she shook her head, he closed his eyes in dismay and exhaled heavily. She watched the faint glint of starlight trace the razor edge as she tilted it slowly. He shook her once, snapping her attention back to him.

“Eyes, throat, belly, groin.” He touched each body part on himself as he spoke. “They’re soft and the blade won’t stick. Any part of a man will do, but those will drop him fast.” Placing his hand over hers, he showed her a simple thrust-and-twist motion.

“Put it in your belt, like this. Good. Now let me see you draw it. Watch you don’t cut your fingers.”

Enari did as instructed and once he was satisfied she could draw the weapon without catching on anything, he took her hand again. They started down the dark street at a brisk pace and Enari observed a change in the way he walked. His stride was still confident, but there was a new alertness in his posture, a deadly grace that proclaimed he was not someone to be trifled with.

“What did she give you?” he asked more casually than she would have expected.

Reluctantly, she fished the amulet out of her bodice and held it up so he could see. He coughed and glanced away, but not before she saw the color rising in his cheeks. Even in the dim light, the blush was visible.

“I’m sorry. That was rather, um, forward of her. Have to give her credit for perceptiveness, though. I’m not sure I’d have thought of that until it was too late, and then where would we be? Well, where would *you* be? As soon as Vasi found out, I’d be dead for certain. I know I don’t have to tell you to keep it out of sight unless you want people to talk. Not that I’d be ashamed, but, well, that brings us back ‘round to the me dying thing.” Throughout the entire rambling monologue, his eyes swept their surroundings and he kept a firm grip on her hand.

They’d nearly reached the market square where the encounter with the Dust addict had occurred that afternoon when a figure stepped into the alley, blocking their path.

“Thought you two would be along,” drawled a male voice, “Made us wait long enough to be sure.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Jex stopped dead as three more man-shaped shadows joined the first. Slowly, attention never leaving the menacing strangers, he drew Enari behind him so that his body shielded her from view. As the pack moved to the center of the alley, moonlight dimly illuminated their features. Three of the ruffians were hulking, heavily muscled men, flat faced and heavy browed, while the fourth, apparently their leader, was whipcord thin. All four were dressed in dark clothing and armed to the teeth.

“We don’t want any trouble, friends,” Jex said, polite and cautious, “Let us pass.”

The men laughed. The sound was ugly and filled with the promise of impending violence.

The leader shook his head, long hair falling into his eyes. “Oh no. The Lady doesn’t take kindly to a dandy like you roughing up her people. Yeema may be a slimy, Dust-mad little worm, but he’s still Brotherhood.”

“The Lady Shadow should warn her men against accosting mages and young kvinnas in a public market, then. Your fellow was sloppy and I only gave the maggot what he deserved,” Jex shot back. “You have no quarrel with us.”

“Be that as it may, we can hardly let such actions go unaddressed. You nobles might start getting uppity.”

“Perhaps we can work somefing out,” one of the big men suggested. “The lassie there is nice-looking enough. Let her be the payment.”

“You’ll touch her over my dead body!” Jex snapped. His tone was no longer friendly. He spun his staff in one hand and planted the end solidly into the dirt at his feet. Its runes began to glow scarlet and a sphere of crackling fire sprang to life in the air above his cupped palm. Two of the men took a hasty step back.

“That can certainly be arranged,” the thin man said with a snigger, “or you can stand aside, mageling. Let us have our fun and we can all go on as if none of this unpleasantness ever happened. We promise we’ll be quick and the Lady need never hear of it.”

The man behind him made a vulgar gesture and elbowed his closest associate. “You might be quick, but I plan to take my time. She looks fresh.”

“Take one step from where you stand and before the Consorts I swear you’ll die before you can take another,” the mage warned him. The orb of flames grew a little bigger as his anger built.

Then, speaking softly so his voice did not carry beyond her hearing, he addressed Enari, “Nani, do you see the doorway to your left?” He felt her nod against his back. “I want you to walk over there, slowly now, and put your back to it. I’ll veil you until you get there, then stay down and out of the way. If one of them gets past me, you run as fast as you can and head for a lighted street. Look for a guardsman.”

Walking backwards to keep the men in view, Enari crossed the narrow space until she felt her back bump against uneven stone. She sidestepped into the dim recess and held her breath, pressing as close to the door as she could manage.

“Hiding your toys isn’t very polite, you know,” sighed the leader, although he really didn’t sound that disappointed. A dagger appeared in his hand as if by magic and he grinned. “Never mind. I haven’t had a decent fight or a good fuck in ages.” He jerked his head towards Jex. “Get ‘im, lads. She’ll reappear once he’s dead.”

The two largest thugs rushed forward together.

Crying out a challenge, Jex swept his arm forward, palm down in a slashing motion, and the ball of fire turned into a line as it left him. It streaked towards the onrushing men, who dodged aside with snarls of anger.

Jex crooked his fingers and the flames reversed direction in midair, doubling back to impact one thug between his first and second steps. It exploded with a roar and the man was immediately engulfed in snapping red and orange flame. He dropped into the dust and tried frantically to smother his burning clothes but to no avail. The mage-fire burned hot and fast and within seconds the man was a living torch.

His partner had faltered, but only briefly.

As the choked screams began to die out, he reached Jex and brought a sword whistling down on the other’s head. Jex raised his staff in time to catch the blow across its length, stopping the steel inches from his face. The blade stuck and with a twist of his shoulders and arms, Jex sent the weapon spinning away. Lightning quick, he

kicked out and caught the tough squarely between the legs. The man dropped with a winded curse, but dodged aside from the follow up strike aimed at his head.

Unfortunately for him, he wasn't fast enough to avoid the lance of fire the mage flung down on him. He, too, was alight in an instant. Smoke and the smell of charred meat filled the night air.

The fourth assailant, the one who'd hung back from the initial charge when the order was given, had managed to sidle around the mage in the moment it had taken him to dispatch his attackers. Spotting Enari, he advanced on her with a leer.

"Come here, little dove," he crooned, holding out a hand. "I won't hurt you, I swear. An' if you cooperate, we might be inclined to not kill your lover. Maybe just rough 'im up a bit."

She backed away slowly, eyes darting between the huge thug and the skirmish behind him. Two lay sprawled in smoking, unmoving heaps, but the wiry one had closed with Jex and he tossed his staff aside as the other hit him. They tumbled and rolled, each seeking to gain the upper hand. Steel flashed and dark splashes stained the ground in their wake, but in the gloom it was impossible to tell whose blood was being spilled.

Taking advantage of her distraction, the man lunged for her and caught her wrist before she could flee more than a few steps. Laughing, he jerked her against him.

"I'm going to enjoy this. These mages, see, sure they can burn you or freeze you or whatever, but they're all one-trick in the end. Get past the magic and they're naught but a whimper. You should pick better company if you're gonna be out in the dark."

Enari turned her face aside as he tried to kiss her and his rough beard scraped her cheek, the gesture more chaste than he'd intended.

"Oh come now, don't be that way," the man chided and grabbed her chin. "This'll be easier if you settle down."

She wriggled frantically, kicking at his shins. A sharp blow stung her face.

"Stop squirming!" he growled, angry now. He reached down with one meaty hand and tore open her dress from neckline to knee, snapping her belt like fine thread in the process and revealing the dainty chemise beneath. With one tug, it too was in tatters. He shoved her roughly against the wall and her head struck the stone hard enough to make her vision swim. The alley revolved drunkenly and blackness began to close in on her, but she fought it, knowing what would happen if she lost consciousness. She reached for the power she'd felt that day with the Greater, only to encounter the same wall she'd run up against the other times she'd tried. The magic was there, but she just couldn't get to it, no matter how desperately she needed it now.

Holding her by the throat, he pressed a hand between her thighs and tried to force her legs apart. Enari clawed at his eyes and it earned her another slap, this one bloodying her nose. Panting now, her attacker threw her to the ground and descended upon her, using his knees to spread her legs as he pawed at her breasts. She managed to eel out from under him and roll to her hands and knees, scrambling away only to be caught by one ankle and yanked backwards. She winced as skin was peeled off her knees and the palm of one hand.

She'd known she wouldn't be able to escape him, but the attempt had given her just enough time.

Enari flipped onto her back and as her would-be rapist dropped onto her, she brought her dagger up between their bodies. His weight drove the blade into his vitals at an upward angle and she twisted it as Jex had shown her. The man let out an agonized howl and she felt a flood of sticky warmth coat her hands and stomach. He toppled away from her and flopped in a spreading pool of dark blood for a moment before going still. A foul stench filled the air and she gagged.

A short, high pitched shriek of pain resounded from further down the passage, but it cut off abruptly and was replaced by heavy silence. Enari hardly noticed, unable to tear her eyes from the hilt protruding from the dead man's belly. Hurried footsteps approached her and she turned her head woodenly.

Jex's anxious face stared down at her, blood running from his nose and a cut above one eye. He dropped to his knees, blocking out the grisly scene, and pulled her to a sitting position.

"Are you hurt?" Hands ran over her, checking for injuries. Finding no obvious wounds, he embraced her tightly, pressing his face to her hair and letting out a whisper of thanks to the Consorts. She just stared at the blood staining her hands, so dark in the night that it looked black. Dimly, she heard him order her to stay where she was, that he'd be right back. His footsteps retreated.

Jex knelt and examined the limp form of his final adversary, watching the narrow chest rise and fall for a moment before reaching down to rip the dagger free of the man's shoulder. He slapped the other's face harshly

until his eyes fluttered open on a moan. They went wide in terror as he saw the mage hovering over him. He sucked in a sharp breath and tried to scamper away, but fire blossomed around Jex's fingertips and the thug squealed and threw up an arm to protect himself.

"You gambled and lost, friend," Jex stated calmly

"We were only protecting one of ours," the man whimpered, "Please don't kill me!"

"The only reason you aren't dead already is because I need someone to run a message." The smile that crossed the mage's face was as pointed as the blade in his hand.

"I, I, yes, anything you want!" He licked his lips, nervously eyeing the dancing flames.

"Tell Moravelle that Jex Xander will be paying her a visit and that he is not pleased."

"Xander? Diu, I didn't recognize you. We didn't know—"

"Shut up" with a snap of his fingers, the fire vanished, "and get out of here before a guard comes along or I reconsider your usefulness."

The man scrambled to his feet and fled, stumbling and nearly falling once as he ran. In a flash, he disappeared around the nearest corner and his pounding footsteps faded. Jex stared after him for a moment, eyes glacial, before returning to where Enari sat.

She seemed to be coming out of her shock, and was scrubbing her palms against her torn skirt in an attempt to remove the residue that clung to them. He was relieved and more than a little impressed to see that her eyes were clear and dry, no hint of panic or hysteria in evidence. He retrieved the loaned dagger and when he beckoned, she climbed to her feet and came to him, leaning into his side and putting her face against his chest. He slid an arm around her shoulders and they began to walk.

Not far from their fateful alley, they came upon an unconscious nobleman propped up against a wall with an empty bottle beside one slack hand. Jex relieved him of his cape, leaving a gold coin in the drunk's lap as payment.

"He'll wake up without it, and a good deal more besides, but that's not my fault," he said, draping the light garment over Enari's shoulders. It fell to below her knees and when she clutched the edges together, it covered her torn clothing almost entirely.

A fountain in the middle of a tree lined courtyard was their next stop. Using a handkerchief Jex found in one of his pockets, they cleaned the blood and grime from their hands and faces. It was then that Enari saw the long slash in his right forearm. The cut ran from wrist to just short of his elbow and the blade had missed opening the vein by half the breadth of her little finger.

"It'll need stitches to close, I imagine," he grumbled, examining the injury. Even now, blood continued to ooze from it, sliding down to drip from his palm to the cobbles beneath his feet. Enari bent and tore a strip of linen from the hem of her ruined chemise, then pushed at Jex until he sat on the edge of the fountain. She was more in her element here and he watched her with a faint smile as she rinsed and then bound the wound securely, tucking the ends of the makeshift bandage in neatly when she'd finished.

That had been more than an hour ago and they'd been walking ever since, avoiding the busier areas of the city in favor of quiet residential avenues. She was tiring rapidly.

Feeling the tug on his hand as she began to lag behind, Jex stopped, bent, and lifted her into his arms. Enari gratefully rested her face against the side of his neck and closed her eyes.

In seconds, she was asleep.

* * *

Torchlight fell across her face, waking her with a start, and it was only then she realized they'd stopped walking.

"There you are, Xander." The speaker sounded relieved.

Slitting open her eyes the barest crack, Enari saw Gaylan Krihamre standing before them, clad in full armor and holding a wicked-looking pike in one fist. He was the sole guard at the small gate they'd used to exit the palace earlier, in an afternoon that felt like a lifetime ago.

He appraised them with open curiosity. "I can see you have quite a story to tell and that it's one best heard with a tankard."

"Oh, aye." Jex sounded almost as weary as she felt. "Later, perhaps."

“There might not be a later. The kvinna started turning the place upside down around dusk when she couldn’t find the wee one there,” Gaylan gestured at Enari. “Then when *you* were nowhere to be found, she put two-and-two together. The woman’s set a warrant for your danglies, and my captain very much wants a word with you.”

“Black Goddess preserve me,” Jex groaned in defeat. He shifted Enari in his arms and she pulled a corner of the cape up to cover her eyes from the stinging torch smoke.

“I think you’ll want something a little more solid than the protection of the All-Mother. May I suggest an iron codpiece as a start?”

“Shove it, Krihamre. Are you going to let us in or not? I promise I’ll talk to your commander, and you’ll get your tale, if I survive the next hour or so.”

“Aye,” the big man agreed, but he didn’t smile at the prospect. He opened the gate and waved them in. As Jex tried to move away, he put a restraining hand on the mage’s shoulder and when their eyes met, his were full of sorrow and regret.

“What?” Jex asked suspiciously.

Before Gaylan could answer, a quintet of guardsmen, also in full battle regalia, appeared from the shadows, the guard captain himself at their head.

Jex observed them stonily, then turned his attention on Gaylan.

“I’m sorry, Xander,” he sighed, holding out his arms. “Please don’t raise a fuss. It’ll be easier for you if you just go quietly. Give her here and I’ll make sure she gets to her room and her Sura safely.”

Jex set Enari on her feet, but instead of going to the Tesian, she clung to him, confused eyes flicking back and forth between Gaylan and his silent brothers-in-arms.

“Well?” Jex prompted. He put an arm protectively around Enari’s shoulders.

“A lot’s happened tonight while you two dallied in the city. It’s not good.”

“I can see that.” Jex jerked his head at the others. “Still doesn’t explain your friends there.”

“Tor Brinon is dead,” Gaylan told him, “And Goddess forgive me, but—”

“Enough!” the guard captain thundered, “Jex Xander, you are hereby under arrest for sedition, illegal entry into the kingdom of Egalion, and murder.” He raked an eye over Enari’s disheveled appearance. “After I get this girl’s story, be prepared for rape to be added to the list of charges. The sentence of death by hanging will be carried out at dawn.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

"I beg your pardon?" Jex blustered, straightening to his full height and facing the captain squarely. He gave the man his haughtiest glower. "Just where do you get off—"

He was cut short by a blow to the mouth from a gauntleted fist. It knocked him sprawling and his head rebounded from the stone wall behind him with a sickening thwack. Enari tried to go to him, but Gaylan caught her around the waist and hauled her back against him. The chainmail of his hauberk was cold, even through her cloak and gown.

"Leave him," he hissed in her ear, "or you'll join him, and we both know he wouldn't want that!"

She struggled, but knew it was futile. All she could do was watch the guards drag Jex roughly to his feet and attempt to shackle his wrists together behind his back. Blood poured from his split lips and lacerated gums, coating his chin and the front of his tunic in scarlet. He spat contemptuously at the captain's feet even as he fought against the men holding him. The effort only earned him a hard cuff to the side of his head that sent him staggering into the man next to him. The guardsman swore and shoved him away, but too roughly, and the mage hit the slightly open gate face first before he was grabbed by two more men. Enari saw fresh scrapes and a new cut on his cheek when he righted himself.

Jex managed to yank one arm free and in his unthinking fury, called fire to life in a whirling pillar around himself. The steely rasp of swords being drawn cut the night.

"*DON'T!*" Enari screamed, trying her hardest to escape the granite circle of Gaylan's arms. She knew he couldn't hear her, but her mind called to him regardless. These men looked as if they'd have no qualms about killing him should he turn his magic upon them.

Jex's head whipped toward her and his eyes were wide, startled. His mouth dropped open and the flames stuttered out of existence. He was distracted just long enough for one of the men to use his own staff against him. Swinging it like a club, the man struck Jex high in the back. Bones cracked and he went down.

This time, he stayed that way and Enari felt tears of helpless rage sting her eyes. Jex groaned once, tried to roll onto his side, and then went still.

"Sir," Gaylan began, but his captain rounded on him with narrowed eyes.

"You're on thin enough ice as it is, Krihamre, and you'd be wise to carefully consider your next words. I'll deal with you and the girl later, but for now, remain at your post and speak of this to no one." He turned back to his winded men and pointed at the downed mage. "Get him out of here."

Someone slapped Jex's face until he came around enough to keep his feet once he was hauled upright. They were hustling him off when he braced his legs and stopped walking.

"Wait, wait," he said hazily as one of the guards started pushing at him, "I get a last request, do I not?" His eyes settled on the captain.

"If you make it quick, I may be inclined to grant it."

"A kiss from the lass there." He inclined his head towards Enari.

An affirmative nod from the captain and she ran to Jex, standing on tiptoe even as he bent his head.

"In my pocket," he breathed against her lips, "Get it away from here."

Then his mouth was on hers, hot and insistent and tasting of blood.

Using her body to shield the movement of her hands, Enari reached into his tunic and removed the little pouch he carried in an inner pocket, slipping it beneath her cloak without anyone being the wiser. After only a moment, they were jerked apart.

"That's enough! Take him below."

* * *

Enari fled as soon as the men were out of sight and Gaylan let her go. Consorts knew the girl was better equipped to find someone who could help than he. As she disappeared, he offered up a whispered prayer to the

Goddess and Her consorts for the battlemage's protection before turning back to face the darkness beyond the gate.

She didn't make it far before a hand shot out of the shadows and grabbed her arm, jerking her to a stop. Whirling, she found herself confronted by a man she'd never seen before.

He was only a little taller than she and neatly built, with hands and feet petite enough to be almost feminine. Dark hair fell past his shoulders in a myriad of intricate braids and each was bound at the end with ties of woven horse hair. Intelligent black eyes studied her from a narrow and sharp-boned face the deep brown of tanned leather.

The star and shield over his heart identified him as a mage of the Tower and Enari released a breath she hadn't known she'd been holding. This man was a friend.

His eyes darted down and Enari's followed. He still held her, and he'd spotted the object clutched in her fist.

"He must trust you very much to give you that," he told her, his voice low and husky. "We must act quickly if we are to save him. Come." Halting after only a few steps, he glanced over his shoulder and favored her with a thin smile. "I am Perimos, by the way. Perimos Wind-Strider."

* * *

He was marched down to a small cell in the bowels of the palace and shoved unceremoniously inside. The heavy door clanged shut behind him and he was alone in the near-dark.

Staggering drunkenly to the stone bench along the wall, he collapsed upon it, hissing out a string of vicious expletives as his ribs and head protested. He lay back and closed his eyes, waiting.

He didn't have to wait long.

Less than half an hour had passed when the door opened and torchlight lanced through his lowered eyelids. He ignored the intruders, feigning sleep.

"Chain him."

Several sets of hands grabbed him and jerked him up and over to the wall. One wrist was unshackled and he heard the clinking of chains as it was pulled through a loop above his head. His arms were drawn sharply upwards and the manacle refastened. The angle was awkward and became almost immediately painful. Jex widened his stance for better balance and glared balefully at the retreating guards. He and the captain were promptly left alone to stare at one another.

"I trust you know why you're here," the man said at last.

"Sedition, illegal entry into the kingdom of Egalion, and murder, wasn't it?" Jex replied acidly. He cocked his head. "Have you decided whether you're adding rape to the list as well?"

"Such impertinence does you no credit," the captain sneered, "and as to the charge of rape...I haven't had a chance to speak with her yet."

"Everything I've done with her has been with her most enthusiastic consent, so don't waste your time."

"I'd be lax in my duty if I didn't thoroughly investigate the matter."

"Wouldn't be the first time lately."

As he suspected it would, the remark earned him another blow, this time to the belly. He'd have doubled over if there'd been enough slack in his chains.

"I've enough to hang you without it, in any case." The captain paced leisurely around the small room, hands clasped behind his back. "I'm sure you know how the people feel about Atromorese scum like you living in their midst."

"What an imagination you have, Captain! Do I look Atromorese to you?" While he spoke with nonchalance, inside he was shaking. How could this man know? What was to become of his mother and sister? Perhaps they didn't know about his family, but he doubted he would be so lucky.

"Save the lies." The captain produced a familiar black silk bag. He opened it and withdrew a tarnished Atromorese silver, blackened around the edges, and held it up between two fingers for Jex to see. "You should be more careful with your things, filth."

Then he stuck a hand into Jex's tunic and, finding it empty, turned out both his trouser pockets. He swore when he came up empty-handed and the look he leveled on his prisoner was one of pure, unadulterated hatred.

“Where is it?” he snarled.

“Where’s what?” Jex asked innocently. “You know, you aren’t nearly pretty enough to be so handsy without at least buying me a drink first.” He paused and studied the captain for a moment. “On second thought, I don’t think the contents of an entire week’s Allsorts jug would make you pretty enough.”

This time, the captain kicked his legs out from under him, forcing his arms to momentarily bear his full weight. There was a crackling pop as his shoulder dislocated under the strain.

“Tell me where it is!”

“Fuck you,” Jex wheezed, “and your mother.”

“No matter,” he shrugged, “you’re going to confess to the murders in this palace regardless.”

“Or what? You’ll beat it out of me?” Jex taunted breathlessly. He’d already been slated for execution, but he refused to confess to something he hadn’t done.

The man removed his gauntlets slowly. “If that’s what it takes, though I don’t actually need your admission of guilt. I just thought I’d at least give you the chance to freely unburden your soul before sending you to Dusan’s judgment.”

“Before you commence, may I at least know how you came by that bag and its contents?”

“Why does it matter?”

Jex rolled his eyes. “I merely wish to have my curiosity sated before I die.”

“A concerned citizen brought it to one of my men after word got around about the coin on the first body. She said you carried a bag identical to the one she found in your chamber, and that she’d seen an Atromorese coin in it. It doesn’t take a genius to put two-and-two together and reach four.”

“Except in this case, your arithmetic is a bit off,” Jex advised, “I wasn’t even here when the boy was killed, and that coin could have come from almost anywhere. There’s a whole entire kingdom’s worth of them on the other side of the Fengals, you see. So really, for you two-and-two makes three and a quarter. Did you learn your numbers from a cave troll?”

The captain raised his fist, then stopped. A calculating gleam entered his eye and he slowly lowered his hand. “You know, I’ve changed my mind. I think I’ll go and talk to the little fire-crown you came in with, just in case she has anything to add.”

Jex wanted to shout at the man to leave Enari out of this, but knew that if he expressed any outrage or concern, it would put her in that much more danger, so he held his tongue.

The captain reached up and patted his cheek. “I won’t leave you to ponder your demise for too much longer, I promise. Just be a good boy while I’m gone.”

* * *

It was very late, or very early, when the captain returned. Jex forced his eyes open and sighed.

“How did your chat go?” he asked on a yawn. Everything hurt, but he’d be damned if he let the discomfort show.

“The little witch was nowhere to be found and that dragon who rooms with her refused to tell me where she was. In fact, she read me the riot act for not looking for the girl hard enough!” The man was fuming.

Jex began to giggle. “Oh, Goddess bless you, Vasi. Here I thought I was to be your only target tonight.”

“I think your tongue will be the first to go,” the captain ground out, reaching for the knife at his belt. “Not even the Consorts could have the patience to listen to your blather.”

The cell door burst open and the captain whirled, knife still in hand.

“I thought I told you that under no circumstances was I to be interrupted!” he roared. But his rage evaporated when he caught sight of the figure in the doorway. Babbling an apology, he fell to his knees and bowed his head.

Standing in the entrance of the dingy little cell, dressed in nothing but a cloak covered nightdress, was Tora Aelani.

Her hair fell in unbound waves around her and Jex could tell from the swollen, puffy state of her eyes and the blotches on her skin that she’d been crying. Yet despite her grief, her head was high and she gazed at the scene before her in mounting displeasure.

“Explain yourself,” she ordered coolly, eyes settling at last on the captain.

The man remained on his knees. “M-Your Majesty. This prisoner is being interrogated for the murder of your husband, and the others before him.”

“Your interrogation is over. Release him.” Aelani’s voice was hard as steel and the look on her face said that she was in no mood to be challenged. The captain blinked up at her, swallowing hard before climbing to his feet and returning his dagger to its sheath.

“I have proof of his guilt, and—”

“I’ve already spoken with the maid who gave testimony against him and she’s recanted her tale.”

“No.” The man shook his head violently before thrusting his hand forward to display the coins and twists of hair. “He had the second one on his person before he was arrested! He’s an Atromorese outlander, here illegally! Min Ha probably sent him to spy on us and I refuse to give him the opportunity to report back to his master! He’s already done enough damage!”

“He is indeed Atromorese.” At her words, Aelani saw the fight go out of Jex’s eyes and he bowed his head. It made her heart ache even more.

“*Oh, Eryk,*” she thought mournfully, “*you keep so many secrets. Whatever became of that open, carefree little boy who kissed us goodbye as he left for the Tower?*”

“Reginold,” Aelani sighed. She strode forward and put a hand on her captain’s shoulder, “Despite his place of birth, this man is not here illegally. If you wish, I can provide you with papers to show his immigration was approved by both Brinon and myself many years ago.” She wasn’t sure who looked more surprised by the news.

“They’re Atromorese,” he protested weakly, “You of all people should know the significance of that, my tora. He murdered Brinon...”

“He wasn’t even here!” she barked.

The captain flinched and looked away.

Aelani’s tone became gentler and she took his hand. “I know why you feel the way you do, but that is in the past and everyone knows you protected my uncle the best you could. Battlemage Xander had nothing to do with Iradi’s treachery, nor has he anything to do with Brinon’s death. You’ve let your hatred color your judgment, my friend.” She stroked his bearded cheek. “I’m asking you, Reg, to let him go. Please don’t make me order you a second time.”

“I—as you wish.” Shoulders slumping wearily, he held out the key to Jex’s manacles.

“Thank you.”

Aelani approached the bound mage and stretched to unlock the thick cuff around one wrist, catching his arm and gently guiding it down to his side. They both winced when it snapped back into the socket. He tugged until his other arm was low enough and she unlocked that fetter as well.

“My thanks, Ma’am,” he whispered, eyes downcast, “and my deepest condolences for your loss.”

Tears welled in her eyes as she looked him over, noting every cut and bruise marring his exposed flesh. “Thank you, Jex. Brinon is—he was a good man and he never would have condoned this.”

Before he could respond, Enari was at his side and Aelani stepped back. She watched the young novice put her arms gingerly around the battered mage and press her face into his chest, heedless of the dirt and bloodstains. He hugged her back, eyes closing on a quiet sigh. Anyone looking at them in that moment would be blind not to see the depth of affection there and she prayed that Vasi never saw them this way. Jex had courted death twice already and she didn’t want to bet on his odds of surviving it a third time in such a short period.

He looked up and found her watching them with a small, sad smile gracing her lips.

“Your associate, Adept Wind-Strider, brought her to me,” Aelani explained, “He told me what you’d been accused of and what my men had done. I came as quickly as I could, though I’m sorry for not intervening sooner.”

He shrugged, grimacing as a twinge shot through his back and shoulder. “I’m grateful you saw fit to intervene at all. Thank you.”

“No need for that, but it grows late and I am so, so tired. I will tell you everything you wish to know on the morrow.” Aelani rubbed at her temples. “For now, off to bed, the both of you.”

Without waiting for a response, the tora turned on her heel and left the cell.

The screaming didn't start until they turned the corner and entered the corridor outside Enari's room. Vasi descended on them like a Fury, eyes blazing. Eryk was not far behind, though he looked more worried than angry. Jex felt his shoulders slump and his headache grew infinitely worse.

They'd almost made it. Damn. One more corridor and they would have reached his rooms without the *kvinna* being any the wiser.

Enari started upon hearing her Sura's raised voice and only then did Jex notice her attire. The borrowed cape fell open to reveal her torn and soiled clothing, and Vasi looked at him with murder in her eyes.

"That's it!" she shouted at him, "I've had enough of you and your—your antics, Battlemage Xander. I—"

"Please," Jex interrupted, "please can we not do this in the hall?"

"Come inside, Vasi." Eryk took her hand. "It's been a long night and no one else needs to hear this. The two of them clearly need a healer's attention."

She fumed at him. "I'll care for my apprentice, but not him. I refuse, Eryk, do you understand me? He isn't getting the benefit of my care a third time!"

"Fine," Jex snapped, finally reaching the ends of his tattered patience. "I'll get Lady Krihamre to stitch me up if I must. She plies a needle well enough. But can we go inside before someone comes out to see what the commotion is?" He jerked his chin at Enari. "Or before she passes out?"

All three of them looked at her. She stood with her shoulders hunched, huddled down inside the appropriated cloak, and swaying a little. Vasi put an arm protectively around her apprentice and the two men followed them into the sitting room.

Once inside, the women disappeared into the novice's room and the door was shut very soundly behind them. Jex sat at the breakfast table and put his head down while Eryk went to the window. Neither spoke.

A half hour later, they returned. Enari's hair was wet and her skin was pink from scrubbing. Vasi had the torn gown and chemise bundled under one arm and a bag in her hand. She crossed to the fire and threw the ruined clothing into the flames, making sure they caught before advancing on Jex.

She let the bag drop onto the table in front of him, jarring him awake, and addressed her apprentice.

"I think you need to take some responsibility for this little adventure. You're a grown woman, old enough to, I would have hoped, know better than to leave the palace without telling someone." She began removing objects from the pouch; a thick piece of muslin with needles of various shapes and sizes stuck through it, a spool of thin silk thread, a pair of tiny shears, a glass bottle filled with antiseptic wash, and a smaller, opaque vial.

Enari's face went pale.

"You're going to make her stitch up my arm?" Jex demanded incredulously.

"And the cuts on your forehead and cheek as well, though I think your bruises and that lovely black eye will heal well enough on their own," Vasi said matter-of-factly, "I'm sorry to inform you I have nothing with which to dull the pain, Battlemage Xander. You used it all on our journey here."

After Vasi retreated into her own room, Eryk came forward and offered Jex a flask. He smiled apologetically. "Best I can do, I'm afraid."

Jex took it, unscrewed the cap, and downed the contents in a long swallow before handing it back with a little cough. He laid his forearm on the table and nodded to Enari.

"Go ahead."

There was no way she could do this. She simply couldn't. He was a living, breathing person who would bleed and feel pain when pierced by the needle, by *her* needle. The cloth dummies she'd stitched on in practice hadn't truly prepared her for the real thing.

"*How can I inflict pain on someone I love?*" She shook her head, feeling her stomach roll, and her breathing grew fast and harsh.

Jex grasped her fingers as she stood and looked up at her, trusting and confident. "It's alright. Do it."

"*Jex, I can't. I'll hurt you.*"

"You didn't flinch in the alley," he reminded her, "Don't start now. This is what your Sura trained you for, and if I'm to be your first in this as well, so be it."

Eryk put two basins down on the table; one empty, one full of steaming water, and retreated to the window again. Enari took a deep breath to steady her nerves and sat. Trying not to cry, she carefully cleaned the wound on Jex's arm before threading one of the smallest needles.

The liquor, Jex discovered, barely took the edge off, but he ground his teeth and forced himself to remain still and silent. He watched as she worked, completely focused on each precise, tiny suture.

After forty, he stopped counting and turned his gaze to the ceiling.

"I'm sorry. I know it hurts."

"Don't mind me, I've had stitches before and I'm sure I'll have them again,"

Once she finished with his arm, she had him lean back in the chair and tip his head so she could better treat the lesser wounds. The position left her standing between his splayed legs and if circumstances had been different, she would've found it rather nice. Jex bumped her knee with his in understanding and smiled wearily.

She began dabbing at the laceration above his eye and the scrapes on his face. The strokes of the cloth were slow and the warm water alternated with the cool herbal wash soothed him. Eyes closed to keep the stinging liquid from dripping into them, he began to drift off under her touch.

Until the first prick of the needle.

Then he was wide awake and unable to stop a flinch. She jerked back and almost dropped the small sliver of metal. Her expression was apologetic and she chewed nervously on her bottom lip.

"Sorry," he shook his head tiredly, "you startled me, that's all. Go on."

She closed the gashes quickly, then moved back so he could look in the mirror. He whistled in appreciation; the sutures were incredibly tiny and he guessed the cuts would leave only a very thin scar, rather than the ragged lines he was anticipating.

"Very nice."

She bowed her head in acknowledgement, then turned away and began cleaning up the detritus of her work. After a moment, she stopped and turned back to him, laying one hand on his shoulder.

"Your ribs?"

"Later. She's giving me The Eye over your shoulder."

"Leave it, Enari. I'll take care of that," Vasi said from the doorway of her room, "Go on to bed."

Her apprentice obeyed with a bow and disappeared behind her closed door.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Enari lay in the dark, eyes squeezed shut, and listened. Tears rolled down her cheeks as the tale of what had transpired while they were in the city unfolded and her heart ached for the royal family. Losing Brinon had devastated them in a way only death could accomplish, and would cast a pall of uncertainty over the entire kingdom.

It was Kylan who'd found him as afternoon faded to dusk, when Enari and Jex sat drinking tea around his mother's kitchen table. The torina had thought him asleep, as it wasn't the first time he'd nodded off over decrees and letters before supper, and wasn't suspicious of his slumped posture and closed eyes. Thinking to wake her father with a kiss, she crept into the room and made her way to where he sat, lit by a stream of reddened sunlight.

It was only when she clambered into his lap and put her lips to his cheek that she'd known something was wrong. His skin was cold and he just didn't feel right, his ribs 'all spongy and soft' against her hand, she'd said, and his heart was still. When she shook him, his head lolled from side to side but he didn't stir.

Her screams had brought the tora running and as soon as she touched her husband, she knew he was gone. Anya, who'd followed her mother as far as the doorway, rushed in when she collapsed beside the chair, sobbing into Brinon's lap. She'd sent Kylan to fetch her uncles and so it was that the hysterical child flew through the door to Eryk's study and into his arms, startling everyone present. It had taken him nearly five minutes to calm her enough to tell him what had happened and less than half that long to race to his sister's side.

He found Anya crouched beside her mother, crying and stroking her hair. Aelani lay curled in the fetal position, her cheek resting against Brinon's boot. Fighting tears of his own, Eryk had lifted his sister gently and carried her to bed while Jordin had drawn the girls from the room containing their father's body. Kylan, however, had refused to be parted from her mother and Aelani allowed the girl to climb into bed with her, holding and rocking her until they'd both fallen into an exhausted sleep under Eryk's watchful gaze.

In the meantime, and unaware of the tragic event, Vasi had started the hunt for Jex and Enari. After searching the palace from top to bottom, she learned from the reluctant Master Librarian that they'd gone into the city near noonday.

"She is my apprentice, Battlemage Xander, and you should have checked with me first before taking her into the city. Look what happened!" Vasi was distraught and angry, though she and the High Mage were trying to be quiet.

Jex was making no attempt to do so.

"And how would checking with you have helped?" he demanded hotly, "We'd have been jumped regardless, Kvinna."

"Jex," Eryk said. "Her point is one of principle. Enari is not your apprentice, nor are you her guardian. I know you meant well, but you should have obtained the kvinna's permission first."

"She'd have said no." Jex pointed out.

"You're damn right I would have said no!" The profanity was unusual for Vasi. To Enari, at least, it was a truer indication of her fury than her tone of voice.

"Why would you have forbidden it, Vasi?" Eryk queried, clearly trying to act as a mediator.

"Because she doesn't like me." Jex stated before Vasi could speak. His voice had gotten a little quieter.

"I—" Vasi stammered, "It has nothing to do with whether or not I like you. You were irresponsible with a child and she was injured in your company."

"That brings me to my point," the young mage sighed, "Well, two points actually. One, Enari isn't a child. That was part of the trouble, actually. Two, and I say it with all due respect, Kvinna, but this was inevitable. If not today, than tomorrow, or a month, or a year from now. She has no idea how to defend herself and it's dangerous."

"You said she killed one of those men," Vasi said tightly.

Jex laughed, short and mocking, “It was *lucky*. She isn’t going to get any bigger, and a lot of men will look at her as an easy target. If she doesn’t learn, she risks becoming a victim every time. That can be just as deadly for her companion as for her.”

“Why, that’s—”

“He’s right.”

The statement was calm, authoritative. Silence descended for a moment.

“Eryk, no,” Vasi protested feebly.

“Yes. You may not like it, but he’s right. Enari must learn something of how to defend herself. Just like today, you won’t always be around to watch over her.”

“I can teach her everything she needs to know,” Jex offered.

“Absolutely not! While I understand the logic, you’re still the cause of all this. I can find someone else to teach her.”

“You won’t find a better teacher,” Eryk pointed out, “Jex is... extremely skilled.”

“Oh I’m sure you are, shadow runner.”

“If you know about that, then you know I speak the truth,” Jex retorted. He was calm now.

“Fine, fine! But I’m warning you, if you hurt her, I will come down on you faster than you can run. Do we have an understanding?”

“Yes, Kvinna. Of course, you’ll have to get in line. The guards who arrested me tonight will probably want the first go after the trouble I gave them.”

“Arrested you?” Vasi asked, bewildered.

“Haven’t either of you heard?”

No answer.

He proceeded to relate the story of his detention for Brinon’s murder and subsequent interrogation by the overzealous Reginold, though he glossed over the details of the latter. Perimos had ridden in shortly before and had been near the western gate purely by chance as the arrest was taking place. Even now, no one seemed to know where the captain had gotten his information or his evidence.

There was an appalled silence when he’d finished. As angry as she was, Vasi couldn’t help but feel a twinge of pity. Not even the cheeky popinjay deserved such treatment.

* * *

She is mesmerized by the light as it shimmers off lines on the floor, lines that cast reflections as she slowly tilts her head from side-to-side. The Other had told her not to move, but the flickering, sparkling diamond shape is so pretty, she can't help it.

Fingers dance across the pages of the big book, pages that slowly turn to the cadence of the steady chanting. It makes her ears itch. She rubs her hands on her swollen, naked belly and feels little kicks flutter against her palms. The Other had made her take off her dress and now she's getting cold kneeling here in the dark corner, and her knees are starting to hurt.

Then the man appears, and all discomfort is forgotten. He is lovely and terrifying all at once.

Her eyes are seized by the beautiful lights on his armor. They speak, the Other and He, but she doesn't understand the words. Her head feels heavy, fuzzy, like someone stuffed cotton in it, and her mouth tastes bad. Did her tongue have fur on it? She hoped not. The men wouldn't kiss her anymore if her tongue was furry and she liked the kissing. But then, that's what got her full of a baby and now that she's big, only a few of them want to kiss her anymore. She's thirsty again, too, and wonders if the Other will give her more of the sweet golden stuff to drink.

The Other turns toward her. In the pretty eyes, she can see reflections of the candle flames, but they're green, not yellow like fire should be. A hand beckons and she shuffles forward on her knees, bowing her head to watch as her passage scuffs the nice lines, wondering if she'll be slapped for making a mess. Cook slapped her sometimes, when she was clumsy or dropped things. But the Other didn't hit her and she was glad. Fingers, cool against her suddenly hot skin, grasp her chin and lift her face. Was the Other going to kiss her? The men that kissed her touched her face like that. She keeps her eyes downcast. She knows she isn't to meet the eyes of her betters when she serves them.

Something shines in the Other's hand and she is captivated.

A line of heat is drawn across her belly.

Pain. Terrible, burning, awful pain in her head. She smells something nasty, like an overfull chamber pot.

Then there is only the dark.

* * *

“Nani? Nani!”

Someone shook her shoulder roughly and she jerked upright, panting in terror and trembling. Her hands flew to her belly, only to find it flat and whole as it should be, and she nearly cried in relief. Strong arms slid around her, pulling her close, and she could hear a fast pounding under her ear.

Jex.

It was Jex who woke her and he sounded almost as afraid as she felt. She hadn't meant to fall asleep in his room and rather than wake her, it appeared that he'd simply put a blanket over her and let her remain where she was.

He'd want to know about the dreams now.

“Was,” he licked his lips and tried again, “was that yours or mine?”

It took her a moment to make sense of the question, but then she remembered; they didn't need to touch anymore for the link to work. Just being in close proximity to one another would do and the space of the bed was apparently close enough.

Then it occurred to her that she didn't actually know whose dream it had been, and the more she thought about it, the more uncertain she became. With the exception of that first time, she'd been touching Jex in some way every other time she'd seen the violent and gruesome visions. So, were they hers? Or were they his? Did it even matter?

He seemed to come to the same conclusion.

Throwing aside the bedclothes, he got up and began hunting for a tunic and boots. Enari winced when she caught sight of his back. The entire upper portion was a mass of black and purple bruises, but thank the Goddess none of his ribs were broken.

After the two men had retired, Enari waited until she was certain her Sura was sound asleep before creeping out of her room and going to Jex. She'd found him asleep in the bath, head tilted back against the rim and

breathing with his mouth open. He hadn't stirred when she closed the door, which was unusual. Only when she touched him did he startle awake.

"You're going to boil yourself," she admonished.

He passed a hand over the water's surface, using a touch of magic to heat it further. "I like it this hot. Feels nice on sore bits and pieces, and boiling yourself is something you only accidentally do once. There's room in here for two, if you'd like to join me."

Enari folded her arms and scowled. *"Oh no you don't. You're going to get out of there and let me look at you."*

"You're awfully bossy."

It had taken quite a bit of sweet-talking, and he refused to actually leave the hot water, but he'd finally let her look at his back and shoulder.

She'd been horrified at what she saw and angry that anyone could be so cruel as to inflict such injuries on purpose.

"Vasi says they'll heal on their own, remember?" he grouched, climbing stiffly from the tub at last. Enari averted her eyes until he'd donned trousers.

When he tried to pull a clean shirt over his head, he found himself unable to raise his arms enough to do so. She'd taken it from him and made him lay down on the bed on his stomach. Knowing how suspicious he could be, she held the little vial of oil she'd brought with her in front of his face to let him have a good look before breaking the seal. He took an experimental sniff and seemed satisfied. Craning his neck, he watched her climb onto the bed and straddle the back of his thighs.

"Where did you get that?"

"Babirye sent it up for you."

"Ah, rumor certainly travels quickly. What are you—ohhhhhhhh. That's lovely." He sighed and closed his eyes. "Mmm, a little harder if you don't mind, but watch the shoulder."

She'd complied, leaning her weight into the motion of her hands as she'd seen Babirye do for Gaylan once after an especially rough go in the practice yard. He made noises of contentment as she worked, sounding like nothing so much as a cat being petted to its satisfaction.

"I do not sound like a cat," he mumbled into the pillow, "and I swear, if you try and scratch me under the chin, I might just bite you."

In moments, he'd been asleep again, but she continued to rub and knead at his back and shoulders, trying not to hurt him as she worked the healing oil into his contusions. Babirye had said that it wouldn't achieve full potency unless it was completely absorbed, which took longer than she'd anticipated. He was snoring soundly by the time she finally finished.

Careful not to wake him, she moved onto the bed and curled up against his side. She should have returned to her own room rather than risk more of Vasi's wrath, but after the night's events, she couldn't bear to sleep alone.

It seemed her ministrations had helped.

As he dressed now, she observed no stiffness in his movements and he seemed to have forgotten about his injuries altogether. His shoulder didn't even look swollen anymore.

"We need to see Eryk."

She glanced pointedly at the darkness beyond the window, but he shook his head and beckoned to her. "I don't think this can wait."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

It took some searching, but they finally found them.

The mother was unconscious, her tongue removed and her belly slit open from breastbone to groin, and it was very unlikely she would survive or even wake before she passed. Her baby, a boy, lay beside her. Though his skin was still warm to the touch, he was gone.

It all moved quickly from there. The High Mage sent Enari back to her own room while he, Jex, Antilles, and Perimos examined the bodies. Perimos requested to see the rooms where the other bodies had been found, and in the order they'd been discovered.

"So this is where the boy was found?" he asked the High Mage.

Antilles walked slowly around the tiny room, eyes wide and unfocused as he used his Second Sight. He'd been a little slow to start, having been drug from his bed by a very insistent Jex less than half an hour ago.

"Yes."

"What did he look like?"

"Does it matter?"

Antilles spoke up then, back turned to the door. "It might, Eryk. A lot of ritual sacrifices must resemble the target to some extent or have a connection to them in some way. Tell us everything you remember. I've heard it already, but Peri needs to know, and maybe you'll remember something new."

"He was ten, his mother said. Black hair, green eyes, pale complexion. She said he never stopped talking and was always getting into mischief. He was about to begin training to be a smith."

Antilles shared a glance with Perimos. "Remind you of anyone we know?"

Perimos snorted. "Other than the age."

"Even the age some days," the other joked, "although in all seriousness, I have a suspicion that it's really the only thing that saved him. Lucky bastard."

Eryk watched the discussion with a silent frown beetling his brows.

"What else?" Antilles prompted.

Eryk closed his eyes and began to speak slowly, "His mother told me that the last time she saw him, she'd set him out on the kitchen steps as a punishment."

"For what?"

"For talking back to her when she'd asked him to do something."

The two younger mages exchanged another meaningful look. Antilles came back to stand beside them, rubbing at his temples where the inevitable headache was beginning.

"How many times as a boy did Jex get punished for mouthing off or not following instructions?" He waved a hand as Eryk started to answer. "Sorry, rhetorical question. I'm not sure any of us can count that high. Anyway, I had a chat with him the night I arrived, after you'd told me how sick he'd been,"

Perimos snickered and the other man's face reddened a little, but he continued, "I Looked at him, and I could see the stains."

"Stains?" Eryk asked. Each mage gifted with the ability to See interpreted things differently and he'd never been entirely clear on how Antilles Saw. For some reason, he always thought of dirty laundry when he heard it described.

The dark-haired man grimaced, trying for the hundredth time to clarify his visions. "I See the touch of magic on another like a... well, a painting, I suppose. That's closer than the pile of soiled clothes you seem to picture. Different colors for different practitioners, different brush strokes for different techniques, and different mediums depending on the intent. Someone with raw talent, but little practical experience in wielding it, touched Jex with black power and the only way I can explain it is that he looked like a canvas a child touched with greasy fingers. Then over the top of that, someone or something else—probably the demon he told you about—placed marks that indicated much more experience and finesse. They left psychic stains on him that manifested themselves as sores, scratches, and the like."

“What about the others?” Eryk asked.

He’d thought there was something unnatural about Jex’s prolonged illness, and the way it resolved itself had been the most disturbing aspect of the entire odd affair. Though he’d been vague about the encounter, likely on purpose, Enari had been persuaded to provide more detail.

He still shuddered when he remembered the drawing she’d made of the foul thing and its mark. They’d burned the parchment immediately afterwards, just to be safe. She’d also shown him Pasusabael’s sigil in the *Treatise Maldicta*. He didn’t understand how the second Greater fit and Enari had been unable to tell him.

Unable rather than unwilling, he was fairly sure.

Perimos shrugged. “We can only go on what you and others tell us, as we arrived too late to inspect the bodies themselves. I would very much like to have examined the tor, for instance.”

“Wait!” Antilles snapped his fingers. “That girl, the one who cared for Jex, Goddess bless her patient heart. Enari, yes?”

“What about her?” Eryk could almost see the gears turning behind the man’s eyes.

“Did she see the other bodies?”

“Well, that depends on your definition, I suppose. I get the impression from Jex that she saw them in dreams or visions or something of the like.”

“No matter, this might still work. I’d like to speak with her, if I may.”

* * *

“Enari?”

She turned at the sound of her name to find the High Mage standing in the doorway to her bedroom. She caught sight of Antilles behind him and he winked knowingly back at her. Perimos simply inclined his head in greeting.

“Novice Namelum, may I speak with you?” Antilles asked.

When she nodded, he beckoned her out into the sitting room. Jex and Vasi were at opposite ends of the chamber, ostensibly ignoring one another. Eryk pulled out a chair and she sat, uncomfortable under the weight of so many eyes.

Antilles set a stack of parchment and a quill in front of her, then took a seat across the table, folding his hands before him and leaning towards her.

“I think you’ve seen— well, Seen— some things during your time here and perhaps before that as well.”

Vasi stiffened. “Adept Denier, I don’t think—”

He put up a hand, but his eyes never left Enari. She didn’t confirm or deny his suspicion, merely took up the quill and began to draw. The room remained silent until she sat back and pushed the paper in front of Antilles. He beckoned Perimos and together they studied the drawing.

“Jex, High Mage Alycon, would you take a look at this please?” Perimos waved them over and the two joined him in a cluster around Antilles’ chair.

Jex reacted first.

After studying the page for only a few seconds, his eyes snapped up to Enari. “This is perfect, Nani.”

“How do you know?” Antilles asked.

Jex hesitated, glancing at Eryk uncertainly.

“Go ahead,” Vasi prompted, “Tell them how.” Her gaze was unwavering as she stared him down.

He squirmed a bit before finally answering. “I...she showed me.”

“Showed you?”

He tapped his temple.

Eryk whirled on him. “Jex, you know better! Using psychomancy is—”

“—forbidden,” he finished impatiently, “Yes, yes. Go ahead and punish me if you like, but it’s already done. She’s actually quite gifted.”

“We will discuss this later.” Eryk growled.

Perimos pursed his lips, choosing to ignore the moral squabble. He’d never understood the rationale behind the prohibition on psychomancy. It was in truth a rather practical skill, and one his people employed with great reverence. He himself had made use of it on occasion, although he’d never gotten caught.

“It is exactly what you saw in the cellar? There are no differences, discrepancies?” he asked.

They shook their heads, but then Jex reached down and picked up the parchment. He brought it closer to his eyes and then took it to the window, holding it up to let the light shine through.

“There *is* something different. What’s this in the corner?”

“Bring it back, dolt, and let us look,” Antilles held out a hand and made a come-hither gesture..

Jex returned to Enari’s side and tapped the drawing. “Here, this faint bit in the corner. I didn’t see anything here before.”

She sketched a mark on a fresh page and handed it to him. Three ovals overlaid one another at different angles, forming a sort of six-lobed flower with an infinity symbol where the center should be.

“Andehai?”

Enari nodded, then shook her head, looking frustrated..

“His soul,” Vasi explained after a brief glance, “Dusan is there to collect his soul.”

“I suppose that makes sense,” Perimos mused, chewing on his thumbnail as he considered. Eryk absently reached over and pulled his hand away before he could bite the nail to the quick.

“I’d like to try something else,” Antilles announced, rising to his feet. “Novice Namelum, will you draw the other bodies you’ve Seen for me please? I’ll be right back.”

He returned awhile later, carrying a box in one hand and a fistful of brushes.

“What are you doing, Antilles?” Jex moaned.

“Testing another theory,” he replied cheerfully, setting the box on the table in front of Enari and removing the lid to reveal a dozen small jars of paint.

Without hesitation, she dipped three fingers in an oily-looking black and pressed them lightly to a picture of Jex that none of them had seen her drawing. She smudged them in a very deliberate fashion and Antilles let out a low whistle.

“I—Goddess, Jex. That’s exactly how you seemed to me. Remarkable.”

Jex said nothing, but he looked a little nauseated. Turning away, he strode back to the window and stood looking out, saying nothing. Enari watched him with apprehension until Antilles touched her arm.

“Don’t mind him,” he murmured in her ear, “He’s not much of a morning person, as I’m sure you’ve discovered by now. Can you do the others as well?”

She went quickly, adding color to each drawing in turn. In the end, there were four sets lined up on the table. The picture of Jex was paired with the dark-haired little boy, both smudged with black fingerprints as Antilles had described. Councilors Porcus, Le’Quar, and Wastrel were grouped together, stained a sickly yellow-green, and Tor Brinon was placed next to Secretary Fin. They, too, were marked with black.

But it was the fourth set that garnered the most violent reactions.

A very pregnant Aelani was drawn in exquisite detail, down to the haunting sorrow in her tear-filled eyes. Her hands cupped her swollen belly protectively. Beside that was a drawing of the woman who’d been found eviscerated that very morning. The body of her infant son lay beside her.

“Thank you for your assistance, Novice.” Antilles closed the box of paints and offered her a handkerchief for her dirty fingers. “I think this is exactly what we needed.”

Enari rose from the table and went to stand by Jex. She put a tentative hand on his bicep and he slid an arm absently around her waist. Eryk stepped sideways as if to get a better look at the drawings, and in the process, blocked Vasi’s line of sight to her apprentice. She seemed not to notice.

“I think, High Mage, we four need to speak in private,” Antilles said.

“It will have to wait a bit. I promised my sister that Jordin and I would make the funeral arrangements for Brinon.”

He nodded solemnly. “We can make a start of it on our own. Perimos? Jex?”

Jex gave an acknowledging wave and bent to whisper to Enari. “I’ll come to you tonight, after Vasi’s in bed. Wait up for me?”

She squeezed his hand in assent and he followed the other men from the room.

* * *

“That girl of yours is brilliant,” Antilles observed as he closed the door to Eryk’s study.

Jex elbowed him and scowled. Perimos blithely ignored them and crossed to a cabinet on the far wall, removing several glasses and a decanter of amber liquid.

“Well, she is! I don’t know that I would’ve made some of those connections without her.”

Jex began to fidget. “She isn’t—”

“Oh Goddess!” Perimos exclaimed, “Everyone knows you’re bedding her at every opportunity, so save your breath.”

Jex shot a dirty look at Antilles.

“I didn’t tell him anything of the sort!” his friend insisted.

“I don’t believe you for a second, Antilles Denier.”

“You’re simply too predictable.” Perimos said, pouring them each a measure of brandy. “And even if you weren’t, it would only be a matter of time before you tried. Anyone who knows you knows that you can’t help yourself.”

“Since Vasi hasn’t poisoned me or killed me in my sleep, I’m not as obvious as you two seem to think,” Jex muttered, accepting his glass and settling into a chair.

“So,” Antilles said, changing the subject. “Did anyone else pick up on the significance of her drawings?”

“Possibly, but I’m sure you’re going to enlighten us anyway, Sir Know-It-All,” Perimos joked, taking a healthy swallow of his drink. “This is certainly higher quality than what he keeps in his study at home.”

“One of the many luxuries afforded by life in the Imperial Palace,” Jex said, knocking back the alcohol and reaching for the decanter.

“So how much trouble do you think you’ll be in for using psychomancy on her?” Perimos asked.

Jex looked him over shrewdly. “I suppose it depends on what kind of shape the observatory is in when he gets back. I might get off easy.”

It was Perimos’ turn to glare at Antilles.

“Sorry,” he said sheepishly, looking down at the glass he was turning around and around. He wasn’t a drinker, and with good reason, but at least it gave him something to do with his hands.

“You, my friend, are the worst secret-keeper I’ve ever met. Consorts forbid the enemy ever gets hold of you.”

Antilles bristled and pointed at Jex. “It’s only him I can’t keep secrets from! He just looks at me, exactly like he’s doing now, and—”

Perimos shuddered and held up his hands. “Stop. I don’t want to know how he gets the information out of you. I’ve nightmares enough without that mental image.”

“Hey!” Jex protested.

“Anyway,” Antilles pressed, desperate to move on from the uncomfortable topic. “Did you notice anything unusual about her drawings?”

“Other than the fact that an eighteen-year-old girl just drew us a pile of pictures one might find in a torture manual, not really,” Jex answered.

“You weren’t paying enough attention then,” Perimos told him. His eyes returned to Antilles. “She used two different colors and her technique was markedly different with each.”

“Exactly!”

“Which means?” Jex prompted.

“Which means, we’re either dealing with two different practitioners or two different demons. Or both, I suppose.”

“Well, that’s just bloody brilliant,” Jex sighed. “Not only have we been unable to learn a scrap of information about the first summoner, but now we might have two? You’re just full of encouraging news this morning.”

“Thanks to Enari, we still have more information now than we’ve ever had. There’s still a chance to stop the next murder, or possibly, murders plural, before they happen.”

Jex’s eyes turned dark as he looked down at the portrait of the heartbroken tora. Rage filled him at the thought of all that had befallen her family in this last week. Losing Brinon had been horrible enough, but now someone was threatening not only her life, but the life of her unborn child.

“How do we stop it?” he asked through clenched teeth.

“We’ll need a little time—a few days at least—to prepare, but now that we’ve a sense of the summoner’s aura, there’s a counter-ritual that can be used to send the curse rebounding upon its caster,” Antilles explained earnestly, “but this has to be timed very carefully.”

He was shuffling the parchments over and over in absentminded agitation as he spoke and Jex finally snatched them away and set them out of reach. Antilles reached for his glass, but Jex took that as well, swallowing the contents and returning it to the sideboard.

“What’s the catch?” Perimos asked, “There’s always a catch with these things.”

“Well,” Antilles hesitated, “the supplies we’ll need are rather hard to get outside the Tower.”

“I can take care of that,” Jex declared, “You can get anything in this city if you know the right people. Just give me a list of what we need.”

“Excellent. Once we have them, I’ll line the ritual out in more detail and we’ll get set up. Is there a place I can work without servants and the like stumbling all over what I’m doing?”

“I’m sure our Master Librarian would be glad to lend you one of his storage rooms. They aren’t large, but they’re out of the way and no one ever bothers with them except the occasional assistant.”

“Perfect.”

“Anything else?”

“Yes. One of us will need to be ready to spring the trap at a moment’s notice. I fear the trigger for this curse is the birth of the tora’s child.”

“She’s not due for eight weeks yet, or so Vasi says,” Jex told them, “So unless your preparations will take longer than that, we should be safe enough in that regard.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

The morning of Tor Brinon's funeral dawned bright and clear, a crisp breeze stirring the bright autumn leaves into spirals of dancing color. Enari sat in her room, dressed in a borrowed black gown, and stared solemnly out at the birds singing in the gardens. She felt that the world should have stopped, the birds remained silent on such a somber day as this.

But that sort of poetic justice only occurred in books.

Kylan slipped in, a pale wraith in black, and climbed silently up onto the bed. She curled into a tight ball and laid her head in Enari's lap, eyes closed. Astraeus settled onto the floor nearby and rested his chin on his paws, watching. Enari petted the girl's hair and waited to see if she would speak.

"It's so quiet here," the little girl said at last, "It's the only place in the whole palace now that is. Not even Jex's room is nice today." She began to cry and Enari simply put her arms around her and held her close. Sometimes, that's all that could be done.

"Will they find him?" Kylan sniffled, wiping her nose on her sleeve and looking up at her with hope. "Will Jex and his friends find who took my papa?"

Enari nodded encouragingly and her confidence seemed to comfort the torina. She put her head back against Enari's shoulder and they sat together in silence until Kylan drifted into a fitful doze. Enari rested her cheek on the girl's hair and returned to staring out at the day. While she'd been truthful when she said the mages would catch whoever was doing these horrible things, she couldn't help but worry they wouldn't be in time to prevent another tragedy.

"Nani?"

She looked over her shoulder to find Jex standing in the open door and felt a wave of relief wash over her. He looked haggard, as if he hadn't slept since she saw him three days ago, and though he was impeccably dressed in his formal robes, the dark velvet only emphasized the circles beneath his eyes and chalky pallor of his skin.

She eased Kylan out of her lap and the little girl murmured in protest but didn't wake. As quietly as she could, Enari crossed the room and into his embrace. He was soft and warm and real, an anchoring contrast to the surrealism of the past days.

"Are you alright?" he asked, returning the embrace fiercely.

"Are you? You look as if you haven't slept for days."

"Probably because I haven't. I've brought you something," he said, stepping back and offering her a tissue-wrapped bundle. "From a friend of mine."

Curious, as this was an unusual time for gifts, she plucked up the folded parchment from beneath the ribbons holding it all together and broke the seal.

Lady Enari,

Jex was so kind as to relate to me the details of your unpleasant encounter with several of my employees some nights back. I would like to extend my most sincere apologies for their uncouth behavior. Enclosed, you will find compensation for your damaged property as well as a small favor, to be used once if ever you should have need of my services.

Most Sincerely Yours,

Moravella Elshanon

P.S. I hope the color is to your liking.

Pulling away the paper, Enari withdrew a gown of cobalt blue silk. It shimmered as she turned it and intricate gold embroidery graced the cuffs, hem, and neckline. Beneath that she found a linen chemise, and like

the dress, it was much finer than what had been destroyed. A black-and-gold braided belt completed the ensemble.

An envelope amidst the wrappings caught her eye and she carefully draped the gown over the back of a chair before picking it up. She upended it over her palm and a ring with a black gem set in it tumbled out. It was similar to the one Jex had, but the outside of the band was plain and there was only one jewel.

“That,” he said, closing her fingers around it, “is something you should guard very, very carefully. The Shadow Lady doesn’t issue boons lightly and it might come in handy someday. Put it out of sight, but keep it on your person always.”

While she strung the ring onto the same cord as the amulet she’d been given by Zaya, Jex crouched beside the bed and put a hand on Kylan’s shoulder, shaking her gently until she opened bleary eyes and looked around. As soon as she saw him, she scrambled into his arms. Enari watched as he hugged the girl, tears glimmering in his eyes before he blinked them back.

“You smell like Enari,” she sighed, rubbing her cheek against him.

He laughed, then turned his head to whisper in her ear for a moment before rising to his feet and taking her hand.

“I wish I could spare you this, dear heart,” he sighed, “and all that came before.”

“It’s ok, Jex. Papa is in Andehai with the Goddess now and Uncle Eryk says he’ll watch over Mama and Sarene and Anya and me from there. And the baby, too.”

Jex sniffed once, blinking rapidly before swiping a hand across his eyes. It came away wet and Enari felt tears of her own welling up. She was as moved as Jex by Kylan’s faith.

He offered his other arm to her and she took it, letting him lead them out into the hall. His boots echoed softly in the empty corridors as they walked, overlaying the quiet shuffle of slippers. Other than their footsteps, the palace was silent and it was as if they three were the only living souls in a world long abandoned.

Their destination was the Chapel of Roses, where the interment rites for tors and toras for centuries had been held.

“Wait here,” he whispered as they entered, directing Enari to a pew near the back before proceeding with Kylan up the aisle, ignoring the suspicious stares and whispers that followed.

He halted beside the front pew where the other torinas sat solemn in black mourning clothes. He prodded her gently towards her sisters, not seeing the searing look of disdain Sarene shot at him. Kylan was reluctant to release his hand, even at the beckoning of Anya.

“Your mother and uncles will be here in a minute, and Enari and I are just at the back. Go on now.”

She sat and scooted down the pew to snuggle into Anya’s side. He turned on his heel, moving back down the aisle to take his place beside Enari. Sarene’s eyes tracked his every move and she squinted thoughtfully at the pair.

“Stop staring, Sarene,” Anya murmured, “It’s rude.”

With a shrug, she faced front and waited for her mother and uncles to arrive.

Every occupant of the chapel rose as one when Tora Aelani crossed the threshold, escorted by her somber younger brothers. Not even her lady’s skilled hand with a makeup brush could hide the fact that she’d been weeping.

The trio moved slowly down the aisle to take their places in the front row.

The sun flooded through the huge stained glass window in the southern wall, falling on the ornate casket of Tor Brinon. An ageing priest stood behind it, silent and immobile in his hooded robes. He waited for the chamber to quiet before he began to speak.

“Today, we begin a time of deep and darkest mourning. Our beloved tor has fallen and shall rise no more.” At this he paused, looking to where the royal family sat.

“He was an honorable leader, and a man who loved his family and his people beyond measure. He will be sorely missed, for his wisdom and understanding has guided and sheltered us all...”

He was interrupted by a stifled cry from Tora Aelani. All eyes turned to her as she doubled over in the pew, clutching her belly and clenching her teeth in agony. Sarene had her hand on her mother’s shoulder and was frowning at her. Eryk rose, then fell to his knees before her, motioning Vasi to join them.

The kvinna was beside them in an instant. A brief word from Aelani, and Eryk and Jordin were helping their sister to her feet. She cried out again, the sound sharp in the still air, and the men had to half-carry her away.

Vasi looked around until she spotted Enari, then motioned for her to follow.

Jex caught her hand. "What is it? What's happening?"

Enari's eyes were troubled as she looked down at him. "*The tora is in labor, I think,*"

"N-no," he stuttered, "No no no. She can't be. We aren't—we're not ready for this!"

Her smile was bitter. "*Babies have their own sense of timing, my love. I'm sorry.*"

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

“Alright, Aelani, this is it. You’re nearly finished. Now PUSH!”

Vasi’s voice was firm and commanding as she crouched between the tora’s straining thighs. The woman had been in labor all the previous day and night and the sun was now sinking on her second full day of struggle. Exhaustion showed plainly on Aelani’s pallid features.

“Oh, Black Goddess, I can’t,” she wailed, dropping her head back onto the pillow. She panted hard as another contraction crushed across her swollen abdomen and her knuckles turned white as she clenched a twisted length of sheet. “Vasi, I can’t!”

Vasi looked up. Wisps of pale hair had long ago escaped her neat bun and now stuck to the sides of her ruddy face.

“You can and you must. Your babe is eager to join us. Just a little more and it will be over, I promise. Now push!”

Enari stood at her Sura’s shoulder, dressed in the long white tunic and matching loose trousers worn by all midwives and their apprentices, waiting for instructions. Her worried eyes flicked back and forth between the tora’s sweating face and Vasi’s crouched form.

It had been nearly two days and the baby had not crowned, seeming reluctant to enter the world. Tora Aelani strained and cried out, but no progress was made. Vasi glanced up at her apprentice and spoke softly, wiping her blood-smearred hands on a towel between her knees.

“I want to make one last attempt to determine the babe’s positioning, but I cannot do so through an external examination. Your hands are smaller, Enari, and you’ll cause her less pain.” Rising and putting a hand to her back, Vasi spoke to the prone woman.

“Aelani, I believe your baby is turned to the breech position. I had hoped that time would turn him or her correctly, but this hasn’t happened. I need to examine you inside and see if the babe can be adjusted. Enari is going to assist me in this, as her hand is smaller and should cause you less discomfort. Do I have your permission to proceed?”

Aelani’s frightened eyes shone fever-bright as she solemnly considered midwife and novice, but she finally nodded and closed her eyes.

“Do what you must.”

Taking Enari’s right hand in hers, Vasi inspected the nails to be sure there was no dirt beneath them or ragged edges. Satisfied, she fished a small pot of oil from her bag and greased Enari’s arm to the elbow. The smell of lavender filled the small chamber.

Enari did as instructed, wincing at the look of pain that flashed across the tora’s face at the intrusion. Hesitating, she glanced up at Vasi, who only nodded. Muscles clamped against her fingers and she halted, glancing at Vasi again, concern and uncertainty written clearly on her face.

“I know this is difficult, but I need you to relax as much as possible. We’ll be quick.”

The pressure eased and Enari slid her hand inside the tora’s body very slowly. She reached, but felt nothing. Vasi pressed on her elbow, urging her deeper.

Finally, her fingers touched something that moved weakly, just a tiny flutter of motion...

“What do you feel?”

Enari patted the tora’s foot with her free hand and Vasi’s face crumpled.

“It is as I feared. Withdraw and clean yourself. I have another task for you.”

The tora grunted in relief when the novice had fully withdrawn her hand. Enari moved to the basin beside the blazing hearth and quickly washed the blood and other discharge from her arm. Drying her hands, she returned to Vasi, who was once again crouched at the foot of the bed.

Vasi spoke without looking up, “Go out into the hall and bring the High Mage to me, quietly.”

Enari turned away and slipped from the birthing room into the small, stuffy antechamber. Anya paced fretfully, her face twisting in sympathy with her mother’s increasingly feeble screams. She was wearing the

same rumpled clothing she'd been in the last time Enari had seen her, more than twelve hours ago and she looked dreadful. The dark circles beneath her bloodshot eyes stood out like livid bruises.

The torina looked up at her hopefully, but she merely shook her head and approached the High Mage.

Eryk was standing with his back to the room, but glanced down when Enari tugged his tunic. She beckoned him and he followed.

His sister lay on the bed, eyes closed and chest rising shallowly. She was, by now, too exhausted to even cry out when the contractions ripped through her. She clenched a length of torn sheet in her hands and clutched it so hard her knuckles stood out white against her already pale skin. She looked shriveled and shrunken, except for the great mound of her belly.

Vasi stood, drawing the sheet down to cover her patient's naked lower half, and came to him. She directed Enari to wipe the tora's face with a cool cloth and give her some water, then led Eryk to a corner. When she spoke, it was barely above a murmur.

"The babe refuses to come. I've examined her and he's turned round the wrong way." Her eyes were the only indicator of the true worry she felt.

"How can I help?" Eryk forced his voice to remain calm and tried to banish the rising fear to a dim corner of his mind.

He'd been called to serve at a breech birth once, by a terrified young Hendai herdsman camped near the Tower. The man had been shown into Eryk's reading room by a baffled and uneasy adept who, not speaking or understanding the Hendai tongue, could not comprehend what had his guest so distraught. Eryk knew a little Hendai and the other spoke enough Egali that the message was finally conveyed. The man and his wife were returning from the Great Market when she'd gone into early and unexpected labor.

Even though Eryk had no training or experience in midwifery, he'd been unable to refuse the man's desperate pleading and pitiful cries. He'd had gone with him, arriving to find the screaming woman writhing on a pile of blankets within a hastily pitched tent. He tried to examine her, earning a strong kick in the face for his efforts, and administered something for her terrible pain. Despite his best endeavors, in the end the baby was born bottom first, tearing its mother open to bleed to death while they'd been helpless to stop it.

But he had no time to pay heed to fears or memories now, not with his sister's life in jeopardy.

"I need your assistance to turn him," Vasi was saying, "I've tried to move him from inside, but he's wedged in such that I can't without injuring him. Your hands are stronger than mine and I may need you to push for her. She's at the end of her strength, so there isn't much time. Can you do it?"

Eryk nodded. "Just tell me what to do, Vasi."

She grinned tiredly. "It's good to work with a competent man for once. Most would balk and a few of them over the years have fainted." Her smile vanished. "You are going to hurt her, but there's no other way to do this and bring them both through safely."

* * *

Enari wiped the cool cloth across the tora's face, gently brushing the tangled hair away from the woman's fevered skin. She opened her eyes and smiled weakly.

"Thank you, Enari." She licked her dry lips. "You are very brave to stay, especially for one so young. The kvinna should be proud."

Enari touched Tora Aelani's face and tried to convey reassurance. She'd never seen a birth drag on for so long and the tora's age worried her, as it worried Vasi. She took the woman's hand, noting how icy it felt in her grasp. She rubbed the fingers, attempting to chafe some warmth into the chilled flesh. As another contraction tore through her, Aelani reflexively clutched Enari's hand almost hard enough to break bones. Enari glanced up at Vasi and the High Mage, wishing they would hurry up and do something to end this suffering. It seemed an eternity that they conversed, but finally they returned to the bed together.

"Aelani, Eryk's here to help us. Your babe is still turned the wrong way and we must move him. I'm sorry, but this is going to be painful."

Vasi spoke quickly as she moved Eryk where she needed him. His large hands were splayed across his sister's stomach and he could feel each contraction as her muscles tensed and relaxed in rapid succession. There was very little time between them now.

Following Vasi's directions, he probed and then twisted both hands in a circular motion. Aelani shrieked as if she were being gutted, but Vasi instructed him "Again. Once more." and he did as ordered. He felt something inside the laboring woman shift and ease and suddenly Vasi cried out joyfully.

"Perfect! Enari, here, hold the towel and be ready. Eryk, lift her up!"

Eryk moved to the head of the bed, put a knee to the mattress, and lifted Aelani beneath the shoulders as Vasi commanded the woman to push. Aelani did, bearing down and groaning loudly.

After a moment, there was a liquid sound, a long pause, and a thin wail. Laughing and weeping, Aelani collapsed against her brother's supporting arm, turning her face into his chest as tears of joy and relief flooded down her cheeks.

"Careful. Support his head."

Enari held the bloody, mewling bundle as Vasi used a knife to sever the umbilical cord. She stared in wonder at the red and wrinkled little face. He was so tiny it scared her. What could be his chances of survival being born so soon?

"Take him to the fire and clean him. I'll finish here. She's still bleeding." Vasi directed, turning back to the exhausted woman and talking her through the final stages of the birth process.

Enari rose and took the baby over to the hearth. She knelt down and, using her hands and the soft cloths left floating in the pan of warmed water, cleaned the blood and mucus away. The infant was still and she could feel his chest struggling to rise. She turned for Vasi, but she was bent over the tora, back to the fire.

A figure in the shadowy corner beyond the hearth stones caught her eye as she turned back.

He was tall, lean, and silver-haired. Not the silver of old age, but that of pure starlight. His lightning-blue eyes were watching her intently. Their disconcerting and unblinking gaze slowly shifted to the baby and Enari reflexively tried to shield the tiny body.

"It is time. I claim this one as mine for the Goddess herself, to fulfill a bargain struck." The raspy whisper echoed and rang as if coming from within the depths of a long-dry well.

When Enari looked down, the baby's lips were turning blue and she could hear quiet choking. Quickly, she pried open his mouth and swept her pinky inside, clearing out a thick greenish substance.

Still, the infant didn't draw breath. Enari turned him gently onto his stomach and patted his back. He coughed weakly but just once.

Turning him onto his back again, she pinched his nose shut and blew gently into the open mouth.

Nothing.

Blowing a little harder this time, she watched his chest rise one time but no more. She turned him over and patted his back again, using a little more force in her panic.

Looking up, she met the God-Consort's eyes squarely. It had taken her a moment, but she recognized him for who and what he was.

"You can't have him, Dusan! Be gone from this place. There will be no death here today."

Dusan smiled, an ancient and knowing expression, and held out his hand.

A purple vapor rose from between the tiny lips and coalesced into the misty shape of an infant. It moved towards the Guardian as if drawn by a magnet and she could do nothing but watch it go.

The little form beneath her hands fell still.

* * *

"My baby?" Aelani struggled to rise and look around Eryk, searching for Vasi's apprentice and her child.

"A beautiful healthy boy, my tora. You'll have him in just a moment." Vasi replied.

Eryk eased his sister back to the pillows and turned towards the fire, concern rising in his chest.

The baby wasn't crying.

He took a step away from the bed and from there, he could see over Enari's shoulder. She knelt before the fire and the infant lay across her knee, deathly still and silent. He watched as the girl removed her mouth from the darkening face. There was no breath or movement from the still form and the little lips were tinged with blue.

Oh, Goddess.

* * *

Enari felt furious tears sting her eyes. The tora had labored for two full days to birth her son, and now he was dying. She glanced around one last time, only to find the High Mage and Vasi still intent on Tora Aelani.

A voice like cobwebs and crystalline chimes sounded in her head, startling and painful in its authority.

“The gift is given unto you, Enari Ihil Hithaerien, daughter of Tanith Minal Hithaerien, and a choice. Knit the broken strands of body and soul and return this life to its vessel, if that be your true will. But choose with care, for all choices have a consequence.”

The wall between her will and her power shattered like a pane of glass struck with a hammer. Power flooded into her and Enari knew there really was no choice in this.

Crooking her fingers, she beckoned and the purple cloud halted, hovering in midair for a moment before reversing direction and streaking back towards her. She gathered it up and, placing her palm over the unmoving chest, she let the power course from her and into the torin, pushing his essence back into his body.

It was the hardest thing she'd ever done and the magic burned as it left her. A golden light, so bright it nearly blinded her, mingled with the essence of the infant in her lap. Time seemed to stretch and stretch and stretch before snapping back with a suddenness that took the pain and light with it.

Enari found herself holding a very loudly alive, and very angry, newborn. Two tears of relief fell onto his upturned face before she could dash them away.

* * *

Oh Goddess, the baby wasn't crying.

He watched as Enari darted a glance around before settling her eyes on the shadowy hearth corner. She put a hand over the baby's chest, palm down with her middle and ring finger pressed together. There was a flash of light and Eryk faintly caught an oddly astringent scent.

The baby opened his mouth, drew a long shuddering breath, and began to bawl furiously.

The girl's shoulders sagged in relief and two tears fell from her tightly closed eyes.

* * *

Unaware that any had seen, Enari began to swaddle the now clean torin. He opened silver-flecked eyes so blue they were like the bowl of a summer sky and gazed up at her, tears rolling down his fat little cheeks.

Odd, but she'd thought his eyes were dark before, like his father's had been, but then she'd only glimpsed them for a second and she could have been wrong. He had a full head of black hair and he bore none of the squashed features common among many newborns. He quieted as she wrapped him in a warm blanket and was asleep by the time she rose and took him to his mother. Enari couldn't seem to tear her eyes away from the infant and was reluctant to release him.

Aelani held out her arms, a smile of weary joy lighting her face. She pulled back the blanket, and as any mother does, counted the baby's tiny fingers and toes. Eryk had slipped away to bring news of the boy's birth to his anxious siblings.

“Oh, he's perfect,” Aelani whispered. She looked up at Enari with a small frown. “When I didn't hear him crying, I was afraid...”

“Ayden.”

The tora sucked in a startled breath and Vasi turned slowly. The two women stared, mouths agape.

“What did you say?” the tora breathed.

“Ayden,” Enari repeated clearly, “Last but greatest of yours. The Goddess has seen him and his father sends his blessings.” Her voice was soft and deep and it carried power. She reached out and trailed a finger along the torin's cheek and he turned his mouth, trying to suckle even as he slept. After a breath she removed her hand and, bowing quickly, turned and hurried from the room.

Aelani stared at Vasi, a mix of wonder and fear in her eyes.

“I thought she couldn't speak and Black Goddess, Vasi, did you see her eyes?”

“She's never spoken a single word, not once in the years I've known her...”

“Her *eyes*, Vasi! Did you see her eyes?”

“How could I not?”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

When Vasi entered the antechamber, she found the three torinas and Jex waiting anxiously. Torina Sarene was clinging to the mage's arm and she looked pale. Little Kylan leaned against his side and he had one hand resting atop her tousled hair. It was clear she'd been crying.

The small party made the room feel overcrowded and even more stifling than before. Her apprentice was nowhere in sight, however, and Eryk was also absent. Another twist of nervous fear gripped her heart.

"Is she alright?" Kylan whispered, "Is Mama alright?"

"Oh yes, my dear, and you have a new baby brother."

"He lives, then?" Sarene demanded, a little sharply.

"Yes, of course. You may go in and see them, if you wish."

Kylan and Anya immediately rushed to the door, but Sarene moved more slowly. Vasi's frown deepened as she watched her. If she didn't know better, she would think the expression on the young woman's face was one of indignation. She shook her head, dismissing the idea as ludicrous. What reason would the torina possibly have for being angry on such a happy occasion? Vasi decided she must be more weary than she'd thought.

* * *

Eryk put his head into the dark chamber and glanced about. He'd followed Enari to this room after she'd fled the birthing chamber, but it seemed now that she had vanished into thin air. Then he heard a quiet rustle from the thick draperies over the window and smiled.

Stepping inside, he closed the door softly and made his way to the far wall, twitching the curtain aside an inch or two. He found Enari seated in the deep sill, knees drawn up, chin resting upon them as she stared out into the night. From this angle, he could see her face only in profile, but the diamond track of tears reflected the faint light from beyond the glass.

"This was one of my favorite places to hide when I was a boy. May I join you?"

Without turning her gaze, she inclined her head in assent. Letting the drapes fall closed behind him, Eryk folded himself into the opposite corner of the wide ledge.

Gazing out at the moving torches of sentries on the battlements, he spoke softly, "I saw what you did, Enari."

That startled her and she jerked her head up to look at him, but just as quickly turned away again.

Eryk continued to stare at the night. "He was dead, wasn't he? And you called his soul back to his body."

After a brief hesitation, she nodded once, a short, jerky motion.

"Powerful magic," he ventured, watching her from the corner of his eye.

She shrugged, still not looking at him.

"I have never in all my years met a mage who could do that."

A puzzled frown creased the skin between her brows and he continued, "Oh, I've met many who could sever a soul from the body and in a myriad of interesting and messy ways, but never one who could heal the break and return life." He stared hard at her, his gaze direct now. "Where did you learn such a thing?"

Silence.

"Did Vasi teach you to do that?"

A single head shake; no.

"Then who, Enari? This is important."

The pause stretched so long that Eryk didn't think she would respond but at last she turned and faced him fully.

Torchlight reflected eerily in eyes that were no longer gold, but the blue of summer lightning. Every trace of their previous color had utterly vanished.

"The Goddess showed me," she said simply.

Eryk sucked in a startled breath, letting it go on an involuntary Hendai curse. What in the name of the Five had happened in that room? His mind reeled and he couldn't decide what shocked him more, that she had just spoken aloud or that the eyes studying him so calmly were not those he had grown used to over the past months. He finally chose to address the first.

"You speak, then?"

Enari snorted and shrugged, a touch of contempt in the gesture.

"Scoff if you like, but it's a shock to anyone who's known you, however briefly. Vasi says you've never spoken. Why?"

"I..." she tilted her head to consider, "there was no need."

"But why tonight, of all nights?" he persisted. He could think of a hundred other times this would have been of great help.

Her gaze was direct. "You were there and you said you saw. Must you ask?"

"I suppose not, but do you know how dangerous this power of yours is?"

"I don't even know *what* it is, High Mage."

"*White Mother preserve us,*" he thought, "I'll need to do a little research to be absolutely certain, but I feel confident in saying that it's life-magic."

She looked at him blankly.

Eryk sighed in frustration and ran a hand through his hair. "Do they teach you nothing at the Temple?...Diu. Do you know the history of the last Great War?"

"A little. It was a very long time ago. The Temple was not involved."

"Alright," he crossed his legs and settled into a more comfortable position. "Would you like to hear a story, or are you too old?"

"Vasi tells excellent stories."

"Indeed she does. You're right about the last Great War occurring a long time ago. A very long time—almost two millennia, according to the histories in the Tower library. These are the histories that survived the fire set accidentally by a novice pyromancer many centuries ago, mind you, and not all the histories we ever had. A great many have been lost in one way or another and—"

"You do not tell excellent stories, High Mage."

Eryk threw up his hands. "I'm out of practice! Jex grew out of storytelling years ago and I've had no one else to tell them to since then. I apologize for offending your sense of procedure, my lady."

Enari giggled a little and the sound deflated his ire instantly. He quirked an eyebrow at her. "Do I have your permission to continue?"

Enari nodded, eyes sparkling.

"As I was saying, the Great War occurred more than two thousand years ago, before Egalion was a united kingdom. And it was fought because of life-magic." His tone had turned serious. "Long ago, there were many mages who possessed life-magic, to one extent or another. It's a power of beauty and healing when used in the way you used it tonight, Enari, but there were a handful who, above all else, desired dominion over others. They began to experiment, calling souls from Dusan's realms into vacant bodies. The souls were called into any body they had on hand, those recently dead or those buried for a century, it didn't matter to them. And it was not always the spirits of humans they brought forth, either, but beasts and demons as well. They used their power to raise armies of the dead and went to war with each other and many of their neighbors. This was the practice of necromancy, and not the intended purpose of life-magic. Do you understand the difference?"

She shook her head, a look of mild concern on her face.

"Necromancy is black magic. It is the summoning and binding of spirits who have passed beyond the Gates and into the God-Consort Dusan's realms, whether Andehai or Diu."

"How is that different from what I've done?" Enari whispered.

"Oh, child, it is very different. A necromancer is one who robs Dusan of those already judged. What you did tonight was to knit together the broken strands of a soul and the body to which it rightly belongs, before it was beyond the Gates. Life-magic is intended as a form of healing, a white magic. The spirits called by a necromancer are trapped into dead flesh, any available dead flesh, but not for the purpose of restoring functionality or actual life. They come back as shambling thralls, enslaved to the mage who summoned them forth, and it's the reason we burn our dead instead of burying them as they do in other lands."

He was a little relieved to see the look of revulsion that crossed her face.

“The All-Mother gave life-magic to mortal mages as a gift of life, hence the name. Its use in necromancy was abhorrent to the God-Consorts. An army from across the Fengal Mountains was sent to wipe out the warring necromancers and to eradicate Life-magic itself.”

“And they were successful?”

“Yes. Towards the end of the war, the few remaining Life mages fled the ruins of their towers and cities, into Old Tvan. They made their last stand in Inqualkhan and were said to be sheltered and aided by powerful Vintyri sorcerers. The magics of the fairy people were strange and nearly a match for the God-Consorts themselves. The alliance gave the mages renewed hope of a victory. The histories say that together, the Five laid siege to the grand city, a siege that lasted a score of years and ended in the throwing down of Inqualkhan’s great walls and the destruction of the entire city. When the others would have wiped the Vintyri from the mortal world for their treachery and defiance in aiding the condemned mages, Dusan interceded. Instead of executing the entire race, he convinced his brothers to show leniency. He gave the Vintyri a choice; retire to Andehai as they were or remain in the mortal world, diminished. Those that chose to remain were banished into a realm of twilight until such a time as they were called upon to redeem themselves. Old Tvan, once a land of majesty and exquisite beauty, was turned into a place of darkness and swamps, and life-magic was taken from the world of man.”

“Or so the histories say.”

He smiled. “Or so the histories say.”

“Do you believe the Vintyri are real?” she asked. The childlike eagerness in her voice was touching. Despite all she had seen and experienced, Enari still appeared as an innocent to his eyes.

It reminded him very much of her mother.

“I don’t know. Old Tvan is largely unexplored and there could be any number of strange and powerful creatures there. Do you think they’re real?”

Shutters slammed down behind her eyes, and the eager innocence and curiosity were abruptly replaced by flat and distant neutrality.

“I do not know, High Mage. Will you excuse me? I’ve been up for two days and I am very tired.”

Startled as he was by her baffling change in demeanor, he recovered quickly. “I know and I’m sorry, but stay a moment, Enari, please. I have one other matter I’d like to discuss with you and I fear I’ve waited too long already.”

“As you wish,” she sighed, “What do you require of me?”

“What do you know of your mother?”

It was a strange question and he sounded nervous, which puzzled her.

“She died when I was born. I’m told I look like her...or I did, until this.” She waved a hand vaguely at her eyes.

“And your sire?”

“Only that he must exist,” she said with a touch of sarcasm, “I don’t imagine my mother conceived me without his help.”

He chuckled. She was nearly as cheeky as Jex when she wanted to be.

“Your mother studied at Turrus Arcana for a time, did you know that?”

“No,” she frowned, “but I suppose that would explain a few things. Magic is generally an inherited talent, yes?”

“Generally, and the most strongly gifted inherit their ability from both the mother and the father.” Goddess, this was harder than he’d thought it would be and it was clear Enari didn’t understand what he was hinting at. He’d just have to say it outright, then.

“Enari,” he took her hands and his stomach lurched when she flinched. “Your father, he would’ve...*I* would have brought you to the Tower to be with me the moment you were born, if only I’d known...if your mother had told me. I loved her very, very much. With all my heart, and I’d have taken care of you both.”

He didn’t know what to expect. Joy, denial, even anger perhaps, but not the unaffected stare she was giving him now.

Very slowly, as if afraid he'd refuse to release them, she removed her hands from his. She slid from the windowsill and after a shaky breath, he followed her to the door, dropping a hand on her shoulder to stop her as she reached for the handle. She looked up, expression weary, but didn't flinch this time.

"I..." she swallowed hard and he could see tears at the corners of her eyes, "I don't know how you want me to feel. Or what you want me to say. It's—it's too much. I'm sorry, I don't know what you want."

A single tear slid down her cheek and he wiped it away. His smile was kind. "I only want for you not to flee from me as if I'm going to bite you. Tomorrow, when you're rested, we'll talk again. Alright?"

Enari nodded in agreement, and with the briefest flicker of a pale smile, she was gone.

* * *

"I don't understand," Vasi said again. She was pacing back and forth across his study, wringing her hands in agitation. "You were facing the fire when Enari took the baby. I looked up once and you had the strangest look on your face. What happened?"

"I suppose I owe you an odd tale after what you told me of her birth, though this one is relatively short in comparison. What do you remember?"

"I gave the torin to Enari and sent her to the fire to clean and warm him...it was quiet, but I was so focused on stopping Aelani's bleeding and making her comfortable." She frowned as the details began to come back to her. "The baby wasn't crying."

"Aelani noticed that, too. I still had my back to them, but when I turned to see what she was looking at, I saw Enari hunched forward with her mouth over Ayden's nose and mouth. She pulled away and his little lips were completely blue. She looked into the corner by the hearth, stared into it as if she were looking at someone I couldn't see, then put her hand over his chest, like this," Eryk imitated the gesture he'd seen Enari use, middle and ring finger pressed together, the others splayed. "There was a flash of light, bright like summer sunshine, beneath her palm and then he was crying, just like any newborn ready for his first meal. And there was that smell."

"Smell?" Vasi asked, perplexed. She hadn't smelled anything unusual.

"I couldn't place it at first, but I've had some time to think and it was ozone. You can smell it sometimes if you're nearby when lightning strikes."

"Do you think what happened tonight has anything to do with what happened before with Jex?"

"I don't see how it couldn't, though they've both been rather close-mouthed with the details so it's hard to say for certain," Eryk said.

"Ugh. This whole tangled summer has given me a permanent headache. Have you ever seen such things before?"

He shook his head.

"Her eyes change from gold to blue in the time I had my back to her, and suddenly she speaks. She Named him, you know." Vasi placed a clear emphasis on the normally unremarkable word. There'd been something prophetic about the way her apprentice had spoken.

Eryk raised an eyebrow. "Did she? I'd wondered where my sister got the name. That would also explain why she was so worked up when I went back to see her after the girls had all gone to bed."

"What did she tell you?"

"Enari or Aelani?"

She laughed. "Both, I suppose. We might as well compare notes."

"Aelani told me that when Enari brought the baby to her, she said his name was Ayden and that the Goddess had seen him. She said the girl just turned and fled after that."

"I don't know which of us was more startled, honestly. What does it mean, 'the Goddess has seen him'? Enari certainly must have at some point, to have a name for him, and she called him the 'last but greatest' of Aelani's children. I can understand the 'last' part, as I advised Aelani of the truth of it, but how could she know him as the 'greatest'?"

"I'm not certain, but there's something that concerns me more at the moment, though I'll need to do a little digging to confirm my suspicions."

"It's life-magic, isn't it?" she asked bluntly.

He blinked in surprise. "You knew?"

"Diu, Eryk, what else could it be? I know the histories are a little vague on the subject, but can you think of any other explanation? Does she know how dangerous it is?"

"I've spoken with her and did my best to impress the gravity of the situation upon her," he retorted dryly.

"This isn't the time for sarcasm! My apprentice has a gift that was eradicated—with extreme prejudice—once before. What are we going to do?" Vasi rose suddenly to her feet and began pacing in agitation. "I don't know how to deal with something like this! Perhaps now that our duty is done here, I should take her home."

"She can't go back to the Temple, Vasi, you know that. I have a great deal of respect for the kvinnas, but they are not prepared to deal with this and Enari can't go untrained. It would be too dangerous and if she has one talent she may have others. It was said to be so with the mages of old. Send her back with me, to the Tower. Or better yet, bring her yourself." He met her eyes and spoke with steady conviction, "You were never destined to be a sister. Come back to Turrus Arcana where you belong. Come home."

She ran a hand through her hair in distress. "I'll consider it. It's late and I'm exhausted, I won't make the decision tonight. We have to think of her feelings, too."

"I know. I think I can hazard a guess how she'll answer, but I'll speak to her, if you'd rather."

"No," Vasi stated firmly, "She's my apprentice and my responsibility, I'll talk to her."

"She's my daughter. We'll speak to her together."

She glared at him, hands on her hips. "Becoming High Mage has made you an overbearing git, has anyone ever told you that?"

Eryk began to laugh. "Jex reminds me regularly and with that exact look on his face."

"He's actually one of the reasons I'll have to think long and hard about bringing her to Turrus Arcana. All those two need is more opportunity to get into mischief together."

"Oh," Eryk thought, *"if only you knew how much mischief has been done already."*

They studied one another and his mirth died away. Standing, he took her hands and drew her close to him. Their eyes locked.

"Would you like company tonight?" he asked huskily. Passion smoldered in his gray eyes as he stared down at her.

Heat blossomed in her cheeks, but when she answered, her voice was firm and steady.

* * *

"Jex?"

The bed dipped slightly behind him.

"Mmm? Who's there?" He'd meant to wait up for Enari, but must have dozed off.

"Jex, it's me."

He knew that voice but the context was all wrong. Rolling over, he opened his eyes...and simply stared at the woman beside him.

Perched on the edge of his bed, she was a vision worthy of any succubatic fantasy. She wore a loose robe and the firelight behind her outlined her naked body through the thin material. Her hair tumbled loose down her back and over her shoulders, a corona of flame around her earnest face.

"Hello, Beautiful," he greeted her with a smile. "Am I dreaming? You talk in my dreams sometimes."

She laughed, a quiet, silvery sound, and touched his cheek.

"If you're dreaming, than so am I."

He squinted at her. "And what happened to your eyes? They weren't blue like that before."

"No, no they were not."

He sat up to get a better look and she immediately crawled onto his lap and kissed him hard. Her fingers clenched in his hair, nails scoring his scalp as she pulled him closer. He was momentarily taken aback by the intensity of her passion, but then his arms were around her and he was up on his knees. Her legs wrapped around his waist and her arms twined around his neck. He could feel her wetness through his trousers and groaned at the scorching promise of it.

“Make love to me,” she pled between fervent kisses. Her hands went to the front of his tunic and in a flash it was discarded over the side of the bed. He felt her fingernails drag down the bare skin of his back and he reflexively arched into her.

“Wait, wait!” he gasped, even as his hands loosed the sash holding her robe closed. “You can’t just not explain any of this and aren’t you tired after everything that’s happened? You’ve been up for two days straight, Nani.”

“Make me forget.” Her teeth nipped none-too-gently at his earlobe to punctuate the order before she soothed the sting with a pass of her tongue.

“We should probably—”

Before he could finish, she pushed off the mattress and bore him over onto his back. He grunted in surprise when his head struck the footboard, but the pain barely registered. Her fingers flew to the drawstring of his loose trousers and pulled free the knot.

Something was wrong.

He caught her wrists, stilling her, then shook her a little until she met his eyes. He tried to smile reassuringly.

“Not that I’m anything less than thrilled for you to have your way with me, but this isn’t like you. Talk to me?”

The fire left her expression and she broke eye contact again. Jex sat up and sighing quietly, leaned in and kissed her forehead.

It was such an unexpectedly tender gesture that it undid her completely. The tears began to spill down her cheeks and her breath hitched as she struggled to contain the sobs.

“Hey now.” He rocked them gently back and forth as she clung to him and cried.

“He died!” she wailed brokenly, burying her face against his shoulder. “Jex, he *died*.”

“Wait. What? Are you talking about the torin?”

“Yes,” she hiccupped.

“But I thought—Vasi told the girls—”

“I brought him back.”

He lifted her chin so he could see her face. “You what?”

“I brought him back. Eryk says he thinks it’s life-magic. Jex, I’m scared.”

“Oh, Nani.”

“I’m scared,” she repeated almost angrily, “and there’s more.”

“There always is,” he tried to tease, but her face remained sober.

“He says he’s my father.”

“Who? Eryk?”

“Yes.”

He didn’t really know what to say to that, but she didn’t appear to expect a reply.

“I don’t want to think about it or talk about it anymore, not any of it. I don’t want to dream about it when I fall asleep. I just want you to touch me until I can’t think of anything else.”

“Well,” he grinned roguishly, “who am I to say no to such a request?” And then his mouth came down on hers in a mind-shattering kiss.

She moaned and when his tongue touched hers, her back arched and her breasts pressed into his chest. He ran his hands beneath the robe and over her shoulders, pushing it down her arms until it caught around her elbows. While she struggled to free herself, he took her nipple into his mouth and sucked with a tempo that soon had her panting just as rapidly. Arms free, she pulled him closer and he sucked harder, using his teeth to lightly worry the hardened peak. His mouth moved to her other breast and he was rewarded with a short cry of pleasure. Her hips began to rock rhythmically as he coaxed her arousal higher.

After months together, he thought she was ready for him to push her a little, try something new. It was an act he enjoyed immensely but had yet to try with Enari and his mouth watered at the prospect.

“Lie back,” he ordered, and she did. He shucked out of his trousers and moved down the bed, using his lips and tongue on every inch of skin he could reach.

Jex pressed a kiss just below her navel, then placed his hands on her knees and guided them apart. She opened herself to his ravenous gaze without shyness or hesitation. He turned his head and kissed the side of her left knee, ghosting his lips along her flesh. She pressed her leg toward him, but he kept his touch light.

"Jex," she pleaded.

"Hush." he told her, "You asked me to make you forget." He pressed his lips to her other knee and began again, his mouth moving up her inner thigh at a torturously slow pace.

Just shy of his target, he drew back and blew across the opening petals, making her squirm and toss her head restlessly. He smiled knowingly, then leaned in and kissed her. She cried out and fisted the sheet at her sides, head thrown back and neck cording. He licked her firmly and her hips thrust up when the tip of his tongue grazed over the swelling bud of her clitoris.

Enari opened her legs further and planted her palms against the headboard, pushing herself toward him. His lips wrapped around her and she felt the suction, the gentle lash of his tongue. It set her nerves on fire and she felt as if she was falling and floating at the same time. Bursts of white light flared behind her eyelids.

His mouth played across her oversensitive flesh for a moment more before he went lower, slipping his tongue through her folds. His hands slid under her bottom and tilted her a little. Then, with a throaty hum of anticipation, he buried his face between her legs and plunged his tongue into her. Enari cried out in ecstasy and tipped her hips to take him further.

Just as her legs began to tremble, he withdrew and resumed the light, teasing flicks of his tongue he'd used before. She cursed him in frustration, bucking this way and that, trying to get him to take her in his mouth again. When at last he did, he also pushed two fingers inside her. She writhed and he had to use his free hand to hold her hips down to maintain the contact.

Jex fed on her until she was screaming and he felt the climax squeeze his fingers. She strained against him and he held her there for as long as she could stand before easing her to the mattress. He nipped playfully at her thigh and moved back up to lie beside her.

She was panting and her eyes were closed. He touched her cheek with trembling fingers and leaned in to kiss her mouth slowly and thoroughly. She could smell and taste herself on him and it instantly renewed her desire.

"Goddess!" she whispered, grasping at him as if she were afraid he'd disappear.

His only response was to kiss her harder and shift his weight over her. He pulled aside the fiery mass of her hair to expose her neck and put his lips to the sensitive spot where it met her shoulder. She shifted in his arms and twined her legs around his hips.

Jex felt her drawing him in and he was more than willing to go. Wrapping his hands around the curves of her shoulders, he sank into her body. She began to make a high-pitched keening sound as he filled her and he growled in response. Her hands dug into his back and her near-frantic passion was more than enough to inspire his. When he reached out to her mind, he was awash in light and color and sensation. The mental and emotional contact only served to heighten the physical experience and he reveled in it.

Suddenly, he rose above her and her back arched off the bed, trying to maintain the full-body contact. Her eyes were shut and she seemed to be mouthing words of some kind, though they were silent.

"Open your eyes and look at me."

She shook her head, the muscles in her neck and arms straining as she tried to push herself against him and regain the lost stimulation. He remained poised over her, waiting. Her hands slid up his arms and grasped at his biceps, then she rocked herself down on him with a roll of her hips.

Jex hissed a curse and she finally opened her eyes to stare up at him. In his beauty and passion, slick skin shimmering in the firelight and midnight hair loose around his face, he could have been one of the Consorts themselves. Enari licked her lips and arched toward him again. She whimpered when his hips snapped forward and he ground himself into her.

All at once, she felt him leave her body, but before she could even voice a protest, his hands were around her arms and pulling her up. She started to straddle his lap and he shook his head. He twirled one finger, indicating that he wanted her to turn around and she blinked at him in confusion. It was hard to think with her heart pounding and arousal singing through her blood.

Huffing out a mildly-impatient breath, he picked her up and spun her so that her back was to his chest. His knees guided hers apart and she could feel his hardness brush teasingly between her legs as he shifted his balance. The slide of his hot flesh made her shudder and instinctively push her bottom back.

While one hand fondled her breasts, the other reached around her hip and he positioned himself to enter her again. He did so with a single hard thrust and Enari had to shift her legs further apart and drop forward onto her elbows to keep from being knocked over

The new angle and renewed friction set her alight and she felt a delicious pressure and the inner quiver of muscles that proclaimed she was close. Jex leaned over her and kissed the back of her neck, increasing the pressure, then straightened and clutched her hips in both hands. Every forward drive of his hips, she thrust back to meet and pure rapture coiled through her body in ever-quickening spirals.

He felt it when her climax took her. Head flying back and inner walls clenching rapidly, she wailed her pleasure into the near-darkness. His fingers dug into her hips and he crested the wave a few heartbeats later, calling out to her and the Goddess as he filled her.

When he was spent at last, he slumped forward and his weight pressed her flat. She turned her head and found him with his eyes closed, his cheek resting on her shoulder. He was fighting to catch his breath and smiling faintly.

After a moment, he stirred, slipping from her and easing them both to their sides. They collapsed together in a tangle of arms and legs and hair.

She brought one of his hands to her mouth and kissed the knuckles tenderly.

“I love you,” she whispered against his skin.

He wrapped his arms around her tightly and for a long moment she thought he wouldn’t respond. Her stomach dropped into her toes and she grew suddenly chilled. Had she just ruined everything? Was that something she wasn’t supposed to say aloud?

“I love you too, Enari.”

His words were barely audible, but to her they echoed like thunder and for a moment, she thought she might fly off into the night with the sheer power of it all.

There were no dreams of demons and death for either of them that night.

EPILOGUE

He appeared as she knew He would. Their bargain had been struck, but tonight she'd failed and there was a price yet to be paid for her power. Even though she'd faithfully sent him souls, that mouthy kitchen boy, Collin Fin, her father, and the whore's child, to regularly renew the gift, the souls she'd promised this night had not been delivered.

Kneeling in the diamond of silver sand and white candles, Sarene bowed her head respectfully. As she did so, the moonstone pendant slipped from the neck of her shift, a suddenly heavy weight, like a lodestone around her neck dragging her face towards the floor. She gritted her teeth and fought against its pull. She might be contrite, but she would not grovel.

Not even before Him.

"My lord," she began, "I have a request of thee. More power do I seek."

"You seek more, when you have not paid the price for the last? I think not, mortal. The time for requests is over."

Sarene felt her ire rising. "I don't understand why you didn't just take the little horror. You are Consort of the Goddess, yet you let that voiceless whore thwart you? For her interference, take her life as payment instead. Our bargain will be comple—"

The room grew icy and the candle flames shrank to pinpoints of diamond-hard light. The Consort loomed above her, suddenly huge and dreadful in his wrath. Sarene was jerked to her feet and he seized the pendant in one fist. With a quick jerk, he ripped it from her throat, effortlessly snapping the delicate links. The power he had given her went with it and she felt the loss like a sucking void in the center of her chest.

"Her life is not yours to offer! You are a treacherous and deceitful wench. As retribution, I take back the power I have gifted you. Do not summon me again." Dusan let her drop.

And then he was gone and she was alone amidst the scattered sand and smoking wax.

* * *

The child had survived.

Two months early, a hard labor, and yet he *lived*. The poison he'd gotten from the old hag above *The Cauldron* all those months ago had been less effective than she'd promised. If she weren't already dead, he'd kill her himself. There was some solace to be found in the thought of her suffering in Diu for all eternity, however.

Deceitful whore.

Jordin Alycon sat back in his chair, goblet in hand, and stared pensively into the fire. Porcus, Wastrel, and Le'Quar had failed him too, and he'd dealt with them as he did everyone who failed him. His faithless wife had been the first to learn that lesson, and her mind had never been the same after meeting Pasusabael.

Her body, though, was still exquisite and he enjoyed it frequently. He should have brought her with him. Perhaps he'd send for her in the morning...

So, his nephew lived as did his sister, and things must go on as they'd been planned. A pity, but he was resourceful enough to make this work to his advantage. He'd offer his comfort and his services to Aelani on the morrow and once he'd shown he had nothing but the realm's best interest at heart, he would make his move. Anya would go back to her precious Temple, Sarene would be married off to the boring Reord in the spring, and once Kylan was a bit older, he'd give her to Min Ha or Gaherith, whichever proved to be most lucrative.

Oh yes, he could make this work quite nicely.

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Thank you for reading my book. If you enjoyed it, won't you please take a moment to leave me a review at your favorite retailer?

Thanks!

Ronelle Antoinette

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ronelle Antoinette lives in Colorado with her husband, two cats, one dog-who-believes-he's-a-person, and a small army of nieces and nephews. She loves fantasy in all its forms, but has a particular soft spot for romantic fantasy.

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