



Excerpt from “The Flame”

Pleased, Koranen grinned at Danau. “Shall we say fifth hour and thirty, tomorrow evening?”

“That early?” she asked, her expression dubious.

“The performance is at seventh hour, so that will give us time to drive down to The Giggling Pear—I can recommend the food, at least, since I just ate there tonight—and still have plenty of time to order, eat it, and get to the performance hall. And if we skip *tiffin*, we’ll definitely have an appetite.”

Locked into a *date* with the enthusiastic man, whether she wanted it or not, Danau managed a smile. “That will be fine. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I may not be getting as much work done tomorrow as I’d like, but I’ll still need a full night’s sleep.”

Don’t take offense at her comment—you know the work on the Desalinator is important, and I’m sure she didn’t mean it to come across resentfully. She didn’t sound resentful, just matter-of-factual... Stepping back from the doorway, Koranen nodded.

“Of course—um, you have a nice smile,” he added before she could close the door between them. *If I can keep complimenting her, maybe she’ll warm up to me.* “You should use it more often.”

Danau blushed, reaching for the edge of the door. “Thank you. Goodnight.”

“I hope to see more of it, especially over dinner—goodnight!” he called out just before she shut the panel between them. Convincing Danau hadn’t been easy, and he still wasn’t sure if a single evening of courting her would be worth it.

But...it’s only a single night. The Gods know I really only need to hold her hand and test it with a little heat, something that would take a mere moment to test, if I wanted to risk injuring her. Spending an evening with her would be an act of kindness, and the Gods favor such deeds.

Turning away from the panel, Koranen inhaled deeply, then blew out his breath, trying to relax. He tensed in the next moment, catching a glimpse of movement through a palm-wide crack in Chana’s door off to the side. The moment he shifted toward her, she closed her door. Thankfully, without slamming it. As much as he didn’t want to hurt Chana’s feelings by not inviting her out to dinner, he couldn’t exactly court the blonde-dyed woman, either. Not if she noticed his heat.

And if Danau notices your heat, too? The thought was depressing. Koranen couldn’t shake it, though. If she does...that would leave only Ama-ti. I don’t want a wife with blue hair...and I really don’t want to be one of half a dozen husbands. I want my own wife, just her and me... Maybe I should get it over with, he thought, glancing at Ama-ti’s door. Give her a kiss, see if she can or can’t stand my heat...

Sighing roughly a second time, he almost crossed to her door. Something stopped him. It was a very simple thing, the squeak of a floorboard. In particular, the squeaking of a board in the suite beside him. Danau’s suite.

Oh, that would be smart—go out on a date with one, arrange for a date with another, then go back to the first and try to kiss her, when the second one could possibly hear you knocking on the first one’s door...never mind the third who was watching us just now... Somehow, I don’t think even Trevan ever managed to pull off something that fraught with courtship danger.