

Seeds of Glory and Ruin

Zeke – The Ball

Audrey laughed, the delightful sound washing over me as she placed a hand on my arm. I flashed my usual grin back at her, although I was barely listening to her words. I didn't need to. I could maintain a charming presence at any official function while half asleep—my mother had made sure of that.

The true focus of my attention was halfway across the ballroom, currently examining the supper table. Cadence looked stunning in a forest green dress that suited her perfectly. She would be at home surrounded by the living beauty of the trees.

Something inside me tightened when I caught sight of my flowers in her hair. Airlie had made use of my offering, then. She had seemed oddly reluctant when I dropped off the small gift for her sister, making me question if my famous charm had finally failed me.

As a popular plants mage, I had presented countless women with flowers over the years. But I had never had a physical reaction to the sight of one of them wearing the blooms. At most I had felt professional pride and pleasure at their pleasure. It was a small service I had always been happy to provide for those of my tribe and then the Guild. But this was different.

I slid deftly out of the conversation with Audrey, eager to reach Cadence before anyone else. But as I approached her, I slowed, giving myself time to admire her appearance while my presence was still unnoticed. I had been carefully avoiding her for days—not wanting any of the Tartorans to notice my excessive interest in the treasure they had hidden in their midst.

I couldn't stay away now, though. An emotion I couldn't entirely name drew me toward her too strongly to resist.

The nervous fear on her face made me shake my head. Apparently a crowded dance floor held more danger than illicit nighttime wanderings. It looked like dancing hadn't been part of her father's makeshift curriculum.

I slipped up beside her and spoke into her ear.

"Surely someone who's willing to brave the forbidden section of the library isn't scared of a mere dance floor."

She turned toward me, a smile on her lips.

"I'll willingly dance with you."

My insides gave another strange clench at her emphasis. I smiled back at her.

"I knew it couldn't be fear keeping you over here."

"Not at all." She chuckled. "I'm afraid it's nothing more interesting than a lack of acquaintance." She seemed to be struggling to maintain her carefree façade. "People don't exactly fall over themselves to get to know the Guild's one remaining non-apprentice."

A brief flash of anger swept over me, but I suppressed it before she could catch any hint of the emotion. Besides, I should be glad for the denseness of most of the Guild. If any of

them had been able to see the truth of this remarkable girl, I wouldn't have been allowed near her.

"Their loss." I held out my hand, and she placed hers willingly into it.

"Perhaps I should warn you that I can't actually dance," she said with a wry look.

My voice dropped low, her nickname slipping out. "All you have to do, Cadie, is follow my lead."

I stepped backward toward the dance floor, not wanting to take my eyes off her. She followed, willingly, and I wondered where else she might follow me if I asked.

Before I could get swept away in the idea, I wrapped my arm around her waist, pulling her against me and giving me something else to fill my brain. She fit against me perfectly, soft and warm and intoxicating.

I directed her through the spins and turns of the dance without conscious thought, and somewhere in the back of my mind it registered that she had no trouble following me.

"See," I forced myself to say with a smile, afraid she might guess at the intensity of my reaction to her nearness. "You're a natural."

She shook her head. "You're just a good teacher. Too good for this to be your first time dancing with an inept partner. I'll try to earn a position somewhere above the bottom of your list by not stepping on your toes."

I chuckled at the idea of my ever relegating her to such a position. "No one who knows you, Cadie, would put you at the bottom of any lists."

Her nickname had slipped out again. This is why I had been avoiding her. After our misadventure in the library and our following conversation in her room, I couldn't help the new intimacy that had sprung up between us. I only hoped no one else had noticed.

"You might be right," she said, still focused only on our conversation. "I know my sister always had me at the top of her list of people so annoying she wanted to dump them head-first in the river."

I laughed at her attempt at self-deprecation. "Didn't the two of you live alone? So that must mean you were bottom of the list as well."

She just grinned at me. "Thus proving you wrong—something that probably needs to happen more often before your head grows out of all proportion."

I suppressed another laugh, ignoring a shadow of irritation at this evidence that she was more than usually immune to the charm I had worked so hard to hone. Of course she—the person I most wanted to impress—was the least affected.

"You would get on well with my mother," I said, the light-hearted words reminding me of my earlier musings. Would Cadence come to Tribe Nicabar one day if I asked?

Before I could stop them, the words fell from my mouth. "I hope I can take you to visit my tribe one day. I think you'd like them. I know they'd like you." They would more than like her, but I bit down on my tongue hard before I could let anything else escape.

Her face responded to the gravity of my words, and I could have kicked myself for ruining the light mood. I hadn't meant to even hint at my intentions so soon.

But when she spoke, my anxiety eased.

"I'd be honored," she whispered.

I pulled her closer, my arms reacting instinctively to her words. It was impossible to keep things light when she looked at me like that.

“Cadie, I—”

“There you are!” An unwelcome voice, unnaturally brisk and cheerful, cut me off.

Cadence turned to see her sister standing beside the supper table with a false smile on her face. I let her go, putting distance between us as my much more practiced smile set on my face, concealing the emotions beneath. Cadence might be confused by Airlie’s interruption, but I recognized disapproval when I saw it.

“Airlie.” I added an extra flourish to my bow, hoping to distract her enough to give Cadence an escape. “The woman of the hour. I hardly dare ask if you’d honor me with a dance.”

She rolled her eyes while Cadence’s eyes flew back and forth between the two of us.

“She’s not in a dancing mood.” Nikolas stepped up beside Cadence, and I had to restrain the possessive instinct that caught me off guard.

From the sour look on the prince’s face, Airlie had actually turned him down. At any other time, I would have cheered her on—Nikolas had a lot to learn about the role of royalty if he thought his surly superiority was princely behavior. My mother would have squashed it out of him ruthlessly if he’d been left in her care. But right now I couldn’t appreciate anything that had him looking at Cadence as if he’d only just registered her beauty.

“What about you, Cadence?” he asked. “Dance?” He held out his hand, sounding far more charming than usual, and I couldn’t breathe for a second as I waited for her to refuse.

But instead she put her hand into his and let him pull her close. Once again I had to restrain myself, looking after them but not letting myself take a step in their direction.

“Don’t look at her like that,” Airlie snapped.

I turned back to her, surprise breaking through my focus. Something had made her drop her mask of control, and the true emotion behind it caught me off guard.

I stared at her. What had I done to warrant this anger?

“She’s only being polite dancing with Nikolas,” she said at my look of confusion. “So don’t take it as some sort of challenge.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking—” I started to say, but she cut me off, shaking her head.

“Oh, I know it’s just a game to you. To most of you.” She swept a look around the crowded ballroom. “And you’re welcome to play it, as far as I’m concerned. Just not with Cadence.” She stepped closer, not taking her eyes off me. “She’s not as grown up as she looks tonight, and she doesn’t have experience with any of this.”

“With balls?” I asked, deliberately obtuse.

Her eyes narrowed. “With handsome, charming boys who flirt with her—and everyone else.”

“Thank you for the compliments.” I gave her my most infuriating grin. “And here I was thinking my charm wasn’t working on you.”

She snorted. “Don’t even think about aiming that smile at me. I’m too busy for heart flutterings.”

I smirked, letting my eyes stray to where the Triumvirate stood in serious discussion with the king and queen—the Royal Mage conspicuous by his absence.

“Oh, really?” I asked in a lazy drawl.

When I looked back at Airlie, her cheeks had flushed slightly, and I couldn’t resist a petty moment of satisfaction. It was better than giving free rein to the anger building in me at her suggestion that I was merely toying with Cadence. It took all my self-control to remind myself that her impression was exactly the one I had been attempting to portray to the Guild at large.

She stepped even closer, going on the defensive to cover up her discomfort.

“I’ve heard your tribe is powerful. Do you expect to be a prince one day? That doesn’t give you the right to treat people’s hearts like they don’t matter.” Her whole body quivered with the intensity of her emotion. “Go ahead and use your weapons with those who are armored against them, but don’t go directing them at my sister.”

I stiffened at her mention of my future status. She had no idea what was demanded of me on the expectation of my future royal rank. Better I used charm than weapons that cut more deeply. I had never promised anyone anything I didn’t intend to deliver.

Various responses ran through my head, but another of my mother’s lessons sprang to my mind. When in the grip of emotion, it was better to say nothing than to let my tongue betray me into speaking out of turn.

Silently I bowed to Airlie, letting her take the cold movement as acceptance of her words if she wished. Turning, I plunged into the moving crowd, putting distance between us.

The further I moved away, the deeper my concern grew. Why had I responded so strongly to Airlie’s words? When I ran through them in my mind, I could find nothing I disagreed with—beyond the accusation that Cadence was merely another girl, like all the others at the Guild. But Airlie couldn’t know I had seen her sister in a way no one else here had, so she couldn’t be blamed for the mistake. So why had I lost my cool?

Already I felt myself swinging around, pulled irresistibly to search the dancing crowd for a forest green dress. And I knew, without a doubt, that despite her sister’s disapproval, I would seek Cadence out again—and soon. It would be wiser to stay away, but I didn’t think I could.

And that was what scared me. My path had been mapped out for me before I was born, and I had no option to stray from it. Whereas Cadence...she was an unknown. Once the truth about her seed came out, I couldn’t predict what might happen. What if she didn’t want to come to Tribe Nicabar with me—or was prevented from doing so?

The question made me shudder. When had I lost control regarding her?

Looking back, I couldn’t remember. While I pondered the matter, my feet led me around in a great circle, heading back toward where I could see her now, arguing with her sister.

At the end of the day, it didn’t really matter when. I had already lost any pretense of distance, and the only thing that mattered was that I find a way not to lose the most extraordinary and fascinating girl who had ever crossed my path.