



Books by Jen Lynning:

Treaties of Moial Empath's Lure Heir's Dilemma Stranger's Choice Siren's Search

The Great Balance World
A Lady of Truth
A Princess of Vision
A Scholar of Beauty

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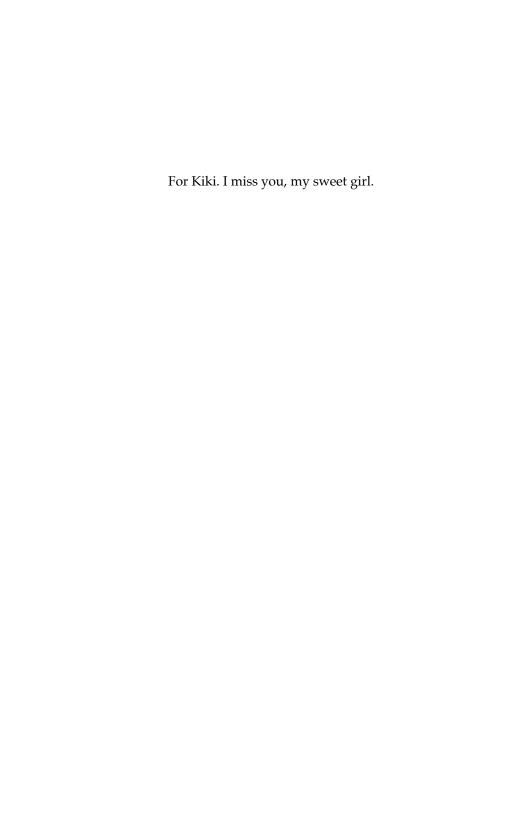
A Lady of Truth

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The Universe naturally seeks Balance.

Humans naturally seek Progress.

The Watcher of the Scales must reconcile these opposing tendencies.

Musings on Balance Anonymous 12th century Korengal Vhas

ONE

I was not committing treason. I had no right to be in the family wing of the imperial palace, but wandering away from the ballroom was not an act of treason in and of itself. That I had memorized the route to Prince Dmir's room showed premeditation, though I had hoped it wouldn't come to this. But it wasn't illegal.

On the other hand, entering his room as bold as I pleased without an invitation was certainly a dangerous approach to take. If he called the guards . . .

If he didn't . . .

Balance take it. If he had simply attended tonight's ball, I wouldn't have needed to sneak into his rooms. No, that wasn't fair. If my brother hadn't gambled away a small fortune, there would be no need for me to speak with the prince at all.

I didn't know what had come over Makev to make such a blunder. He was usually responsible, well aware of how our father reacted to mistakes. He provoked our father on a regular basis, but only with words. And after the last time? He knew better than to take such a risk and give Father an excuse to disown him. Losing money he didn't have was probably the worst possible offense in Father's eyes.

Makev had claimed the gin was at fault, saying he hadn't realized how much he had drunk until the morning after.

At least he had alcohol to blame. I had no one but myself to blame for tonight's act of foolishness.

My first stroke of good fortune of the evening came in the form of an unlocked door. I turned the knob and entered the prince's suite.

The sitting room was empty. Of people, at least. It was stuffed to overflowing with books. There were more in the one room than could be found in my entire house. None of my ancestors had put much store in the written word. Prince Dmir clearly did.

A shadow-light hung from the ceiling, the illuminated half of the sphere casting a blueish-white light over the room. More shadow-lights littered the room in stands on tables and hinged frames attached to chairs, but they had all been flipped so that the light halves were hidden. I didn't need any extra light, though.

With the way my luck was going, the prince wouldn't be in his suite at all. The unlocked door was the only instance when an obstacle hadn't been thrown in my path since learning of Makev's debt. After going through the trouble of securing an invitation to the imperial ball, however, I planned to check every room. I wasn't about to leave without being thorough, even if the odds were good that the prince was out winning another fortune he didn't need.

I made my way to the inner door and threw it open.

A single shadow-light on a stand by the bed cast a soft glow over the room and its inhabitant. Prince Dmir looked up and over at the doorway, his eyes wide.

My luck held—finally—and he did not shout for anyone to come drag me away.

"Your Highness." I curtseyed. The taffeta of my gown rustling was the only sound in the room. I kept my knees bent a moment longer than necessary, but the formal greeting hardly disguised the fact that I had barged into the prince's bedroom. Nor did it help me ignore the prince's bare chest, a few drops of water rolling over the smooth skin until they reached the waistband of his loose trousers.

I swallowed. I wasn't an inexperienced maiden, but I wasn't far from it, either. Nervous as I was, I still had some expectations for the evening, and Prince Dmir shirtless surpassed them.

The prince dropped the washcloth he had been holding next to the water basin. "Who are you, and what are you doing in my room?"

I wrenched my gaze back up to his face. No staring at his chest, I admonished myself. Look at the dark stubble along his chin instead. Maybe tonight wouldn't be as dreadful as I had feared. "I am Lady Eleya Poinar. I'm here on behalf of my brother."

"Your brother?" Prince Dmir grabbed the shirt tossed over the back of a nearby chair and slipped it on.

I watched skin disappear as he hastily buttoned the shirt. I wondered if he'd undo it again if I pointed out he had done the buttons askew. Given what I was here to discuss, I decided not to bother. I forced myself to look up once more. Tonight certainly wouldn't be as bad as I had anticipated. The prince was hardly some odious old codger—he was barely a year older than I—but knowing it and seeing it so plainly on display were two different things.

Belatedly, I realized he wanted me to explain who my brother was. I needed to focus. "Makev Poinar. I know we haven't been introduced, but you know Makev. Everyone knows Makev, really. But you played cards with him for a full evening, so you must certainly know him. Unless the gin affected you even worse than him."

"I barely drank any."

"Makes sense, what with you winning."

"Lady Eleya, I know your brother, but that still does not explain your presence in my room."

"I am here to make a deal with you, Your Highness. I want to resolve Makev's debt myself."

"Why can't Makev pay? The Duke of Smagrav is one of the richest men in the entire empire."

I heard the prince's scorn and wondered what my father had done to earn it. I didn't doubt for a moment he deserved it.

"Well, yes, but Makev isn't the Duke of Smagrav, yet. He does not have access to those funds. And it would be unfortunate if Father learned Makev had lost so much money in a gaming hell." Unfortunate was an understatement.

"But you can pay his debt?"

"Well, I can't pay it with money. Father doesn't allow me access to his fortune any more than Makev." I swallowed, but it was easier to say the next words than I had expected. Seeing the prince half naked had given curiosity the upper-hand over nervousness. Though perhaps curiosity wasn't the best description of the feeling sending warmth through my blood. "I am willing to negotiate terms to pay off the debt some other way."

Prince Dmir didn't hesitate. "No."

"I'll be honest, Your Highness." I was always honest, actually, but he didn't know that. "I am desperate enough to agree to pretty much anything. Please, name your terms."

"No."

Maybe he didn't understand what I was offering—or didn't believe I'd really make the offer. No point in being missish about saying the words, all things considered. I crossed my arms. "I'm saying I'll sleep with you—as often as you deem necessary to pay the debt in full."

Given the sum Makev had lost, the prince could demand quite a lot. I didn't know how much a single night should be valued at, but even if he wanted more than seemed reasonable, I wouldn't balk. I figured so long as he wasn't cruel—and nothing I had heard about Prince Dmir implied he was—after the first time, what did it matter? If that's what it took to protect my brother, then fine.

"I understood you, Lady Eleya. My answer is still no."

"Listen, I know I'm not the most beautiful—"

"Stop." He held up his hands as if to ward me off. "It's forgiven. Your brother's debt is forgiven. There."

I frowned. "I know how much he lost. No one would just forgive a debt of that size. I'm not going to walk away so that you can come after him tomorrow."

"I will sign a contract saying it is forgiven, if that is what you require."

I wanted to help my brother, but I didn't want the prince's pity either. "No. I said I would pay it off, and I will. I just can't pay it off in coin. If I'm too repulsive for your taste, fine, but I am not leaving until we reach an agreement."

"I didn't say you were repulsive."

"I am practically throwing myself at you, but you would rather lose three thousand crowns than sleep with me. I can read between the lines."

"I'd rather lose three thousand crowns I don't even have than take advantage of you that way."

I threw up my hands. "But I don't have any other way to pay off the debt!"

"Then walk away. Consider the debt paid in full."

"Debts don't work like that, Your Highness. I will not walk away with the scales unbalanced between us." My voice rose, desperation getting the better of me.

I had imagined so many outcomes to this evening. Meeting the prince—well, seeing him half-naked—had given me hope that resolving Makev's debt might become something I enjoyed. But even in my worst-case scenarios, I hadn't imagined Prince Dmir might refuse me completely. I couldn't accept his offer to wipe out the debt, Balance take it. I fully admitted that pride meant I didn't want his pity, but that wasn't the reason I refused to walk away. Debts always end up being paid, one way or another. I'd rather pay this one on my terms.

My hands became fists at my sides. My fingernails dug into my palms. "You must let me work off the debt."

The prince crossed his arms. "Are you afraid I'll go back on my word? Is that why you won't walk away?"

"It has nothing to do with your honor." I knew he was telling the truth about forgiving the debt. But that wasn't the point. My voice rose, frustration getting the better of me. "It has to do with Balance. Surely you understand the importance, Your Highness. Refuse my offer if you must, but don't leave this debt weighing on me. Pretending it doesn't exist won't solve the problem."

"And what will?" Dmir's eyes were wide.

"Repaying the debt! There must be a way I can do so without repulsing you."

"I'll hire you as my secretary!" The prince was nearly shouting now, matching my volume.

The shock on his own face after the words spilled out was enough to make me stop and think before replying. I didn't have the qualifications to be a secretary. I could read, of course. I even spoke several languages, including Ancient Koreini, but secretaries *knew* things. My best friend, Ketira, would have made an excellent secretary. She was scholarly enough—or she had been until her recent fervor to find a husband had taken over. But no one had ever lumped me in among the ranks of bluestockings. The position would be a sham, a way to placate me.

I supposed that wasn't any worse than becoming the prince's mistress in order to pay off the debt. It would even the scales, at least a little. On the other hand, Makev was more likely to notice my comings and goings during the day. He didn't know about my plan to resolve his debt, and I'd rather it stayed that way. If he discovered what I was up to, he'd probably inform Father himself about the debt in order to pay it off. The risk of Father disowning him over losing the money was too great.

"I accept, but on one condition."

Prince Dmir's eyes narrowed. "What?"

"I don't want you to publicize my new position. I can't be seen as your new secretary."

"You can't . . . be seen?" The prince gaped at me. "You barged into my room in the middle of the night proposing to become my

mistress, but you're worried about people seeing you as my secretary?"

"It's hardly the middle of the night." There were at least a hundred people in the palace ballroom as we spoke, none of whom would think of retiring for hours yet. "That's beside the point, though. If people find out I'm your mistress, they won't wonder why. I mean, they might wonder why you would pick me, of all people, but they won't wonder about *my* motivations."

"Lady Eleya, you are the daughter of a duke. Why would you be any man's mistress? Wouldn't you expect a gentleman to offer you marriage instead?"

"You are a prince, not a mere gentleman."

"I'm the younger, more boring prince."

"And the only one within reach at present. Not that I'd ever consider an affair with Prince Kivan—he's engaged, after all."

"So you do expect marriage."

"What? No. It has nothing to do with the possibility of me marrying him. I wouldn't do that to Princess Josyn. She has the right to expect fidelity from her fiancé."

"I'm fairly certain she knows better than to expect that of Kivan." She probably did. The Lyran princess was no fool, and she would know how to interpret the crown prince's surprise decision to tour Plumei's overseas colonies months before she reached her majority. They had been engaged since childhood, but Prince Kivan fled before his mother could insist on their wedding.

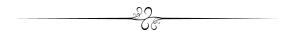
"That's not the point. I won't be the woman tempting her fiancé to stray." I frowned. "Why are we talking about me becoming your brother's mistress?"

Dmir threw his hands up in the air. "I don't know. You're the one who brought it up."

"Well, anyway, my point remains. People will wonder if I am suddenly working as your secretary. I don't want to invite such scrutiny."

"I won't tell anyone, Lady Eleya."

"Then we have a deal."



"Where are you off to this morning?" Makev yawned as he shuffled past me to the sideboard.

"The palace." I paused on my way out of the room and went back to pour Makev a cup of tea. Maybe the kind gesture would be enough to keep him from asking any more questions.

No such luck.

"The palace? What business do you have there?"

"I forgot something last night at the ball."

What I had forgotten was to ask Prince Dmir where or when he wanted me to start my new job as his secretary. He probably hoped I'd give up. He'd learn better soon. Lady Eleya Sonita Poinar did not give up.

It didn't occur to Makev to wonder what I might have forgotten, or why I didn't send a servant to fetch it. He took everything I said at face value. It always amused me that it was easier to deceive him, the one person who knew about my inability to lie, than anyone else.

I had told Makev about the korengal I had cast in order to sense lies within minutes of successfully wording the spell-prayer. It had taken months of research, experiments, and obliquely questioning Ketira (whose understanding of Ancient Koreini far surpassed mine) to craft a korengal the Watcher deemed Balanced enough to grant.

After being fooled by Nikolo Durenyi's lies, I had considered the time and effort well spent.

At barely nineteen, I had thought myself so wise when I met Nikolo. When he claimed to have no interest in my family's fortune, I had believed him. Not because I thought he was in love with me—I hadn't fallen for any of the men clearly flattering me in hopes of getting their hands on a large dowry—but because Nikolo had never

spoken of a future or deep feelings. I had believed his motivations to be honest, if not pure.

Then he approached my father in secret and claimed to have gotten me pregnant. Liaisons only raised brows among a certain set, but pregnancy? Among the nobility, pregnancy had to happen within the confines of a marriage. Which was why I had made sure I wouldn't get pregnant while I was with Nikolo.

In the end, everything worked out for the best. Once his plan fell apart, Nikolo spread the word about how meager my dowry was. Two years later, and the fortune-hunters still never sought me out. I hadn't known how effective Nikolo's gossip would be at scaring them away at the time, though. I had developed the korengal that allowed me to detect lies so that I would never make such a mistake again.

After scores of unsuccessful attempts, I had shared my triumph with Makev immediately. I could no longer lie, and I needed to test the new ability I had received in exchange. Of course, I hadn't told him how much wriggle room I had left myself. I could only sense outright lies, not prevarications or misdirections. To Balance that sense, I could not speak an outright lie, but I could prevaricate and misdirect with the best of them.

But to Makev, everything was black and white. He'd see me taking on his debt as black. So I didn't tell him what I had truly forgotten at the palace.

"Hopefully, some other lady didn't take it by mistake," Makev said. He sat down to break his fast, and I set off for the palace.

Despite Father's general stinginess, I had the use of a steam carriage whenever I needed one. He believed in maintaining appearances, and the Duke of Smagrav and his family must have the latest conveniences if anyone were to see them. If no one was about to see us, then the only person's convenience that mattered was Father's.

Not taking the carriage was harder than slipping past Makev without letting him know my true purpose. I convinced the servants

that I wanted to walk, which was the truth only because walking prevented a driver from accompanying me.

I'd have to think of a better excuse if I wanted to continue meeting the prince without the entire household knowing my whereabouts. And everyone else in Tarân, for that matter. The steam carriages were still few and far between, even in the capital of Plumei.

My first priority, however, was learning where to meet the prince to accomplish my duties as a secretary.

The walk from our house to the palace was not long. The cobblestone streets were wide and bright in this section of the city, and it was early enough that few carriages—steam or horse-drawn passed me by. A breeze made the summer heat bearable, and I found I actually enjoyed the chance to stretch my legs. My excuse of wanting to walk would work a little longer if the activity remained pleasant.

I entered the palace grounds through a garden, allowing me to meander while I waited for someone to come into view. While I admired the dahlias just starting to bloom, a servant exited the palace. I set my course to intercept him.

"Excuse me, is Prince Dmir in residence currently?"

Asking a random servant probably wasn't any better than announcing myself at the front door, but I had some small hope of keeping my new position as a secretary quiet this way. Explaining that development to my brother would test the limits of my ability to lie.

The servant looked at me with wide eyes. "I couldn't say, my lady."

Of course not. He couldn't even give me a simple yes or no, which meant my korengal powered ability to sense the truth was useless. Either he didn't know, or he wasn't at liberty to divulge the whereabouts of the imperial family to random ladies in the palace gardens.

"Well, thank you."

"Of course, my lady."

He scurried away, and I waited for another servant to come out, not expecting any better results.

Walking around that garden, it felt like I made up for a month of sitting in steam carriages. The second servant was no more helpful than the first, and the morning was fast slipping away. It had taken an invitation to the imperial ball for me to get face-to-face with the prince the first time for a reason.

I decided to try one more servant before conceding defeat for the day. Not that I'd give up for good. If I had to, I'd knock on the palace doors myself. Hopefully, I could find another way before it came to that.

The next person to enter the grounds was not a servant. Princess Josyn spotted me before I could decide if her attention would be better or worse than knocking on the palace doors.

"Lady Eleya," she called out, her voice without inflection, as usual. "What a surprise to find you here. Do you often tour the gardens?"

"No, Your Highness, but I'm beginning to think I should. I believe the dahlias will be particularly impressive once they are in full bloom."

The princess closed the distance between us. "I'm partial to the peonies myself, but they are already done for the season. There's something to be said for a flower that both looks and smells magnificent."

"You have a point, Your Highness."

"Dmir isn't in the palace this morning," Josyn told me, her expression never changing. No smugness at knowing my reason for visiting the garden. No delight in surprising me.

Most of the court called her the Ice Princess. Between her grayblue eyes, and silver-blond hair, the name fit even without taking into account the way she never showed emotion. She was a princess of the neighboring Lyr, not Plumei, but she had been raised to be our next empress. She had lived in Tarân for the past seven years. Once Crown Prince Kivan returned from his visit to our overseas colonies,

they'd marry, and Josyn would be a princess of Plumei in truth. When the Empress died, Kivan would inherit the throne, but everyone knew Josyn would rule.

I had no idea what she thought of me seeking out her future brother-in-law.

"Did one of the servants mention my questions, or—" I cut myself off just in time. No need to volunteer details.

The princess actually smiled, a slight upward tilt at the corners of her mouth. "Or did I know you had been in his rooms last night?"

I winced.

"Dmir left the palace early this morning," Princess Josyn told me, as if my presence in the prince's room the night before meant nothing. Well, if she knew I had gone in, she probably knew I had come out again after too short a time to have done anything.

"Do you know where he went?"

"No."

She was telling the truth, Balance take it.

"But I know how to find him."

"Of course." She smiled once more, the expression subtle yet clear, and led the way down the paths to the palace. "I'm not actually made of ice, you know."

"I know, but that doesn't mean you'd want to help me chase down the prince."

"On the contrary, it means that I am overjoyed to help you chase him down. I look forward to seeing him caught; he's too serious for his own good."

I blushed. "It's not like that."

Princess Josyn ushered me inside the palace. "Lady Eleya, you snuck into his bedroom last night."

"And he wanted nothing to do with me."

"He asked questions about you this morning."

I looked at the princess in suspicion. I knew she had told the truth, but I still couldn't believe it. "He did?"

"I think you made an impression on him last night."

I laughed. "I guess you could say that. I certainly made sure he noticed me. I suppose it would be odder if he didn't ask questions about me this morning. Let me guess, the first question was whether I am insane?"

Princess Josyn turned down a corridor lit only by a few shadowlights up near the ceiling. A servant's passage. "I believe it had something to do with your suitors, actually."

I didn't taste the bitterness of a lie when she spoke, and searched for a way she could be misleading me. "Do you mean he asked after my dowry?"

"Why would he care about your dowry?"

Because it told him exactly how much money I had to my name. It made more sense than him asking about my suitors—which were practically nonexistent, since my dowry was considerably smaller than expected for the daughter of the Duke of Smagrav. A connection to my father was supposed to balance out the paltry sum, but anyone who met His Grace wanted more money, not less, to be related to him.

The princess had a point, though. "I suppose he wouldn't."

Dmir would have no interest in securing my measly fortune through marriage. Despite his protestations about taking advantage, I was fairly certain fear of being trapped into a marriage had played the biggest role in making him turn down my original offer. I didn't blame him for that. No one wanted to marry me after Nikolo trumpeted my pitiful dowry far and wide.

I was too average. Not plain, but not beautiful. My features were all forgettable, from my brown hair that was neither straight nor curly to my hazel eyes. Beyond the physical, I was still just average. Not foolish, but not witty. Not unconnected, but not rich. I was safe enough to have around to fill out a card table or ballroom—not a

threat to my host's daughters, and never one to cause a scandal. In short, I was boring.

I had never before done something as outrageous as I had last night. Maybe I had caught the prince's attention, but I wouldn't hold it for long. A handsome man in his early twenties, let alone one who was also an imperial prince, could find plenty of women more alluring than I without even trying.

We exited the servant's passage, and I recognized the hallway. Prince Dmir's room was around the next bend. Josyn took me to a door on the right instead.

"Mili," Josyn called out as soon as she was through the door. "We have a guest."

Another woman stepped into the sitting room from deeper inside the suite. She was dressed in charcoal gray with a touch of snowy white lace at her throat and cuffs. An apron cinched tight around her waist and a matching cap covered most of her hair. A lady's maid, though she was to my maid what Princess Josyn was to a flower-seller. Mili no doubt had more power than I did at court, and she was certainly better informed than me.

The princess ignored the look her maid gave her. "Lady Eleya is trying to track down Dmir."

I gaped. Gone was the Ice Princess. Even the small smiles she had given me in the garden were nothing compared to this. Her entire face was suddenly alight with mischief.

I looked over at Mili and discovered the maid had a similar expression. "Is she now?"

"I thought I should be a good future sister and make sure Dmir didn't miss her."

"Very thoughtful of you, Your Highness."

I considered Mili for a moment. "Are you the reason Her Highness knew I had been in the prince's rooms?"

The maid chortled. "The prince's insistence on not keeping a regular valet has more to do with it than anything."

"But if he doesn't have a valet around, doesn't that mean he's less likely to be watched?"

"But a good valet would be loyal to him and keep any chatter to a minimum. Instead, the servants who tend him will gossip about anything they find interesting."

"But there weren't any servants around."

Mili laughed harder. "Not that you saw. Trust me, there are always servants around."

"So which ones saw where Prince Dmir went this morning?"

The princess patted my hand. "That is the important question. Mili will find out."

The maid sauntered over to the door. "Child's play."

TWO

DESPITE ITS IMPOSING name, the Hall of Records was a basement-level room that smelled of leather and mildew. Mili had tracked Prince Dmir to the Hall through a network of servants that baffled me. That Princess Josyn's maid could track down Dmir's every movement within the palace didn't surprise me, but her ability to pinpoint his location within the city did.

Then again, I hadn't wanted to take the steam carriage today for fear of my family's servants tracking my movements. Mili had claimed Prince Dmir had walked there alone, but it stood to reason that people noticed the prince's comings and goings.

The Hall of Records was close enough to the palace that walking wasn't an ordeal, though I had already gotten far more exercise than was my usual. According to Princess Josyn, the Hall of Records was in this basement near the palace so that it was easily accessible to imperial clerks if needed, but the important documents were all stored in the imperial archives under the palace itself.

I fought back a sneeze as I traveled through the narrow aisles. Dust motes floated up as my skirt brushed over the stone floor, clear in the bright light that didn't fit in with the rest of the Hall. The only amenity not lacking was shadow-lights. But the korengal-spelled crystals didn't need upkeep. Too bad no one had discovered how to keep a room dust free using the Balance.

The hem of my lilac skirt was gray by the time I reached the center of the room, where the shelves gave way to a collection of tables and ladder-back chairs.

Prince Dmir sat in one of the chairs, leaning over a folio. His black hair hung loose, just long enough to shield his eyes from view with his head tilted like that.

I paused, still standing between two rows of shelves. I briefly lamented the many layers of clothes enveloping the prince. Some part of me must have hoped to see him shirtless again, as ridiculous as the idea was. Not that he didn't look delectable in his shirtsleeves and waistcoat—his jacket was draped over the chair behind him.

Balance take it. Delectable? Sneaking into his room the night before and seeing him half naked had clearly messed with my sensibilities. I had never considered a man delectable before in my life. Not even Nikolo.

While I watched, Dmir pushed up his sleeves, exposing his forearms. I changed my mind. There was nothing wrong with me; the prince was simply too attractive. The night before, I had suspected that enacting my plan might not be as distasteful as I had feared. Now I forgot any misgivings I had ever had and lamented the fact he hadn't accepted my initial offer.

More dust tickled my nose, and I finally sneezed.

The prince looked up. "Lady Eleya." His eyes went wide. "What are you doing here?"

I stepped out from between the shelves. No staring at the prince's arms. I looked up and focused on his lips. No, not any better. I looked past his right ear. "I'm here to start working as your secretary. Sorry I'm so late, but you neglected to mention when—or where—I should meet you."

"You didn't need to meet me. I said I'd forgive the debt."

Not this again. "I thought I made my position clear last night. I said I would work the debt off, Your Highness."

"It isn't even your debt. The scales are not yours to Balance. Besides, if I had known Makev couldn't afford it, I never would have let him bet so much to begin with."

That declaration surprised me enough that I looked directly at the prince. "Why?"

"Because I never want to ruin anyone when I play cards. I only target those I think can afford to lose."

"Target? An odd choice of word."

The prince looked down at the corner of the table, and I took the opportunity to study his face. I wasn't used to people showing guilt, and the hint of bashfulness overlaying his guilt was endearing.

He muttered something I couldn't make out.

"What?"

"I count cards," Prince Dmir said, slightly louder. "It isn't fair for me to play against most people, so I try to choose my partners with care."

"You feel guilty because you win by using your brain rather than relying on chance? Your Highness, I don't think you understand the point of gambling. You want to win when playing. Why limit yourself?"

"What is the point in playing against people who can't afford to lose, though? If they can't pay their debt, I'm not really winning their money, am I?"

"What do you think I should do with that leverage, Lady Eleya? Use it to force their sisters into my bed?"

"I'm willing. It's not force."

"You're willing under duress. It isn't the same thing."

I put my hands on my hips. "I'm not feeling any duress at the moment, and I'm still willing."

My eyes widened. I couldn't believe I had just said those words. Aloud.

"Well, I'm not."

I pressed my tongue against the roof of my mouth, but there was no bitterness. The prince spoke the truth. My hands slipped back down, and I looked at the floor. "I'm sorry. You made yourself clear last night. It's just that you won't actually let me do anything to work off the debt. That's all I wanted."

It was all I had wanted when I first concocted my plan. Now, I had other thoughts going through my head, but the prince's rejection stung enough to push them aside.

"It's not . . . I don't . . ." Prince Dmir ran a hand through his hair. "Come over here. I'll show you what I'm doing so that you can help."

I walked over to the table.

The prince stood and pulled out a chair for me.

"You don't have to treat me like a lady."

"You are a lady."

"I'm your secretary, Your Highness."

"Lady Eleya, I'll let you help if that's what you need to feel you have Balanced the scales, but I'm not actually hiring you as my secretary."

He probably thought I'd give up after a little bit. Or declare the debt paid in full after a few weeks. As if I was not perfectly aware that a secretary wouldn't earn enough to pay such a debt for years—decades, even.

I sat down.

Prince Dmir sat beside me and pushed the folio into the space between us. "This is a collection of farming reports from the area near the Wrexhil Mountains."

I nodded, not that I understood why I was looking at a bunch of cramped writing about farms in distant parts of Plumei. It was mostly numbers, organized into columns that held no meaning to me.

"I'm looking to see how coal mining in the mountains has affected the farms over the years."

"Right. I understand. I mean, I don't, but I understood the words. Why are you looking at this?"

Dmir sighed. "Because people are pushing to increase the number of railways throughout Plumei, which means the demand for coal will increase. We're already out of Balance—we need to slow down production of trains and focus on finding Balanced energy alternatives first."

I had heard a few mutters on both sides of that argument before, though I still had no idea what it had to do with farms near the Wrexhil Mountains. I freely admitted I didn't know enough one way or the other to say if we should push forward in the name of progress or hold back in the name of Balance. What I did know was that sitting in musty basements looking for evidence was not a job for a prince.

"So, why are *you* looking into this? Doesn't the Empress have a room full of clerks and secretaries to do such research?"

"My mother doesn't want to hear that coal mining is destroying the land. She's forgotten the importance of Balance in her need to leave a legacy of progress. I am here to find the evidence I need to convince people to go against her."

"Don't you have a room full of clerks and secretaries, then?"

Prince Dmir laughed, a single, sharp burst of sound. "Hardly. I am welcome to use the imperial clerks for projects that my mother approves of. For something like this, I must hire my own helpers. Secretaries who aren't paying off their brother's debt require wages. I have the time to spare to do the research myself, and this way I can save my money to invest in the development of alternative energy sources. Research requires plenty of capital. Especially when funding multiple Balance-inventors. Marcous Dzar burns through money at an alarming rate."

I had heard of Marcous Dzar before. The name meant "we seek truth" in Ancient Koreini. It was a scientific society that refused to let politics dictate their research. If the prince funded the society, and

the scientists and inventors looked for the answers to his questions, then they all believed in his cause.

I blew out a breath. "That's what you wanted Makev's money for? To invest in research?"

The prince nodded.

No wonder he wanted none of my attempts to repay the debt. Nothing I could offer would help him pay an inventor.

I looked down at the faded black ink that meant nothing to me. "I'm sorry."

From the corner of my eye, I saw the prince cock his head to the side as he regarded me. "Why are you sorry?"

"I insisted on you letting me repay the debt, which won't do you any good."

"If your brother doesn't have the money, it won't do me any good to demand payment from him, either. And you are another set of eyes to help me wade through these reports."

"Not a very useful set of eyes." I shoved the folio back toward the prince. "This means nothing to me."

Instead of reminding me that I didn't need to help, that he had offered me a free pass, Prince Dmir handed me a notebook and pen. "Why don't you take notes for me, then?"

I opened the notebook, which was a quarter full already. I stared at the writing in horror. "At least you'll be able to read what I write. This is worse than the folio!"

Too late, I realized I had insulted a prince's handwriting.

He didn't take offense. One corner of his mouth crooked up. "If I expect other people to read something, I dictate to a scribe."

"But don't you plan to produce this as evidence to win people to your cause?"

"Not that notebook in particular. I'll have someone copy over the relevant bits into an organized document."

"That poor person."

The prince stared at me, one eyebrow raised.

"You expect me to do it?" I flipped back through the pages and tried to read some of it. I looked back up at the prince. "Are you sure you wouldn't rather sleep with me?"

He looked away. "Not to pay off a debt."

I blinked. That was not the same vehement denial I had heard earlier. Maybe the truth wasn't as clear cut as I had believed. I couldn't stop myself from smiling at the thought.

Dmir cleared his throat. "We should get started. I need to be back at the palace in an hour."

I unscrewed the pen cap and turned to a clean page, my mood not dimmed in the least. "Of course."



AFTER A WEEK in the Hall of Records, I had a much better understanding of the drawbacks of coal mining. It made me wonder why anyone would use it to power steam engines in the first place. I no longer had to search for an excuse I could use to convince the servants I didn't want to take the steam carriage when I left each morning. Preferring to walk over firing up the boiler was now the absolute truth.

"Why not fight to ban railways altogether?" I asked Dmir when he closed the latest collection of farming reports.

"In moderation, the railways and trains themselves are beneficial. It is mostly the coal used to power them pushing us out of Balance."

"What is the alternative?"

"I don't know, but there are dozens of people searching for it."

I plucked the nearest shadow-light from its holder. It was an oblong bit of crystal, bright on one end and dark as midnight on the other. "Can't we use a korengal to create something like the shadow-lights but with heat?"

The spell-prayers had to be Balanced, but if a single crystal could produce and absorb light, why couldn't it produce and absorb heat the same way? Use the heated end to fire the boiler, and coal became obsolete.

"Have you ever tried to create a shadow-light?"

"Of course. My tutor set that as one of my first exercises when I was learning Ancient Koreini." The Watcher of the Scales only honored korengal that were perfectly Balanced, and he only heard those spoken in the ancient tongue from the era when the entire world had existed in Balance. The draw of having a prayer answered was often used to encourage students to take their studies of the ancient tongue more seriously.

"Tell me, how effective was your shadow-light?"

I grimaced. "Worse than a single candle."

The prince nodded, unsurprised. "Natural items already exist in Balance. It is hard to change them and still maintain that Balance. Most people don't think much about the korengal used to create shadow-lights, but assume they must be simple."

"Simple korengal are usually the best." Most of my attempts to spell my own truth-sense had failed because I had been too specific. Only by allowing more room in the wording had I found a way to get what I wanted while maintaining the Balance. It meant I hadn't controlled how my new sense manifested, but it had worked.

"To affect humans, simple korengal are best," Dmir corrected me. "Humans are already unBalanced, and vague prayers allow the Watcher more room to tilt us toward True Balance. But if you leave any room for interpretation in a spell meant to change anything else, it fails."

"I may not be able to create an effective shadow-light, but they aren't rare," I said, tilting the crystal to the side and wondering for the first time how the ubiquitous lights were made. "People clearly know how to craft the right korengal. Why can't they transfer that to heat?"

"Light is safer than heat. It also behaves differently."

"What do you mean?"

Dmir waved his hand under the shadow-light in my hand, casting a shadow on the table. "You can't do that with heat. It radiates

outward in all directions and conducts easily through most materials. If you spelled that crystal to be hot enough to power a steam engine on one side and it worked, the other side would be so cold that there would be no safe way to handle it. But it won't work, because the heat and the cold would immediately seek Balance and the entire crystal would revert to being the same temperature as its surroundings in no time. The spell only works for light because the direction the light is emitted and the direction it is absorbed can be angled away from each other."

"So, it's impossible?"

"I wouldn't say that. We just haven't discovered how to keep everything in Balance and produce the results we want yet. Several of the scientists I'm funding are looking into how we create the equivalent of a shadow-light for heat. But it will take time and many failures before we have such a device."

"What are the rest doing?"

"Several others are looking for different sources of energy. Some think we could do away with the steam engine altogether, not just our reliance on coal."

"Really? Do you think that's possible?"

"I do, but unfortunately, I don't think I have the time to wait for their discoveries. I'll be grateful if the Balance-inventors can find an alternative to coal in time."

"I know the coal is already leaving a mark, but are we really in such desperate straits already?"

"Perhaps not, but Kivan is due back within the month."

I blinked. "What does the crown prince have to do with anything?"

"Once he returns to Tarân, the little influence I have will be gone. Plus, no one will care about the effects of railroads and steam engines while everyone is planning for the biggest wedding of our generation."

"But you have supporters. They won't just turn their backs on you once your brother returns, will they?"

"Maybe not intentionally, but who is going to pay attention to the spare when the heir is around? I can tell you right now, Kivan will not care about the impact of coal mining, and if someone mentions the possibility of making more money by investing in the railroads, he will jump on that opportunity."

"What about Princess Josyn?"

"Exactly." Dmir sighed. "Even if I could convince Kivan to help me, he's going to be busy with Josyn and the wedding."

"No, I mean, what about enlisting the princess's help?"

"Why would she help?"

I crossed my arms. "Why wouldn't she?"

"She is my mother's protégée, and Mother doesn't care about the damage the railways are causing."

"She is an intelligent woman with a mind of her own. If you can convince her, she might even be able to persuade the Empress."

"She certainly holds more sway with Mother than I do."

"She holds more sway with everyone." I winced. "I don't mean to say that you have no influence. I just meant that Princess Josyn is ... I mean we all know she will be the next Empress. And she is ..."

"Better in social situations than me?" Dmir gave me a self-deprecating smile. "Don't worry, you won't offend me by speaking the truth, Eleya. I know Josyn is better at courtly machinations and political maneuvering than me."

My cheeks warmed, and I hoped the prince thought it was embarrassment. But the rush of heat had nothing to do with nearly insulting him and everything to do with him omitting my title when he called me by name.

I had thought we were becoming friendly as we spent each afternoon together, but I had never dared to address him as anything but Your Highness. That he dropped the formality now made my heart beat faster in the hope that we could be true friends—perhaps more than that, too?

I tried not to overreact. Maybe he had simply forgotten in the moment. No use drawing his attention to it. "I'm glad, because I always speak the truth."

Dmir's eyes crinkled at the corners. "Something tells me you know exactly how to lie with the truth."

"A useful skill to have, Your Highness."

"Indeed. My truths are often too blunt for people's tastes."

"I like that you don't try to soften the truth."

"You might be the only lady who does, Eleya. Lady Eleya. Sorry."

"It's fine. I don't mind if you call me Eleya." He was right; I lied with the truth quite a bit. I didn't mind if he called me Eleya, I rejoiced in it.

"Then please, call me Dmir. It will be nice to have a woman who isn't family, about to become family, or more interested in dissecting me than holding a conversation call me by name."

"Dissecting you?"

He nodded. "Mistress Loreta Sankiev. Brilliant scientist interested more in biology than royalty. I've convinced about half the scientists and inventors from Marcous Dzar to call me by name, but she is the only woman who doesn't still use my title. And I'm pretty sure on that the rare instances she looks at me she is actually trying to look under my skin and see how I'm put together."

I looked him up and down. "You are a rather captivating specimen for study."

This time, Dmir's cheeks flamed red. He glanced down at the closed stack of farming reports. He picked them up, licked his lips, and peeked at me from the corner of his eye. "Would you like to visit Marcous Dzar and see what they are working on?"

"Absolutely." I grinned. "You will have to give me an overview before we get there, though, Dmir. I don't want to sound like a fool by asking stupid questions."

"The society encourages curiosity. But maybe don't ask Mistress Loreta anything."

"But the other scientists are safe to question?"

"If you are willing to listen to a deeper explanation than you ever imagined, yes."

"Let's go then. Can we go now? Or do we need to schedule our visit?"

"We can go now if you don't have any plans for the evening. There are people there at all hours of the day—and night."

"I don't have any plans tonight."

Dmir swallowed. "Then it will be my pleasure to take you on a tour of Marcous Dzar, Eleya."

THREE

Shadow-lights dangled from chandeliers. In this particular ball-room, the spelled crystals were oblong and cast a yellowish light over the parquet floor. The chandeliers themselves were lost to shadow, for the light-absorbing half of the crystals were not covered. If there had been fewer shadow-lights, it might have looked like stars in the night sky. But the count and countess of Lilsk, for all they professed to revere Balance, were not the sort to skimp on anything they deemed of value.

"What about the Baron of Iskint?"

I looked in the direction my friend Ketira nodded. "Lord Gregin? He has to be nearly fifteen years older than us."

The baron stood next to a table teeming with untouched flutes of lemonade. He stared at the table long enough that I suspected he was trying to change the lemonade into champagne through sheer force of will. I couldn't remember the last time I had seen him in a ballroom, probably because he usually spent the evening tucked into the card rooms, not dancing.

"Yes, but he's not *old*." Ketira insisted. "He is a baron, and fabulously wealthy. I have to compromise somewhere. It's like they always say in the temples, 'Seek Balance in all things."

"If the temple clerics offered advice on your husband hunting, I'm certain they'd tell you that seeking Balance means searching for

a man of moderate wealth, status, and age, not exchanging one for the others."

"Bah," Ketira tossed reddish blond hair over her shoulder. "If I want to put up with an old man in exchange for wealth, that is my choice. Isn't that exactly the idea behind korengal? Gain one attribute in exchange for another. If it's good enough for the Watcher, it is good enough for me."

"But Lord Gregin? Is wealth really that important to you?" I looked around the ballroom. "What about Lord Berdik? He is the heir to a marquisate, only a handful of years older than us, and has enough money to support a comfortable lifestyle."

"Have you met his sister, Eleya? In my mind, gaining her as a sister outweighs all the rest."

Ketira had a point. Berdik's sister was a terror—a very vocal, very opinionated terror.

"What about . . ." I looked for a man Ketira hadn't already rejected—a hard task, as she had spent every ball these past few months considering and tossing out potential husbands. There had to be someone she hadn't already disqualified besides Gregin. Not Lord Peyt. No one whose family came from the southern region of Plumei (one of Ketira's odder requirements, but by no means the strangest).

Ketira had always thought more about her eventual marriage than I, but lately she seemed to think of little else. Even with my korengal, I had yet to determine the reason for her sudden fervent desire to find a husband. I suspected pressure from her family played a role, though I couldn't imagine her parents pushing her to marry against her will. More likely, she thought her marriage would benefit her family, and any time one of her siblings missed an opportunity, she felt guilty.

But not guilty enough to waive her long list of requirements. A list that eliminated every man I saw.

Everyone was at this ball, it seemed, but no one new. Except . . . "Dmir?"

Ketira spun around. "Prince Dmir is here? He would be perfect, wouldn't he?"

"Well, yes, but . . ." I hadn't intended to send my friend hunting in his direction. It was just so surprising to see him at a ball, I had blurted out his name without thinking.

"Balance save me. He's coming this direction." Ketira patted her hair. "How do I look?"

"Lovely as always," I answered without looking. Dmir really was walking in our direction.

"Eleya, this is serious. I may never run into the prince at a ball again; you know he barely even attends the ones hosted by the Empress—not that *I've* ever secured an invitation to an imperial ball. I need to make a good impression."

I looked over at her. "You always make a good impression. Calm down. We don't even know he is coming our way. Maybe he is going somewhere past us."

"There's a wall behind us."

"Right." I glanced back. Dmir was definitely approaching us. He caught my eye and smiled. An answering smile came to my lips automatically.

"He's smiling. Balance save us, Eleya, the prince is smiling at . . . at . . . you!" Her face was suddenly blocking my view of Dmir as she scrutinized my expression. "You're flirting with the prince! How do you even know him? Eleya, you're not allowed to keep secrets like this from me!"

I looked over her shoulder. Dmir would be able to hear us soon. "I'll explain later."

"You'd better." Ketira jabbed my shoulder with a finger, then reached up and tugged the jabot pinned at my throat, ensuring the lace fell perfectly. She stepped aside just in time.

"Good evening, Lady Eleya."

Ketira and I both curtsied. I missed the familiarity of the past week, when Dmir had called me just Eleya, but the middle of a ballroom was not the same as a musty storeroom. Who'd have ever

thought I'd prefer the Hall of Records? "Good evening, Your Highness. What a surprise to see you at tonight's ball."

"No one declines an invitation from the Count of Lilsk."

Dmir had a point. The count and countess threw a ball every few months, inviting different people depending on their mood at the time. Their balls were possibly the most boring events put on in Tarân, and still everyone came. For one night, people overlooked the sedate dances and lack of alcohol and card rooms in favor of ingratiating themselves to two of the richest people in the kingdom.

Unlike my father, the count and countess shared their wealth if they liked you.

Perhaps Dmir could convince them to invest enough to offset the loss of my brother's nonexistent money.

Ketira cleared her throat.

I rolled my eyes. "Prince Dmir, allow me to introduce my friend, Miss Ketira Palov."

"A pleasure to make your acquaintance, Miss Ketira. Would you mind terribly if I stole your friend for the next dance?"

"Please do, Your Highness."

Ketira didn't give me a chance to respond—not that Dmir had actually asked me. She snuck a hand behind my back and propelled me toward him. I accepted Dmir's arm with as much dignity as I could muster, trying to pretend my friend had not literally shoved me at him.

"I apologize," Dmir whispered as we walked away. "You wanted me to pretend we had never met, didn't you?"

"No," I answered, perhaps a bit too vehemently. "Why would I want that?"

"Didn't you want to keep our association a secret?"

"I don't want my brother to learn of our arrangement, that's all. Actually, dancing with you tonight will probably help, because I'll have a way to deflect his attention if he sees me with you later."

"So you are dancing with me to allay any suspicions your brother might have?"

Did Dmir sound disappointed? I made my voice as joking as possible. "No. I'm dancing with you because it would have looked particularly foolish to say no after Ketira pushed me at you. Not that you asked me so that I could say no, of course."

"I didn't?" The prince stopped and looked at me with wide eyes. "I didn't. I'm sorry. Do you want to dance with me, Eleya?"

No one was close enough to hear but him. I didn't have to censor my response to avoid gossip. "I'd love to, Dmir."

"You're not just saying that?"

"I don't lie as a rule."

"You say that quite a bit, and every time it makes me more convinced that you are adept at deceiving without lying."

"Maybe, but it doesn't change the fact that I wasn't lying about wanting to dance with you."

"I'm glad to hear that."

We reached the edge of where people were dancing and waited for the current song to end. I wasn't sure what the next set would be, but knowing the count and countess, it would probably be a pattern dance rather than a partner dance. Conversation would be easier before we began.

"Do you think Lord Hanrid will invest in your research?"

Dmir glanced around at the crowd and lowered his voice. "How did you know I'm here to secure an investment?"

"I'm not a fool. You need the capital, Lord Hanrid and Lady Mariga have funds, and they decide whether they approve of people enough to invest those funds by observing them at their balls."

The prince winced. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to imply you were foolish. Most people assume I am here because my mother and Princess Josyn didn't want to come, and I was the sacrificial representative of the family."

"Well, they probably aren't wrong."

"No, they aren't. But neither are you."

People began to line up for the next set of dancing, and Dmir led me out among them. He went directly to the center of the ballroom,

rather than lingering at the edges. Both Lord Hanrid and Lady Mariga lined up nearby with their own partners.

For someone who rarely attended balls, Dmir knew how to navigate them well.

"Have you already approached them, or is tonight your first contact?" I asked when we stepped forward to meet in the first pattern of the dance.

"We've already spoken. I hope to wrap everything up tonight."

Clapping thrice, I spun and approached the next gentleman in the line. Two more until I reached the count.

"Delightful crowd here tonight, isn't it, Lord Slone?"

"Quite. Quite. Wonderful group."

Slone lapsed into silence, and I let it linger. I had little time to plan and even less to speak once I reached the count. I wanted to use every moment to full advantage.

Three more claps and I moved on to the Baron of Iskint. "Lord Gregin, how fortuitous to see you here. I must compliment our hosts. To dance with such partners is an unprecedented delight."

"They are very discerning when sending out invitations."

It was easy to deceive a man who listened only to the truths he wanted to hear. Easier still to manipulate him into saying exactly what I needed to hear.

After another three claps, I twirled over to my next partner, Lord Hanrid. He moved ponderously, not slowed by age so much as his version of decorum. I matched my steps to his, the already sedate dance becoming nothing more than a choreographed walk through the ballroom.

"You and your wife have truly outdone yourselves, Lord Hanrid. Everyone I've danced with has mentioned the caliber of the attendees. To think, I danced with a prince at your ball!"

The count smiled. "Thank you, Lady Eleya. I'm glad you are enjoying yourself."

The first pattern of the dance didn't allow for any more conversation than that, but I moved on to my next partner satisfied. When

I came back down the line in the second pattern, I'd have longer to chat with the count.

I continued moving from gentleman to gentleman, exchanging a few words that would allow me to mention several different compliments to Lord Hanrid if needed. Then we moved onto the second pattern of the dance, and I worked my back down the line, this time spending long enough with each man to have a conversation, albeit a brief one.

Soon I reached Lord Hanrid for the second time. I placed my palm against his, and we circled around each other.

"My lord, how do you manage to Balance your company so well? I am at a loss for words." There was no truthful way to express my thoughts without exposing my opinion of his hypocrisy. Thankfully, questions avoided my limitations. "Did you purposefully Balance the attendance of Prince Dmir with Madame Alezna?"

"Of course." Lord Hanrid lied.

The bitterness of his words filled my mouth, but I had learned not to react in the years since I had cast my korengal. Among courtiers, lies were commonplace. I wondered if the count thought Alezna was an appropriate counterbalance to royalty, or if he merely wanted to preen under my compliments. I suspected that if he had taken the time to think it through, he would have decided the penniless widow Balanced out a prince. Never mind that she came from a well-connected family and continued to live a comfortable life.

Lord Hanrid's vision of Balance did not include the common folk of the empire. He wouldn't care that coal mining ruined the livelihood of nearby farmers as the soil and waterways became polluted. But he would enjoy crowing about how he helped laborers maintain the Balance. Especially if it made him appear better in relation to his peers.

"I wish my father cared more about Balance," I said, letting a hint of wistfulness flavor my voice. "He forgets that those who are not noble are still people. Think how much more Balance he could bring

to the world if he cared. Plumei needs more people like you and Prince Dmir, don't you think?"

"Prince Dmir?"

"Oh yes, he was speaking to me of his hopes before the dance started. He considers the entire Balance. It is refreshing to see."

"Indeed."

The dance pulled me away from the count, but I was content. Lord Hanrid ought to be in a receptive mood when he spoke to Dmir. The prince probably didn't need my help, just as he didn't need me as a secretary, but I would still do my best to aid his efforts.

I continued the swirling pattern of the dance, no longer as interested in promoting conversation with my partners. Nor did they care much to impress me with their wit and intellect. I really had to make sure Ketira did not chase after Lord Gregin. She'd be miserable with him.

Finally, the dance brought me back to Dmir. We stepped forward and our hands pressed together, palm-to-palm. The innocent touch, one I had just experienced with a dozen other men, made my breath catch.

Dmir watched me intently, heat in his gaze. "Ely."

I swallowed. The shortened version of my name felt more intimate than a caress. I couldn't look away from Dmir. We didn't speak. I wondered if Dmir also considered the words on the tip of his tongue to be inappropriate for Lord Hanrid's ballroom.

The dance ended, our hands lowered, and we both stepped back. The silence, and that searing connection, continued.

Who knew how long we might have stood staring at each other if Gregin hadn't rushed by, pushing past me so that I almost stumbled.

Dmir was there, his hand under my elbow, in an instant, but when I looked up, his attention was no longer on me. He was too busy glaring at Gregin's back.

The reprieve from his gaze gave me the wherewithal to notice the other dancers moving around the floor, making room for those participating in the next set. Lord Hanrid and his wife were moving directly toward us. Toward Dmir.

"Turn around. Don't glare," I whispered. I pulled my arm from Dmir's grasp, regretting the loss of contact immediately.

He turned and saw the count and countess. He looked back at me. "Eleya, I have to—"

"Go. Convince them to commit their whole fortune to Marcous Dzar. Mention to Hanrid your difficulty in finding people willing to invest when the returns would benefit everyone instead of just themselves. If you can imply my father refused to even hear you out, so much the better."

Dmir didn't have time to ask me any questions, and I hoped he trusted my advice. I hoped I had read the count correctly and offered the correct advice.

Dmir bowed. "Thank you for a lovely dance, Lady Eleya."

"The pleasure was mine, Your Highness." I curtised, nodded at our hosts, and turned to find Ketira.

Perhaps I could distract her from Lord Gregin by filling her in on my acquaintance with the prince. I laughed silently. As if I had any choice about explaining now.



I TAPPED MY pen against the desk, the sound too loud in the lifeless Hall of Records. If it weren't for the bright lights, I'd probably feel unnerved to sit down here alone. Dmir was the only other person I had ever seen in the Hall, and he usually arrived before me every afternoon.

I set the pen down and tried to rein in my impatience. I shifted in my chair. One of the folios stacked on the table wasn't in line with the rest, so I nudged it back in place. Then I aligned the entire stack with the edge of the table.

Finally, I heard Dmir's soft tread. I shot to my feet, my chair scraping against the floor. "Did you get it?"

I hadn't rushed to the Hall of Records today because I wanted to know if Dmir had secured Lord Hanrid's help funding the Balance inventors, but that question seemed a safer way to start the afternoon than throwing myself at him. After introducing myself to Dmir by showing up in his bedroom and offering to sleep with him to pay off Makev's debts—and being turned down—the last thing I needed was to rush in without knowing if he had desired the same things as I the night before.

Dmir grinned and continued walking to the center of the room. "Five thousand crowns, pledged to Marcous Dzar. Even if Kivan came home tomorrow, I think we almost have the investments needed to fund research for an entire year. A little more, and then it is just a matter of convincing people not to rush into anything with the railroads before the inventors succeed."

He stopped right in front of me. "Bringing up your father's greed was a stroke of genius, Ely. Hanrid was practically shoving money at me at that point."

I looked up at Dmir and knew he was thinking the same thing as me this time. I leaned closer. He mirrored me, the distance between us fading. The entire world was fading; all I knew was Dmir.

His hand cupped my cheek.

The kiss was feather light, a brush of lips against lips. I sighed against him. "Dmir."

His lips returned and this time the kiss was deeper, yet no less soft and sweet. I wanted to melt into Dmir. I placed my hands on his shoulders and pressed closer. His hand drifted from my cheek to cup the back of my head. His other hand settled on the small of my back and held me against him.

I licked at his lips, and they began to part. Then the ceiling creaked, someone walking across the floor above us.

Dmir stepped back hastily. "Well. We should . . ."

I crossed my arms. "In all the weeks I've been helping you, no one has ever come downstairs."

He tugged at his jacket. Then he smoothed down his collar. "Which means we're probably overdue for a visitor."

I sighed, but didn't protest. The Hall of Records wasn't exactly the most romantic location, anyway.

Dmir shuffled through the folios he had set aside the day before, but he didn't open any of them. He also did not look at me at all. If he didn't want to kiss where anyone could stumble across us—though we had a better chance of being caught in a supposedly private room surrounded by servants, in my opinion—then I at least wanted our former ease returned. And maybe to get him out of that jacket.

I pretended nothing had happened. "I found a description of the Wrexhil Mountains from our great-grandparents' day that might help. The Duchess of Kraetcha toured the empire shortly after the war ended, documenting everything she saw. She described the Wrexhil Mountains in detail, and they sound like a natural paradise. I haven't seen them myself, but my understanding is that the area is a soot covered wasteland today."

Dmir finally looked at me again. "Oh, that's smart. If we can find a modern description and show how coal mining made the area lose its natural beauty, that might convince several people who won't even listen to anything I say about farm output."

"I was thinking that we should arrange for Lady Nasala to hear the description in public," I said, naming the baroness whose lands included much of the mountains. "Her reaction when listening to what her home looked like less than a hundred years ago could be powerful."

Dmir's hands framed my face, and he kissed me again. "You're a genius, Ely."

My cheeks heated. There wasn't even a hint of bitterness on my tongue, for Dmir meant the compliment sincerely. "It's the least I can do to help."

He smiled at me. "Hiring you as my secretary might have been one of the wisest things I've ever done."

"Oh, I don't know." This time, I kissed him. "I think a different choice that night might have been even better."

He cleared his throat. "Under the \dots I mean, given the \dots that is to say \dots "

I stepped back and patted his chest. "You think so, too, huh?" Mutely, he nodded.

I grinned. Then I pulled out the Duchess of Kraetcha's description of the mountains and handed it to Dmir. I would show restraint. I trusted my patience would be rewarded.

FOUR

THE SUN WAS still high enough in the sky to bathe the entire street in light when we exited the Hall of Records. It was early evening, but the season conspired against me. In the shadows of dusk, I might have dared to press Dmir for an invitation back to his rooms in the palace. The sunlight and busy street were not enough to make me lose my nerve, but I suspected they would make him uncomfortable.

It surprised me, therefore, when Dmir reached out and ran his hand down the length of my arm, stopping to squeeze my palm. "I'll see you tomorrow?"

"Of course. You aren't rid of me yet."

"Good. I don't want to be rid of you, Ely."

For a moment, I thought he might actually lean in and kiss me right there on the street. Instead, he gave my palm another squeeze and stepped back. "I already can't wait for tomorrow."

"Me too."

He turned and walked away. I stood there, watching his retreating form, for several heartbeats. Then I made myself move in the opposite direction. A steam carriage clattered over the cobbles next to me, and the belch of smoke left me coughing. It amazed me that I had never noticed how dirty the steam-powered vehicles were before meeting Dmir.

It was even worse near the Marcous Dzar headquarters. The streets were narrower, the surrounding buildings taller, and the coal residue lingered. Steam carriages weren't that common, but there were enough other contraptions powered by coal-fired engines to add extra urgency to the society's mission. The machines made life easier for many people, but that ease could not come at the cost of the very air we breathed.

"Eleya!"

I froze. What in the Balance was my brother doing here?

"Eleya, wait up!"

I turned slowly and forced a smile on my lips. "I'm already waiting, Makev."

He hurried to close the final distance between us, puffing with exertion.

"Where's your steam carriage?"

"I'm not using it. All your comments about the coal smog and unBalance and whatnot convinced me to try out walking for a change. Can't say I'm much enjoying it."

I began to move, Makev keeping pace beside me. "You get used to it soon enough." I waved the lingering traces of smoke away from my face. "And it is better when the air is fresh."

Makev shrugged. "I'll take your word for it." He sped up and angled his body so that he came as close to looking at me straighton as possible while walking by my side. "Eleya, did I just see you with Prince Dmir?"

"I don't know, did you?"

"I did. And I want to know why."

Makev's tone told me to tread carefully. He had to be suspicious of me associating with Dmir shortly after he had incurred a debt to the prince. A debt that had never been called in. Better to put Makev on the defensive than risk being asked a direct question. "What, I can't talk to the prince? Really, Makev, is it so hard to believe that I might be friendly if I run into a member of the royal family?"

"What I witnessed wasn't a friendly hello or an innocent chat in a ballroom. You seem to know His Highness quite well."

"We have chatted in a ballroom before. I even danced with him, if you'll recall."

"I do recall. I especially recall the way he looked at you last night. It makes me wonder just how long you've been associating with him. And why you might be meeting him in strange locations." Makev scowled. "The prince never called in my debt; you didn't do something foolish, did you?"

I had a split second to decide what approach to take. I could try to convince Makev there was nothing between me and Dmir and that he was jumping at shadows, or I could admit to an affair but convince Makev it had nothing to do with his debt.

Given Makev's expression, admitting to an affair would cause its own set of trouble. After everything that had happened with Nikolo, he had become overprotective.

I rolled my eyes. "I had a conversation with the prince, and he told me about his work trying to find alternatives to coal energy. You said I inspired you to forgo the steam carriage? Well, he inspired me to not only walk, but also to help search for answers."

I gestured back the way we had come. "You caught us leaving the Hall of Records, Makev. Nothing inappropriate was going on."

Thank the Balance that I could say those words. I certainly didn't consider kissing Dmir inappropriate. Makev might. Older brothers were a pain at times.

"So why hasn't the prince called in my debt?"

"Maybe he forgot about it." Maybe, one of my favorite words.

Makev's eyes narrowed. "I should talk to him about it. I need to let him know I'm not welshing, that I just need time to gather the funds."

"You do what you think is right," I said as calmly as possible. My brother hoped to scare me into a reaction, but I knew better than to panic and give him reason to doubt my story.

"I will. I'll send over a note tonight and go talk to him first thing tomorrow."

Makev watched me closely, so I shrugged.

I had to talk to Dmir before Makev, but I could not show my brother any hint of nervousness.

If all else failed, I had to trust that Dmir would not tell my brother how I had snuck into his bedroom and the bargain I had offered.

My nerves calmed. Dmir would never speak of such a thing with Makev. Still, it would be best if we coordinated our tales. If Dmir's story didn't match mine, Makev would dig deeper. Getting to Dmir before my brother would be a challenge. One I'd have to tackle tonight.

First step? Making sure Makev wouldn't be watching me.

"We've determined my reason for being here, but what are you doing in this part of town, Makev?"

"You're acting like this is an area no one ventures without grave reason. We're only a few blocks from the palace, Dodanse Park, and our own home."

"Yes, but we are not at the palace, Dodanse Park, nor home. This particular street has a few residences, embassies, and buildings like the one housing the Hall of Records. Why are *you* here?"

"It is merely a street connecting others. Is it so odd that I should walk along it?"

"You visited Lady Ivaena, didn't you?"

Makev studied the ground in front of our feet.

"She has never so much as smiled at you. Why do you persist in chasing after her?"

"Is it really so hard to believe that someone like her might fall for me?"

"Yes!"

Makev scowled, the anger an attempt to hide hurt.

I softened my tone. "Not because you are unworthy, Makev. The issue is that you are too good for her. She doesn't associate with

kindhearted people. If she suddenly took an interest in you, I'd worry."

"Sometimes I think it would be easier if I didn't know that you always speak the truth. I could dismiss your concerns then."

"I worry because I love you. You know I only want to watch out for you." As soon as I said the words, I knew they were a mistake.

Makev pounced on them. "Exactly. Which is why I worry about your sudden association with the prince. I know you want to protect me, but I can take care of myself, Eleya. Don't forget, I'm the older sibling."

"By one year."

"It still makes me your elder."

"It makes you pompous."

We bickered the rest of the way home. I thought I might have succeeded in distracting Makev again, but as we parted ways he pinned me with a stare. "I'll write my note to Prince Dmir now."

"Go ahead."



MAKEV SENT HIS note off to the palace with a servant immediately after sealing it shut. Clearly, he suspected that I might try to divert his request for a meeting if given the opportunity. Causing a delay would only increase his suspicions, though. I simply needed to get to Dmir first.

Luckily for me, neither of us had any engagements that evening. Once Makev saw me settling in for a night at home, he went out to his club. I rushed upstairs and re-pinned my hair, then slipped out of the house. No doubt the servants would think I was headed for a tryst, but they wouldn't tell Makev or my father, so it hardly mattered. Not that my brother or father had any right to complain about my personal affairs, but Makev worried I'd get my heart broken and Father doubted my discretion despite two years of faultless behavior.

I had to admit, I also hoped the evening might end up a tryst. I hadn't planned to push Dmir, when he so clearly wanted to move slowly, but if I had to see him anyway . . .

Of course, I still had to find a way to see him.

Once again, I aimed for the gardens behind the palace rather than the building itself. But this time, when I spotted a servant, I didn't ask after the prince.

"I need to speak to Mili," I informed the maid making her way around the paths, flipping over shadow-lights.

"I'll inform her you are here, my lady," the woman said and hurried back inside.

It wasn't the princess's maid who stepped out of the palace not long afterward.

"Lady Eleya," Princess Josyn greeted me. "Did you come in search of Dmir again?"

I curtsied. "I apologize for interrupting your evening, Your Highness. I had hoped that you or your maid might be willing to aid me once more. I find I have a matter of some urgency to discuss with His Highness."

"I regret to inform you that he is not in the palace this evening, and I do not know how late he will be out."

"Balance take it." My shoulders slumped. "I thought he rarely went out of an evening. Why does tonight have to be the exception? I don't suppose he went to an event I could acquire a last-minute invitation to?"

"Invitations are not needed where he went, but ladies are also not welcome."

I frowned. Was Princess Josyn saying he had gone to a pleasure house? A pit formed in my stomach, my heart tumbling down into its depths. I couldn't ask. I couldn't speak.

"You are dressed in a way that would stand out in a gaming hell, I fear."

"A gaming hell?" I could breathe again. "He went out to gamble?"

"A surprising habit of his," Josyn said. "He doesn't seem like the type to enjoy games of chance, but he goes out every month or so."

"To secure funds for the scientists," I told her. He had mentioned being so close to having enough money to fund the research that afternoon. I should have realized he'd want to get those final crowns as soon as possible. Wondering how I would find him before Makev, I continued speaking without thinking about what I said. "He doesn't really gamble. He counts cards."

"That explains why I've never heard of him encountering a losing streak."

I winced. "You weren't even trying to get a secret out of me, and there I went and told you something I probably shouldn't have."

Josyn's eyes sparkled. "I promise not to tell his mother how Dmir supplements his income."

I smiled. It probably didn't matter. Josyn wouldn't use the knowledge to hurt Dmir. Still, I'd mention my slip to him. The princess's facility with secrets gave me an idea of how to find him. Makev might not have let the name of the gaming hell slip when he told me of his losses, but someone must have said something where Josyn or Mili could hear. "Do you know what gaming hell he goes to?"

Princess Josyn looked me up and down. "If you are going to insist on going to him, we will have to do something about your wardrobe first."

She was right. A lady would stand out in such a place. It wasn't that ladies weren't welcome, as Josyn had first claimed, but they couldn't dress like they would for a ball.

"We?"

The secret smile, a mere hint of the full-blown grin I had seen in her private chambers, graced the princess's lips. "Mili does love a challenge."



I RESISTED THE urge to tug at the neckline of my blouse. Ladies' fashion in Plumei called for high-necked garments, often with extra lace going right up under the chin. The middle class and poorer women didn't bother to button themselves up so much. They were too far removed from the Empress to worry about imitating her style.

The women who entered gaming hells unbuttoned as much as possible—noble or commoner alike.

Not that there were any buttons. The clothes Mili had found me consisted of a skirt pinned up on one side to show the petticoat underneath, a loose blouse that hung off my shoulders, and a front-lacing bodice that both guaranteed my blouse would not fall so low as to be completely indecent and made the entire outfit that much more provocative.

I couldn't wait to see Dmir's reaction when he saw me, but I still reacted to each tease of wind over skin that was never bare.

I pulled my hair over one shoulder, thinking maybe that might help me forget that so much skin was exposed. I took a deep breath. Mili and Josyn had worked wonders on me, from clothes to hair, in a short time. I shouldn't squander their efforts by losing my nerve now.

And I wanted Dmir to see me dressed like this. Maybe he'd lose his patience given such a temptation. He'd consider me a temptation, wouldn't he? Not a fool?

I pushed open the door to the gaming hell.

Laughter, shouts, and the sound of dice washed over me. The shadow-lights set in sconces near the ceiling were turned so a quarter of the light-absorbing portion faced the floor, leaving the room well lit, yet wreathed in shadows. People moved around the room holding glasses and each other, the stiff formality of a ballroom nowhere in evidence.

I scanned the room for Dmir, but didn't see him. The tables in this first room were all set up with dice games, from what I could tell, and he favored cards. I moved farther into the room.

"Hello, lovey." An arm snaked its way around my waist. "Care to be my lucky charm?"

I pushed away from the stench of sweat and gin. "I'd only offer you bad luck."

The man laughed. He let me go, but his eyes fixed on the exposed skin of my décolletage. "I dunno, lovey. I think you'd be good luck."

"Not for you."

"Already got a gent, then?"

"Yes."

"A pity."

I worried he'd press further, but he turned and wandered over to another woman without saying anything else.

I continued my search for a card room, but was waylaid again before I was halfway through the first room.

This time, the man grabbed my wrist as I walked past and tugged me closer. "Care to keep me company?"

Balance save me, I recognized that voice. Turning only enough to get the leverage needed to break his hold, I kept my face lowered. Having Lord Gregin discover me in a gaming hell, dressed as I was, would be nearly as bad as Makev talking to Dmir before me. I didn't bother answering him—the rules of etiquette didn't apply here. Breaking free of his grasp and walking away was answer enough.

Another man tried to entice me to his side—this time thankfully without grabbing me—before I reached the nearest doorway. No wonder Mili and Josyn had advised me to find Dmir as quickly as possible once I reached the gaming hell. I had thought they were warning me he might leave at any moment and then all our efforts would be wasted.

Entering the next room, I noticed one of the women playing at the nearest table. She wasn't dressed in a ballgown, but neither did she have as much skin on display as me. I looked a little closer. My clothes were not out of place, by any means, but there were plenty of women dressed somewhat more conservatively. I laughed to my-self.

Josyn and Mili truly were remarkable. They could have snuck me into Dmir's rooms to wait for his return, or delivered a note. They hadn't pointed out the flaws with my stated need to go to the gaming hell. Instead, they dressed me up in a manner certain to draw Dmir's notice and sent me on my way.

I should have been angry, but it wasn't their fault that I had overestimated my understanding of what a gaming hell was like. I had agreed with every suggestion they had made. If I had balked at the blouse and bodice, no doubt Mili would have produced something more demure rather than insist I wear this outfit.

Not that covering more skin would have protected me from the drunken louts. All the women were subjected to such behavior here. I had a new appreciation for the way my brother had reacted when he overheard Ketira mentioning her visit to a hell a few months ago. Not that it was his place to chastise her, but perhaps his worries were more justified than I had thought.

If I had known more about hells, I would have demanded a full account once we made Makev leave the room. She was mad at me for not telling her about Dmir, but she certainly hadn't told me anything close to the entire story of her visit to the gaming hell, either. I had thought she had merely evaded mentioning the reason for her visit. Clearly, she had left out far more than that.

She had gone and come out unscathed. If Ketira could spend an evening in a place like this, then so could I. I could handle a few men who expected more than I was willing to give. I would not give up without finding Dmir.

FIVE

2) E

THERE WERE PLENTY of men who expected more than I was willing to give. Several of them were lords and gentlemen I had met previously on the floor of a ballroom. Avoiding hands took quite a bit of work. Avoiding recognition, not so much. The men never bothered to look higher than my chest, and no one here would recognize that expanse of skin as Lady Eleya Sonita Poinar.

There were also more rooms than I expected. The first three card rooms proved devoid of Dmir, and I began to fear he had left. Then I found the fourth card room.

This one was emptier than the rest of the hell, though by no means unoccupied. Fewer people stood around talking and watching the players, but every table was full. I spotted Dmir immediately.

He sat at a table with three other men, a pile of chips at his elbow and more in the center. As I watched, one of the men threw down his cards in disgust and pushed away from the table.

I inched closer, but did not dare draw attention to myself. I had no idea how much each chip represented, but I was certain there was a fortune on that table. I couldn't distract Dmir and make him lose any more money intended for Marcous Dzar.

I was so intent on Dmir that I forgot to monitor the people near me. The man who had just left the table reached my side unnoticed. But I noticed when his hand squeezed my bottom.

"I'm tired of cards. Why don't we go upstairs?"

I shoved at his chest. "Not interested."

I spoke louder than intended, and several eyes turned to regard us. Including Dmir's.

"Ely?" My name must have slipped out unbidden, for Dmir bit his lip a second after saying it. But he didn't look away from me.

I glanced back at the man who had fondled me. "I'm only interested in winners."

Turning my back on him, I walked over to Dmir's side. If I put a bit of extra sway in my hips, well, it made sure people didn't look too closely at my face, didn't it?

Dmir held out a hand, and I gladly accepted it. He drew me down onto his lap and whispered in my ear, "What are you doing here?"

I nuzzled at his neck and whispered back. "I need to talk to you, but it can wait until your game is finished."

"Somebody is going to recognize you."

"Nobody here is looking at my face."

The arm Dmir had slipped around me tightened.

"Go back to your card game," I told him. I thought over the most common greeting men had offered me all evening and laughed. "I'll be your good luck charm."

I shifted, settling myself more comfortably across his lap, draping myself over his chest. I could feel his reaction against my hip, and it brought a smile to my lips. He might think me a fool for coming to the hell, but I was also a temptation. I shifted again.

He hissed almost silently, the air brushing over my cheek. He leaned down and placed his lips near my ear once more. "For the love of Balance, don't wiggle so much, Ely. I can't think, much less count."

"I'll behave." For now.

Dmir turned to the other men at the table. "I apologize for the interruption. I raise."

To keep myself occupied, I picked up the glass sitting next to Dmir's collection of chips. I took a sip and fought back the urge to

splutter. Piney and slightly bitter, the gin was nothing like the wines I occasionally drank. It reminded me more than anything of the taste lies left on my tongue.

How had Makev downed enough of this stuff to get drunk? I could handle the flavor, but I didn't enjoy it.

The game continued. I ignored most of it, allowing myself simply to enjoy cuddling into the heat of Dmir's body, the comfort and rightness of having his arm hold me close. Occasionally, I tried another sip of gin, needing something to do with my hands that wouldn't distract Dmir.

"All in," the man across from Dmir said.

"I'm out," the other announced, placing his cards on the table.

Dmir hesitated.

"I'll be nice and warn you," the first said. "I've got an excellent hand."

He wanted Dmir to fold and forfeit the already large pot in the middle of the table. Such a risky bluff, going all in. But these men had to know even better than I that while Dmir won more than he lost, he didn't take risks.

I shifted and lifted my lips to the side of Dmir's neck. "He's bluffing," I whispered against his skin before pressing a light kiss to that spot.

Dmir tensed under me. I risked another press of my lips and a few more words. "He lied when he said he has an excellent hand."

"Well?" the man prompted.

"All in," Dmir said. "It's time to wrap up tonight's game in any event. I have more pressing places to be."

Dmir laid his cards face up on the table.

His opponent cursed.

Dmir signaled to someone, and the chips were collected and counted. I reached for the glass of gin. I must have drunk even less than I thought, for it was nearly full.

Plucking the glass from my hand, Dmir shifted me away from the table. "I think that's enough for one night, don't you?"

"None is enough. That stuff is foul," I agreed. Though it hadn't tasted as bad as I remembered from that first sip. "Is it time to go?" "In just a moment."

A clerk employed by the gaming hell came over with a slip of paper. Dmir signed it, then twisted to put his face near mine. "Time to go, Ely."

I stood up, and the room spun, but Dmir kept me steady. "I've been sitting too long," I told him.

"Uh huh." He wrapped an arm around my waist and steered me through the hell. We didn't go back through all the rooms I had wandered during my search for him. Instead, he led me to a long hallway and a door that led out the back of the building.

We walked in silence through the alley. When we reached the main street, Dmir tried to pull back, but I kept my arm around him, and he pulled me back against his side. "How did you know he was bluffing? There was a more than forty percent chance he had a hand that would beat mine."

"I can't tell a lie, but I can sense them."

"Do you mean you invoked a korengal and literally cannot lie?"

"I've been telling you all along that I always tell the truth."

"I suppose you have. I just didn't appreciate how true that was."

"No one ever does. I am constantly under-appreciated."

"I appreciate you, Ely. Very much."

"I appreciate you, too."

We strolled in silence for a few more streets, the summer night pleasantly warm. I didn't think about anything except the feel of Dmir by my side and my hopes for where this night might lead.

Once again, he broke the silence. "What did you need to talk to me about?"

I scowled. Talking about my brother was not where I wanted tonight to lead, but we needed to have the conversation. "Makev saw us leave the Hall of Records today. He wants to talk with you about his debt. You can't tell him about our agreement."

"I know. You've mentioned before that you don't want him to find out. That's what brought you out to a gaming hell?"

"Our stories have to match. Otherwise, he'll figure out that we're lying."

"So, what have you told him?"

"I said that we spoke, and I was impressed by your efforts to maintain Balance in Plumei. I'm helping you with your research because you inspired me." I glanced around, noticing our surroundings for the first time since we had left the hell. "This isn't the way to the palace."

Dmir frowned. "It's the way to your house, though, isn't it?"

"My house?" I stopped. Looked down at myself. Then back up at Dmir. "I can't go home like this!"

"So you didn't go out like this? Where are your usual clothes?" "At the palace."

He opened his mouth. Closed it. Opened it again. "Why? How?"

"Because I went there first to find you, and then Josyn and Mili helped me dress for a trip to the gaming hell. My other clothes are still with them."

"Josyn sent you down to the gaming hell dressed like that?"

I put my hands on my hips. "What's wrong with how I'm dressed?"

Dmir covered his face with his hands. "Nothing. But you know what every man in the hell thought when they saw you."

"They thought that I belonged there. As intended."

Dmir lowered his hands and shook his head. "Come on, let's get you home."

"No. I told you, I need my regular clothes."

"You really think it will cause less of an uproar to enter the palace with me at this time of night than to go home dressed as you are?"

"Absolutely. No one at home will notice if I'm not there. They'll certainly notice if I walk in dressed like this, though."

"People at the palace will notice you."

"I'm not concerned about that. I just need to keep Makev and my father from discovering I went to a gaming hell. I'm going to the palace, Dmir. Whether you take me or not."

"Fine, I'll take you. But we'll sneak in and attempt to limit how many people notice."



DMIR LED ME through several of the same servant's corridors I had walked previously with Josyn. I thought I recognized the point where the servant's hall crossed with the royal wing, but Dmir didn't step out into the main hallway.

He looked at me, then back at the door. Then back at me. "Probably best to go directly to my room. Then I can find a way to contact Josyn or her maid."

I nodded, more than happy to go to his room.

I saw no one as we crossed that final distance into his suite, but Dmir clearly felt the weight of unseen eyes. He hustled me into his room without ceremony.

I waited until the door closed, then grabbed his shoulders and went up on my toes to kiss him.

After an infinitesimal hesitation, he kissed me back. His tongue painted my lips, and I opened to him. Then someone knocked on the door.

Dmir cursed, but softly enough his visitor wouldn't hear through the door. He spun me around and ushered me into his bedroom. "Wait here while I see who it is. Then I'll contact Josyn and get your clothes."

I nodded, and he went back out to the sitting room. He was going to get my clothes. I looked down at myself. I saw the laces of my bodice and began plucking at them. Women among the working classes were wise, wearing clothes they could get into and out of on their own. It was much easier to unlace the bodice than the corset I

had worn under my usual clothes. I had the bodice off in short order, and everything else followed moments later.

So simple.

The door creaked open.

I turned and smiled at Dmir. "I undressed all by myself!"

"I see that." He stared at me, a pile of fabric that looked familiar in his hands. He swallowed and tilted his head back to look at the ceiling. "Why did you undress?"

I gestured at the fabric in his hands, not that he was looking at me. "You were getting my clothes." I looked closer at the pile. "I don't want to put them on now."

"Eleya, you refused to go home dressed in what you had worn to the gaming hell. You can't very well go home naked."

"I don't want to go home at all. And I want you to keep calling me Ely."

"Ely." He darted a glance at me. "You're drunk."

"I am not. I only had a few sips of gin. It isn't nearly as bad as Makev implied."

"You had more than a few sips."

"The glass was practically full when we left."

"Because someone kept topping it off."

I closed the distance between us, since it seemed clear Dmir would not come farther into the bedroom. I took the clothes from him and dropped them on the ground.

He looked down at me again when he heard the thump of fabric hitting the carpet.

I pressed closer. "Kiss me again."

"Not when you're drunk."

"You were kissing me minutes ago."

"Minutes ago, I didn't realize how strongly the gin was affecting you."

"What does that matter?"

He crossed his arms. "I'm not taking advantage of you. If you still want to parade around me naked when you aren't intoxicated, then we can reassess the situation, but for now, my answer is no."

"Fine. We'll reassess in the morning."

I turned and walked over to his bed. I threw back the covers.

"What are you doing now?"

"Going to bed. That's what one is supposed to do when drunk, right? Sleep it off?"

"In your own bed. In your own clothes."

"You can insist I leave if you want, but I'm not getting dressed." "Ely!"

"Shh. I'm going to bed." I crawled onto the thick mattress.

"In my bed."

"You're welcome to share with me."

"How kind of you to offer. I don't think that's wise, though."

"Don't trust your own honor?"

"Not around you. I won't lie and say I'm not tempted, Ely."

I turned over, my back now to Dmir. "Good. Lies taste foul."

I expected to argue with him quite a bit more, if he didn't storm out of the room and find somewhere else to sleep, but moments after my head hit the pillow, darkness sucked me under.

SIX

When I woke up, I knew immediately I was in Dmir's bed. The sheets and mattress felt all wrong—actually, they felt better than what I was accustomed to. And I felt plenty, because I was naked. I remembered stripping off my clothes the night before and "parading" in front of Dmir, unashamed. Maybe he was right, and I had been drunk, but not to the extent that I hadn't known what I was doing. I didn't even feel any lingering effects this morning beyond a slightly dry mouth.

I turned over, too disappointed to continue enjoying the comfort of his bed. And that's when I realized I wasn't alone. He slept within arm's reach, a line of pillows between his body and mine. The blanket didn't cover his entire torso, and I saw that he wore no shirt, like the first night I had walked in on him.

I wanted to crawl over and press myself against him. It would feel even better skin against skin than it had during our few brief kisses. But the wall of pillows had been placed between us deliberately.

I must have made a sound, for Dmir stirred. His eyes opened, he saw me, and smiled. "Good morning."

No hesitation, no doubts, just a smile of welcome. I scooted closer. "Good morning. I'm surprised to find you in bed with me."

"It is my bed."

"And you were rather insistent last night about not making use of it."

"Sleeping isn't quite the same."

I moved one of the pillows aside. "I'm still surprised you would even sleep here with me in your bed."

"You insisted."

The bitterness of a lie coated my tongue, and I didn't have to wonder if I had forgotten the last moments before sleep had claimed me the night before. I sat up and pushed the other pillows away.

Dmir's gaze locked on my bare breasts and his eyes darkened.

"Liar," I whispered, and leaned close.

His eyes snapped back to mine.

"I invited. I didn't insist you should stay, though I'm glad you did. But now you owe me for lying." I moved so that my lips brushed against his. "I need something to replace the bitter taste of your lie."

Dmir slipped a hand behind my neck and closed the tiny distance between us. He kissed me without hesitation, with a fervor I had yet to feel from him, though there had been hints. Our tongues tangled, and I tasted nothing but him.

My position was awkward, but I didn't want to break away, so I slipped a leg over his hips and straddled him.

He groaned and bucked against me, the hard ridge of his erection pressing against me. He wore trousers, but the thin fabric was hardly a barrier. I slid along his length and Dmir broke off the kiss.

"Ely."

I continued moving back and forth. "No more excuses, Dmir. I want you. You want me. No one is intoxicated or in an ethically compromised position. What else could you possibly object to?"

His hands clamped around my hips, but he wasn't stopping me from moving against him. Then his fingers dug in a little more, and he rolled us over.

I landed on my back, Dmir still between my thighs. In that moment's disorientation, he grabbed my wrists and pinned them to the

bed on each side of my head. He was leaning so close, my nipples brushed against his chest with every breath.

"I want to savor you, Ely. We're not in a hurry."

"Oh." My head fell back against the pillow.

Dmir leaned down and kissed me, but this time our lips and tongues met in an exploration. Slow. Thorough. Intoxicating. He moved down from my lips to lick and nip at my throat and frantic need rose up in me once more.

I couldn't move, pinned in place under his body, my hands still trapped. He drifted lower, his breath a tantalizing tease over my breasts.

"Dmir!"

He chuckled.

Then I heard it. A knock on the outer door of his chambers. I tensed, wanting to ignore it, but unable.

Dmir sat up on his knees and listened. He scowled. "Who in the Balance is knocking on my door so early?"

That's when I remembered. I sat up, my hands instinctively moving to cover my breasts. "My brother! He was going to talk to you first thing today."

All color drained from Dmir's face. "Your brother's here?"

"Well, probably not outside your door, but he's probably the reason someone is knocking."

Dmir slid off the bed. "Balance take it. I can't face your brother right now! What will I tell him? He's going to kill me."

Tucking the blanket under my armpits in a semblance of modesty, I followed Dmir out of bed. "He won't kill you. He doesn't know what was going on a moment ago, and even if he did, it's none of his business."

"Ely, you never went home last night. And you said he already suspected something was going on between us. He's going to figure it out."

I cocked my head to the side. "The knocking stopped. Whoever it was probably thinks you're still asleep. They'll tell Makev you aren't available, and everything will be fine."

"Somehow, I doubt your brother is going to give up that easily. You spent the night here, Ely."

"He doesn't know that. I doubt he even realizes I'm not at home yet. He got up ridiculously early to make sure I couldn't interfere. He probably thinks I'm still abed."

"Yet." Dmir rubbed at his cheeks. "But he will notice. When the servants send him away and he goes home, he'll notice you aren't there."

I cursed. Dmir was right. Dropping the blanket, I rushed over to the pile of clothes I had dropped on the floor the night before. "Come lace up my corset. If I hurry, I can make it home before Makev."



THERE WAS NO hiding that I had been out all night from the servants, and my disheveled state probably gave them a good idea what I had been up to—if only they were right. But I made it home before Makev. I pulled on a fresh gown and had a maid redo my hair, then went down to the breakfast room. Still no sign of my brother.

I finished breakfast. I lingered over another cup of tea.

Finally, Makev strolled into the breakfast room.

"Good morning," I said brightly.

His eyes narrowed. "I had an interesting conversation with the prince this morning."

My cup clanked on the saucer as I put it down. "What? When?" "Just now. I had to wait a bit, but he saw me."

Dmir must have sent a servant to delay Makev as soon as I left. He had ensured I got home first, but had to talk to my brother to give me that time.

"What did he have to say?" I asked as nonchalantly as possible. I knew I wasn't fooling Makev, not after my reaction to his announcement, but I had to try. "Is he calling in your debt?"

"No. In fact, he said he is forgiving my debt. He feels bad about taking advantage of me when I was drunk."

I forced down another sip of tea. "Hmm, that doesn't surprise me. He is very honorable."

"Then he said he also didn't want to cause any strife since he knows how much you care about me."

"Mmhmm." Makev's words took a moment to make sense. No, they didn't make sense. "Wait, what?"

"Prince Dmir seems to think that if he called in my debt, it would upset you. And he doesn't want to upset you, on account of being in love with you."

"What?" I was on my feet without knowing how I had gotten there. "He said what?"

Makev frowned. "You didn't know? I thought you were just trying to keep the relationship a secret from me, but you didn't know he's in love with you?"

Mutely, I shook my head. Love? I hadn't even dared to hope for so much.

He had kissed me for the first time just the day before. A man who had repeatedly refused to sleep with me because he would not take advantage in any way had kissed me. If Makev hadn't interrupted this morning, we would have done far more than kiss. Dmir was not the type to take a casual lover. Even without talking about it, I knew that much.

"He loves me," I said softly, daring not only to hope, but to believe that it might be true.

"A prince, Eleya." Makev shook his head. "Balance take me, I never thought you'd fall for a prince."

"It was a surprise to me, too." I looked at the door. "I . . . I need to be going now."

I needed to hear the words from Dmir. I had to know for sure.

"Wait." Makev held out an arm, as if to block the door. "Don't forget, Father will be home for supper tonight."

The reminder confused me. Of course I had forgotten in that moment, but I wouldn't have missed supper. Father might only dine at home occasionally, but I never had formal engagements on the nights Father was at home. And informal suppers away from home were rare for me—I had no club to retreat to like Makev. Then I realized what my brother was hinting at.

"I couldn't? Could I?" I shook my head. "No. Despite what Dmir might have said to you, we don't . . . have an understanding of any sort."

"Perhaps because he's never even met your father?"

"I'm certain he has met Father before."

"No, he's met the Duke of Smagrav. There's a difference."

I wasn't so sure. Even at home, Father was more duke than parent. "It's too sudden. He probably has plans."

"Eleya, we're talking about Prince Dmir. He is infamous among the nobility for never having social plans." He hesitated, then added, "Be sure to invite Ketira, too, to balance inviting the prince. I'll tell Cook to expect two extra guests."

Makev didn't wait for me to make up my mind; he had already decided. In this case, I found I was fine with going along with his plans. I couldn't lose my nerve and not invite Dmir, not if Cook was expecting guests.

SEVEN

THOUGH I ARRIVED at the Hall of Records earlier than usual, Dmir was already seated at our table. He had a folio in front of him, but he wasn't looking at it. His gaze was focused so far in the distance that he didn't even see me enter the room.

I paused at the border between shelves and open space. "Dmir?"

He shot to his feet fast enough that his chair toppled over and thudded against the stone floor. He stared at me, his throat moving, hands flexing, and without saying a thing.

"You spoke with my brother this morning. I thought the plan was to pretend you didn't know he was there."

"You needed time to get home."

"We also discussed not making any connection between me and your failure to call in Makev's debt."

"I didn't have many options with him right there talking about what he owed. I had to tell him I forgave the debt."

"So why not leave it at that?"

"Because he might have been as stubborn as you. I had to give a reason to erase the debt that he would find Balanced. A reason that wouldn't lead him to suspect that you had intervened on his behalf."

I took a step forward. "So what reason did you give him, then?" "I think he already told you."

"He did." Another step closer. "But I need to hear it from you, Dmir."

Dmir closed the distance between us. He cupped my cheek with his hand. "I told him the truth, Ely. I told him I would never do anything that hurt you. I'll do anything in my power to make you happy.

"I'm pretty sure I fell for you the night you barged into my room and showed more hesitation over becoming my secretary than my mistress. Then you began helping me down here. Every time you spoke, you either asked an intriguing question, made an insightful observation, or made me laugh. I knew I had fallen when you spent an entire dance setting the stage to make Hanrid amenable to my proposal."

His other hand came up and traced a path from my brow to my lips. "I love you, Lady Eleya Sonita Poinar."

Dmir's lips met mine, and I savored the sweet taste of his lips, his tongue, his truth. My hands fisted in his jacket, and I rose up on tiptoes, refusing to stop when he tried to pull back. He obliged me and leaned forward again, our lips never losing contact.

I lost track of time, but eventually the shallow breaths between kisses were not enough and I had to pull away. I sucked in a lungful of air and buried my face against Dmir's chest. His hand smoothed down my hair and he held me while I recovered.

Finally, I tilted my head back to look at him. "I'm pretty sure I fell for you when I barged into your bedroom and saw you wearing nothing but those loose linen trousers."

Dmir chuckled, but I felt the tension take hold of him.

I had to speak plainly, for he understood exactly how much I could hide while still telling the truth. "I really did feel something more than lust that night, Dmir. You were so set on being honorable. On helping me without compromising me. I didn't know what I felt at that point, but something was there. Then I began working with you, and saw your passion for making life better for everyone in the

Empire, for finding a Balance between innovation and nature. You inspired me. You seduced me with your ideals."

I placed a hand over his heart and looked deep into his eyes. "I love you, Dmir."

He exhaled in a mighty burst and clutched me against him.

We stood there, arms wrapped around each other, silent, for a small eternity. I rested my head against his chest, listening to his heart beat. When it slowed, I mumbled against his shirt. "Father is going to be at home for supper tonight. Will you join us?"

I swore his heart stopped for a moment.

"Did you just invite me to supper with your family?"

I nodded against his chest. He had spoken the truth when he declared his love, but that didn't come with guarantees that he'd want to have a public connection with my name. Or that he even could. He might not be the heir, but he was still a Prince of Plumei.

"I'd be honored to dine with you tonight."

I finally met his eyes. "Really?"

"You need to ask? I thought you could sense the truth."

"Doesn't mean I'm always ready to believe it."

"Why is it so hard to believe?"

I knew in that instant that if I mentioned anything about my fears that Dmir might want me as nothing more than a mistress, he'd be offended. Not for himself, but on my account. So I found a different truth to tell him. "No one actually wants to spend time with my father in an intimate setting. Family suppers are not particularly enjoyable at our house."

"You'll be there." Dmir pressed his lips to my forehead. "That's enough for me."

"Thank you," I said, not even sure myself what exactly I was thanking him for. Everything, it seemed. For being who he was. I probably owed him an apology rather than thanks for agreeing to come tonight. Ketira always demanded a rather large favor in exchange for attending Poinar family suppers.

"Ketira," I exclaimed. "I need to send a note to her immediately."

Dmir stepped back, his confusion clear.

"I need to invite her before she makes other plans. Balance, I hope she doesn't already have other plans. Things will go much better if we have another woman at the table next to Makev, and Ketira is the only friend I have who can handle supper with my father."

I rushed over to the table and found a pen and paper. At least I had the perfect bribe ready to entice Ketira. She wouldn't want to miss sitting across from Dmir.

Dmir watched me warily. "You're starting to worry me."

"Good. It's always best to be prepared when facing my father. I'm not sure what difference it will make that you are royalty, but he doesn't have much respect for anyone he considers beneath him. In my experience, that includes everyone. If he can't dismiss your rank then he'll find some other fault, like your age."

"Ely, how is he going to react to the fact that I am there for you?" I shrugged. "I don't know."



FATHER DIDN'T REACT at all when I announced we would have two extra guests joining us for supper. Makev and I rarely invited anyone to these family meals, but Father didn't seem to care so long as we kept the numbers low and even. I debated telling him that one of the guests was Prince Dmir, but decided surprise was better, since Father didn't ask who the guests were.

Dmir arrived first and was shown into the parlor.

Makev elbowed my side. "Close your mouth," he hissed.

I snapped my jaw shut, but I wanted to continue gaping at Dmir. I had never seen him dressed so meticulously. He always wore the latest styles, but simplified. Even at the count and countess's ball, he hadn't worn anything so fine. No, that was a lie; the clothes had been fine, but not immaculately fitted and perfectly accessorized.

Father recognized Dmir at least. "Your Highness, welcome to my home."

Dmir inclined his head. "I am honored to be here, Your Grace."

Father subjected Makev and I both to a rare burst of scrutiny.

Dmir nodded at us. "Lord Makev, Lady Eleya, thank you for the invitation."

Makev nodded back, then went over to the sideboard and poured a glass of wine that he carried over to Dmir.

I was just close enough to hear his words when he handed over the glass. "Here, you'll need this."

Ketira sailed into the parlor moments later, and another round of greetings, and pouring another glass of wine, filled the final minutes before we transferred to the dining room.

Father, of course, sat at the head of the table. Makev pulled out a chair for Ketira on Father's left and seated himself next to her. Dmir pulled out the chair across from my brother for me before sitting at Father's right hand.

Ketira, Balance bless her, didn't let us fall into silence as the soups were served.

She looked over at Dmir. "Your brother is due back in Tarân soon, is he not, Your Highness?"

"Yes. He should be crossing the ocean even as we speak. I believe he is scheduled to make landfall at Paelk in just over a week."

"So there could very well be a wedding this autumn. Princess Josyn must be thrilled."

"She has been anticipating this moment for many years."

For my father's sake, I did not snort. Dmir had answered Ketira's question much the way I would have, side-stepping the truth that was not welcome in polite conversation rather than lying outright. I appreciated the favor he did my taste buds. I often drank a touch more wine than was wise at formal meals to mask the taste of the lies flowing around me. Tonight, I refused to drink much, though.

Not that anything could happen under the watchful eyes of my family and best friend, but I wouldn't take the chance of missing any more moments with Dmir because of alcohol. Though hopefully this

morning had proven that the gin was not the cause of my desires the night before.

Ketira, Balance curse her, didn't let the subject of royal weddings drop.

"With your brother about to marry, you must be thinking about your own future wedding, Your Highness."

Makev choked on his soup.

I glared at Ketira.

Dmir smiled. "It has been more on my mind of late than ever before."

Then my father spoke. "Don't think that I'll increase Eleya's dowry just to snag a member of the imperial family. I don't object to such a connection, but I hardly think it worth actively pursuing."

Dmir faced my father. "I have no interest in your daughter's dowry, Your Grace. Lady Eleya has won my admiration for herself alone."

Father pushed aside his empty bowl. "Well, see to it that you don't ruin her other prospects, then."

Mortification took over, and I dropped my head into my hands.

"Eleya, behave like a lady, for Balance's sake."

"Perhaps you should be more concerned with your own ungentlemanly behavior, Your Grace."

I lifted my head. I had never heard such vehemence from Dmir.

Father stood. "You dare to insult me in my own home?"

Dmir rose. "You dare to insult your own daughter in her home?" "Get out!"

Dmir faced the other side of the table. "Lord Makev, Miss Ketira, I apologize for the interruption to your suppers." He met my eyes. "Lady Eleya, I look forward to our next meeting."

From the corner of my eye, I saw Father's face grow red as he trembled with outrage, but I didn't turn away from Dmir. I extended my hand. "Until our next meeting, Your Highness."

He kissed the back of my hand and strode out of the room without so much as glancing at my father.

In the awful silence that followed, I don't think any of us dared to breathe except Father, who panted with anger.

"That ungrateful . . . Eleya, you will have nothing to do with him in the future, do you hear me?"

"I hear you." I rose to my feet. "I'm not going to listen to you, though."

"You're not . . .you're not . . ." Father spluttered. Then his hand came down on the table with enough force to rattle the dishes. "You are my daughter and you will do as I say!"

"I am a grown woman and will not be bullied."

"You will obey me or you will have no place under my roof!"

"I want no place under your roof."

I turned and marched toward the door with my head held high. Ketira reached my side before I was out of the dining room, and we exited the house together.

"I'm so sorry," Ketira burst out the moment we reached the street.

"It's not your fault."

"But if I hadn't tried to tease the prince, none of this would have happened."

"Ketira, it's fine." I said the words thinking only to calm her, but I found they really were the truth. Obviously, I had many things to figure out now, but it was a relief to step free of my father. No wonder Makev always told me not to worry when he provoked Father to the point of being kicked out. It was liberating to speak my mind and know that I wouldn't have to deal with Father and his rigid opinions for a while.

Ketira's eyes were wide. "It's not fine. You just lost your home! Of course you know you are always welcome to stay with me and my family, but . . . how are you not bawling, Eleya?"

"Would you cry over being rid of my father?"
"Elv?"

Ketira and I both looked over at the alley between my house and the next. Dmir emerged from between the buildings. I smiled; he hadn't gone home.

He closed the distance between us. "Ely, is everything all right?" I threw my arms around him. "Everything is fine."

Ketira approached more slowly. "Everything is not fine. Eleya's father just disowned her."

"What?"

I patted Dmir's chest and glared at Ketira. "He did not."

"I was there. I heard what he said."

"He said I wasn't welcome under his roof. That isn't the same thing, Ketira. He banished Makev from the house for half a year once when my brother refused to pay court to Lady Abignale."

"What?"

"Lady Abignale?"

Dmir and Ketira's exclamations of shock rolled over each other. I knew Ketira was trying to figure out why she had never heard about this. Dmir was probably doing the math and realizing that the elderly Duchess of Epsia had been unmarried for about a year when Makev was barely nineteen.

I shrugged. "Father only relented when the duchess remarried. He thought kicking Makev out would make him desperate enough to try to woo a woman our grandmother's age."

"Wait," Ketira's brow furrowed. Then her mouth parted as realization dawned. "Wasn't that the year your brother spent most of his time at your family's country estate? I thought he left because . . . well, for other reasons."

I wondered what Ketira had thought, but now wasn't the time. "Yes. Father didn't even realize Makev was staying at the estate. Actually, Makev stayed at our house in Tarân a few times, too. He just never let Father see him. He's been banished from the house for a week or so at a stretch a few other times, too."

As if on cue, Makev came strolling out of the house. He sauntered over to us. "I'm going up via the tree out back to grab a few things. Do you need anything, Eleya?"

"Oh, Makev, he didn't." It was one thing to understand my brother's easy acceptance of being banished from the house, but another to know I might have cost him something far worse.

"Don't worry. I left on my own. He was too shocked to deal with me, too."

Thank the Balance. Father had sworn the last time that he wouldn't stop at banishing Makev from the house next time. He said he'd disown him. Though that was probably harder when his spare heir had already been kicked out.

Makev gestured with his thumb over his shoulder at the alley. "Do you want me to grab any of your things?"

I shook my head. I didn't want to even think about what I needed tonight.

"All right." He glanced between Dmir and Ketira. "Where will I find you tomorrow?"

"The Hall of Records."

Makev snorted. "Right. Well, I'll be on my way then."

He ducked past us and into the alley where Dmir had emerged earlier.

Ketira gaped after him. "This is really just a commonplace occurrence?"

I shrugged. "It's the first time Father's kicked me out, but it really isn't that big of a deal. Now, we should be off before Makev actually sees who I'm going home with. Not that he hasn't already figured it out."

"Ely . . . "

"You're not really going to say no, are you, Dmir? We snuck into the palace just fine last night."

Ketira squealed, though quietly—thank the Balance. She clapped a hand over her mouth. Then she lowered it. "I'll just leave you to it, then. Good night, Eleya. Your Highness."

Dmir watched her leave without saying anything or moving.

I tugged at him. "Come on. I really do want to be a few blocks away before Makev comes back out. It'll be easier if he can pretend he doesn't know where I went tonight."

He began walking, but slowly. "Are you really fine with everything that happened tonight, Ely?"

"I am. I mean, I'll probably be angry tomorrow and maybe I'll have flashes of worry over everything, but I don't regret what happened." I tried to make Dmir walk a little faster. "Now I understand why Makev always got so frustrated when I repeatedly asked him if he was all right when this happened to him."

Dmir frowned. "Yet you were still worried when he came out."

"Makev has pushed our father considerably more than I have. He really is in danger of being disowned at this point."

"That's why you snuck into my room, isn't it? You were afraid that your father would disown Makev because he lost so much money."

I nodded. "My brother often gets in arguments with Father, but he is generally a responsible person. I was terrified that such a lapse in judgment would push Father to carry out his threat of disowning Makey."

"So you chose to offer yourself up as payment instead of sitting back and becoming the heir to a duchy."

"And I hadn't even realized at that point how smart of a choice I was making. I would much rather have you than a duchy."

"Your father will never approve of me after tonight."

"You're still a prince. He'll accept you. You'll probably even be welcome back in his house, eventually. In case you haven't figured it out, banishing people is his way of dealing with anger."

"You're not mad about what I said?"

"Dmir, I will treasure the memory of you calling him ungentlemanly forever. You're not mad I subjected you to meeting him?"

Dmir shook his head.

"Then we're both fine. No apologies or guilt needed."

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"I feel bad that I made you miss supper, though. I know a nice dining house. Would you care to join me for a meal?"

"I'd love to."

EIGHT

2) E

DESPITE THE FAMILY supper falling apart so spectacularly, having supper with Dmir turned out to be a delight. The food was delicious, and the company was even better. After an hour laughing with him, sipping wine, and admiring the fit of his jacket over broad shoulders, I was ready to pick up where we had left off that morning.

Dmir escorted me through the streets of Tarân toward the palace, the side-long looks he gave me proclaiming his thoughts tended in a similar direction. But he didn't lead me to the palace doors, not even the side door we had used the night before.

Instead, Dmir escorted me to the gardens behind the palace.

"You have a sudden desire to admire the roses?" I asked.

"It is a bit early to retire."

The halls were teeming with servants, he meant. That was fine. I didn't mind spending the time strolling through the gardens on Dmir's arm while the sun set.

"I want to check the dahlias," I told him. "They should be at their peak."

Dmir froze. "Of course."

I laughed and pointed at the bed of brilliant yellow, pink, violet, and maroon flowers. "Roses are the only ones you can name, aren't they?"

"I can name plenty of flowers. Recognizing them, on the other hand, is not my specialty."

We made our way to the dahlias, and I leaned over, running my finger along the smooth petals of one fuchsia flower.

Dmir groaned. "Of course we would have to Balance the scales tonight."

I looked up at him in confusion, but Dmir was staring off to the left. I followed his gaze and spotted Princess Josyn and another woman walking along the garden paths together. The woman was older and dressed regally in a gown that looked both out of place among the gardens and as though it could never be out of place anywhere.

"Dmir." I licked my lips. "Is that the Empress?"

He sighed. "As if it wasn't enough to face your father tonight, now we must brave my mother."

Dmir made no move to walk toward the Empress and Josyn, but he made no pretense of not seeing them either. I straightened fully and waited by his side. I wanted to clutch at my skirts, but I had learned not to give into such displays of nerves years ago. The harder urge to resist was gripping Dmir's hand.

After an agonizing wait, and far too soon for comfort, they reached us.

"Dmir, what a surprise to find you out here this evening." The Empress greeted her son, barely sparing me a glance.

I tried to breathe. Having Her Majesty ignore me was probably the best outcome for this meeting.

"Lady Eleya enjoys the dahlias," Dmir replied blandly.

The Empress's gaze fell on me. "The Duke of Smagrav's youngest, are you not?"

I curtsied. "Yes, Your Majesty."

"I am not overly fond of your father," she informed me, her voice chilly.

"I'm not either," I replied without thinking. My eyes went wide when I realized what I had said. It was one thing to speak my mind to Father, quite another to address the Empress so bluntly.

"No one is," Josyn said, her voice as cool as the Empress's.

Dmir's mother looked at Josyn, then back at me. "Enjoy the dahlias, Lady Eleya. I must speak to my son for a moment."

I curtsied again.

Dmir's hand brushed against mine as he walked over to his mother, but I didn't dare look at him. They walked away silently. Princess Josyn stayed by me.

"I thought Dmir was having supper at your house tonight?"

Had Dmir told her? It seemed strange for him to have told Josyn, but I couldn't see how else she would have found out. It wasn't like any of the palace servants were privy to Dmir's invitation—unless he had let something slip while getting ready.

That made sense, actually. I should have realized earlier that she had known. "You're responsible for his outfit, aren't you?"

She didn't so much as smile, but I knew she was amused. "I cede all credit for that to Mili—and Dmir for being wise enough to seek her aid. But you have not yet answered why you are in the imperial gardens instead of your home, Lady Eleya."

"Dmir wasn't overly fond of my father, either. And the feeling was mutual."

"I'm sorry to hear that. Do you think your father's opinion can be changed?"

"No, but it hardly matters."

"Doesn't it though? Despite her opinion of the duke, Her Majesty won't approve a union if it doesn't have his support."

I swallowed. "Is there any chance she'd approve at all? Despite what happened tonight, Father wouldn't object to a connection with the imperial family. But is that even a possibility?"

Josyn nodded behind me. "Look and judge for yourself."

I spun around, all thoughts of subtlety gone.

Dmir was walking in our direction, a huge smile on his face. The Empress stood watching him, her expression inscrutable.

"I'll let you two have a private conversation," Josyn said, moving off in the Empress's direction.

"Thank you," Dmir told her, his eyes locked on me. He took my hands in his, and I worried that he'd notice how clammy they were. "Ely, I have a question for you."

My throat was too dry to speak. I nodded.

"May I court you?" He squeezed my palms. "Don't get me wrong, I have every intention of asking you to marry me, but Mother insists that we not get engaged until after Kivan and Josyn's wedding. So for now, may I court you?"

I found my voice. "Weren't you doing that already?"

"Not very well. I intend to be a very assiduous suitor. I may not be allowed to propose yet, but there will be no doubt in anyone's mind that I plan to spend the rest of my life adoring you. If you'll have me, that is."

"Dmir, I'm already yours." I went up on tiptoe to kiss him, then let my lips drift as close to his ear as possible. "All that's left is for you to claim me."

Dmir craned his neck around. "Thank the Balance, Josyn got Mother out of sight. Let's go."

I giggled when he turned for the palace doors and had to trot to keep up with his long strides. Someone was going to see us, but I didn't care. It seemed Dmir didn't either, for he didn't even react when we ran into a servant in one of the side passages on the way to his bedroom.

I laughed again. "You really do intend for everyone to know I'm yours."

Dmir halted his headlong flight through the palace. "I'm sorry, Ely. I should practice more discretion, shouldn't I?"

"Balance, no. Don't stop now, Dmir. I don't care if the whole world knows."

"You're certain?"

Another servant entered the hall, and I pulled Dmir down for a kiss. "I'm certain."

We raced past the gaping maid without further conversation.



I COULDN'T GET out of my formal evening gown alone, so the instant we crossed into Dmir's rooms, I set to work on his clothes instead. "As delectable as you look in this suit, I want you out of it."

Dmir flushed. "Delectable?"

"Mmhmm. Tonight, I finally get to see if you taste as good as I've imagined."

Jacket, waistcoat, and shirt were all unbuttoned. I slid my hands under the layers of fabric, intending to ease them from Dmir's shoulders, but I was distracted by the feel of his skin. The smooth satin of his chest, the light dusting of hairs. I leaned forward and pressed an open-mouthed kiss over his heart.

"Ely," he groaned. "We haven't even made it to the bedroom."

I licked at the same spot, and he shuddered. "So?"

"So you are rushing things again. I told you before, I want to savor this."

"But we have all night. Rush now, savor later." I pushed the clothes off the top half of his body.

He pulled away, letting them fall from his arms, then came back and pinned me against the wall. He kissed me, slow and deep. "Savor now and later. Bedroom, Ely."

"Trousers off first."

Dmir groaned and pushed away from me. He stripped his trousers and underlinens off in a rush—I was winning.

I stared. No, I had already won. Lean, but with muscles that belied the hours he spent in musty libraries, Dmir was built to perfection. My gaze traveled down and up, then back down to settle on the thick length jutting from a nest of dark hairs.

I stepped forward.

He stepped back.

Step by step, he led me deeper into his rooms, never letting me close enough to touch.

"Are you luring me into your bedroom, Dmir? You?"

He shrugged, the ripple of his muscles entrancing me. "It's not like I'm doing it under false pretenses."

"No," I agreed. "I'd say your intentions are quite clear."

Dmir's shyness and blushes had completely disappeared. As endearing as it was seeing him stumble over my forwardness, I had to admit I liked this playfully sensuous Dmir even more. If only I wasn't wearing an evening gown. If I had been dressed in the same clothes as the night before, I could have at least gotten started on removing them as I followed Dmir back into his bedroom. To his bed.

When I had him cornered against the bed, I reached out once more, but he held up a hand, stopping me.

His voice was low and commanding. "Turn around."

I turned. It didn't even occur to me not to obey, not when his words sent a rush of heat between my thighs.

Dmir gently swept my hair over my shoulder. He caressed my neck, leaned in, and kissed it. Then his hands moved to the buttons of my gown. He undid buttons and laces with slow deliberation, his knuckles brushing over each inch revealed, the smooth silk of my chemise only enhancing the sensation. His mouth followed the same path down my spine. I shivered. At this rate, I wasn't sure I would survive until he had undressed me completely.

"Dmir," I pleaded.

His hands traveled back up my spine and over my shoulders, pushing my gown down.

I turned around, but I was too unsteady to rip off my remaining garments in a rush. Dmir watched, his gaze hooded, as I pulled off my undergarments one by one and let them drop to the floor. He had seen me naked before, but this was different. I felt almost shy as

I bared myself to him, not because I didn't want him to see, but because I knew he saw more than my body.

"Bed, Ely."

I climbed onto the bed, but Dmir gripped my ankle, keeping me from crawling to the center of the mattress. I looked over my shoulder at him and he motioned with a finger, urging me silently to turn over.

I rolled onto my back and spread my legs wide. "Like this?"

Dmir tugged on my ankle, sliding me closer to the edge of the bed. He stopped when only my upper body still rested on the mattress. Then he knelt. "Like this."

I held my breath, my entire body tightening in anticipation.

Dmir lifted one of my legs, leaned in, and kissed my calf. He slowly worked his way up my leg, each of his kisses coming between words. "Beautiful. You are so beautiful, my Ely."

Every whisper of breath and caress of his lips intensified the pressure building inside me. By the time he reached my knee, it was almost too much to bear, yet I wanted to beg for more. When he kissed my thighs, his fingers tracing over and around, leaving trails of pure sensation in their wake, I trembled.

He reached the slick heat of my core and licked.

That was all it took. I cried out his name, pleasure replacing my awareness of the world. As the aftershocks waned, I realized Dmir was speaking, the words coming in staccato bursts between licks.

"You're not done yet. Come for me again, Ely."

I was on the edge of release again, each swipe of his tongue pushing me closer, but I needed more. I needed Dmir. "Inside. I'll come with you inside me."

"Not yet. One more like this."

"Dmir!" I tangled my fingers in his hair and tugged.

He surged upward, his body a cage pressing me into the bed. I wrapped my legs around him, locking my ankles behind his back. Our lips met and there was nothing of patience left in how he kissed me. No hesitation when he lined up our bodies and thrust inside.

I rolled my hips, savoring the sensation of being joined with Dmir.

He groaned and rocked out and back in. Then he rushed.

My body moved in time with his, faster and faster, until I fractured. He continued to move, his thrusts wringing even more pleasure from my body.

"Dmir," I called out again, not sure if I was begging him to stop or to never stop.

He shuddered, his movements losing their smooth rhythm.

"My Dmir."

He spilled inside me.

We lay there on the bed, my arms and legs around him, his body a silken weight over me, for long moments.

"I love you, Ely."

The words filled me with a gentle warmth, and I knew they would have that effect every time he said them for the rest of our lives. A future brighter than I had ever imagined spread out before me. A life of love, happiness, and passion. Unhooking my ankles, I caressed his back. "I love you, too."

Dmir rolled over, ending with me sprawled over him. "Next time, you aren't allowed to rush me."

"Next time, *you* aren't allowed to rush *me*." I pretended to think about it for a moment. "Actually, you are. Balance in all things, right?"

Dmir grinned. "It's going to be a very busy night."

NINE

When I woke, Dmir was no longer in bed, but I could hear him in the outer room of his suite. I stretched and attempted to push aside the languid feeling urging me to lie abed all day. I didn't know what time it was, but we hadn't gotten much sleep, so remaining under the covers held extra appeal. The door opened and Dmir came in. Suddenly, the bed wasn't as attractive, not when he was across the room. I sat up.

Dmir carried a covered tray and had a gown draped over one arm. He paused when he saw me sitting up in bed, the covers pooled at my waist. "Much as I love your current attire, I come bearing clothes and food."

He had pulled on a pair of those loose linen trousers, but nothing else.

I pushed my hair back over my shoulder, enjoying the way Dmir watched me. "Is that one of my gowns?" I asked, making no move to climb out of bed yet.

"I assume so." Dmir put down the tray and held out the clothes. "It was in my sitting room next to the breakfast tray when I got up."

I slid out of bed and walked over to Dmir. Ignoring the clothes, I went up on tiptoe to kiss him. He followed me as I sank back on my heels. I ran my hands along the ridges of his abdomen, up to his

shoulders, and then down his arms. Then I snatched the clothes and skipped back out of reach.

Dmir grinned and sat in the lone chair next to the table where he had placed the breakfast tray.

I shook out the fabric, aware of his eyes on me. Taking my time, I laid out the gown and all its undergarments on the bed. I rolled silk stockings up my legs. Then I lifted the knee-length chemise over my head and let it skim over my breasts and hips. Stopping there, I looked at Dmir. "Hmm, this seems to be the level of formality you favor for breakfast."

His grin grew even wider. "I peeked at the breakfast tray. There is a veritable feast, but only one set of utensils and a single cup." He glanced around the room and pretended surprise. "And it appears I only have one chair, too. We'll have to share, it seems."

I crossed the room and settled across Dmir's lap.

Reaching around me, his arm brushing against my breasts, he lifted the lid from the tray.

I was momentarily distracted by the amount of food. "When you said a feast, I didn't imagine that much."

"I believe this is the kitchen's version of a discreet meal for two when they don't know the tastes of one of the two."

"Or they assumed we had worked up a very large appetite."

"I am rather hungry," Dmir whispered against my ear.

Then his stomach growled.

I laughed. "I had better feed you, then."

We ended up taking turns feeding each other, often without making use of the fork and spoon at all. The meal passed with gentle teases and many kisses, and I wanted it to last forever.

"No more," I protested when Dmir held another strawberry to my lips. "I can't eat another bite."

I laid my head on his shoulder and watched Dmir return the berry to the tray. There was still a mountain of food left. There was also a letter tucked under one of the plates.

"Are you going to read your mail?" I asked.

"Hmm?"

"The letter." I leaned over and pinched the corner of the paper between my fingers and tugged it out. Dmir's name filled the front.

I handed it to him, and Dmir flipped it over. A blob of plain red wax sealed the letter. "It must have come yesterday. I wonder who it's from?"

He cracked the seal, and I settled back against him. I had no need to read his private correspondence.

Dmir tensed under me.

"What is it?"

"Lord Hanrid is revoking his donation to Marcous Dzar."

I pushed upright. "What? Why?"

"He doesn't really say. Just, 'In light of recent revelations, my wife and I have decided that Your Highness's philosophies of Balance do not match our own."

"What 'recent revelations' could he be talking about?" I bolted out of Dmir's lap. "You don't think it has anything to do with—"

Dmir stood and gripped my hands. "How could it? The letter came yesterday."

"I was here the night before, too, after . . . after . . . " My eyes widened as realization struck.

Dmir squeezed my hands. "After our visit to the gaming hell. Gambling and drinking would go against the count and countess's views of Balance, wouldn't it?"

I pulled away from Dmir and darted over to the bed and the rest of my clothes. "We have to go convince them that your visit was justified, that you value Balance. Help me get dressed."



THANKFULLY, THE GOWN left for me in Dmir's sitting room was one of my most respectable. I tried not to wonder too hard if Princess Josyn and her maid had acquired the dress or if my brother had sent it over to the palace. I hoped it had been the princess.

With the subtly striped, gray gown buttoned up to my neck, and my hair neatly arranged by the maid who collected the breakfast tray, I looked serious and proper. Conservative. It matched well with Dmir's usual clothes, which were more suited to a clerk than a prince, though they were made of the finest fabrics.

The dress gave me the confidence needed to walk into the count and countess's drawing room. I perched on the edge of a chair, my back straight and head high, while we waited. It didn't matter how I had spent the past two nights, or that every servant in the palace must know how I had spent them. I looked the part of a woman who shared Lord Hanrid and Lady Mariga's values. I'd have them convinced Dmir was the most principled, decent man they had ever met in no time.

After all, it was the truth.

Dmir, trying not to fidget on the chair next to mine, was not as sanguine about our prospects.

Lord Hanrid and Lady Mariga filed into the room.

"Our minds are made up," Lady Mariga announced, with no pretense at civility.

"We cannot countenance supporting someone who shows no regard for Balance, Your Highness," the count added with a bit less force.

They both noticed me at the same moment, surprise stamping their features.

"Lady Eleya? What are you doing here with the prince?" Lord Hanrid asked. He didn't wait for a response, turning back to Dmir. "You must know this does not help your cause. We know you went to the Duke of Smagrav's home yesterday—after specifically telling me you didn't want to do business with a man so out of tune with the natural Balance."

"I did not visit His Grace for business reasons," Dmir replied calmly. "I went to his home solely because he is Lady Eleya's father. You do not hold his views against her, do you?"

I met the eyes of the count and countess both in turn, then focused on Lord Hanrid. "His Highness disagreed rather vehemently with my father, as a matter of fact. But that is not why we are here, my lord. I don't know what you heard, but I can assure you, His Highness is working for the Balance of all."

"Balance?" Lady Mariga screeched. "Where is the Balance in visiting a gaming hell? Such places are the antithesis of Balance."

"Visited on a regular basis, I agree, Lady Mariga. But as in all aspects of life, moderation grants Balance. His Highness rarely attends social events. He is not out every night drinking or playing cards. Yet his days are spent in serious contemplation of the needs of the empire. To have no break from his duties is hardly Balanced. A single night in a gaming hell seems far preferable to spending every night in a club."

I addressed the countess, but my words were still for her husband. By all accounts, his devotion to Balance had more to do with an inability to handle his liquor or win at a hand of cards. He made a virtue out of necessity. And no man who wished to keep friends among the nobility could afford to censure the lords' clubs. Hanrid purported to view them as a necessary Balance to those same lords' duties.

Lord Hanrid nodded along to my argument. But Lady Mariga spoke first. "And what of the strumpet he favored while he gambled? Do you believe such behavior to be an act of Balance, Lady Eleya?"

Keeping my expression neutral took a great deal of effort. I wasn't sure if I wanted to blush in embarrassment or laugh at the absurdity of being called a strumpet, but I knew either reaction would not help our case. Thank the Balance they didn't know I was the woman who had spent the evening on Dmir's lap.

I searched for words, knowing I had to tread carefully so that I did not back myself into a corner that I couldn't escape without lying. Dmir had no such hesitations.

"A strumpet? The woman I was with was no strumpet."

Lord Hanrid narrowed his eyes. "But you were with a woman." "Yes." Dmir stared the count down. "There is nothing unBalanced in two people finding pleasure with each other."

Lady Mariga sniffed. "Without marriage vows, such relations are fundamentally unBalanced. True Balance is one man for every woman and one woman for every man. Marriage is the only way to guarantee the matches."

I rarely encountered such a narrow view of Balance among the people living in Tarân. Most believed that shared pleasure, when enjoyed discreetly, was perfectly Balanced. Few cared if such relationships existed between a man and a woman or not. Marriage, with its emphasis on bloodlines and inheritance, was a different matter, sadly. Even then, many married couples were unfaithful. I wanted to point this out, but I knew not to challenge the countess so directly. I hoped approaching her statement from the other direction wouldn't push her too far.

I leaned forward. "There are unmarried couples who are faithful to each other. Surely they are living in Balance, then?"

"If they are in Balance with each other, then there is no reason they should not be married. Pledging their troth under the Watcher's gaze is not an onus, but a privilege."

"The Ancients had no marriage vows. Surely you cannot say that they did not live in Balance?"

Lady Mariga opened her mouth, but had no ready retort.

The Ancient Koreini had lived in total Balance, the legends said. Then, over two millennia ago, they bargained with the Watcher and gave up perfect Balance in favor of embracing free will. As one, they invoked the first korengal and separated humans from the rest of nature, setting us on a path of progress and steering us away from natural Balance. Their ancient tongue was still the only way to appeal to the Watcher and cast a spell-prayer.

Reading between the lines of the clerics' tales of the Korengal Djan years, the Ancients had lived in communities that would have

had nothing like marriage. I wasn't sure I believed the stories of perfect harmony between all people, but I'd cling to them like a zealot if it helped now. The Ancients had not believed in one man for every woman and one woman for every man. That much was clear.

After a few more false starts, the countess replied. "We do not have the same advantages as the Ancient Koreini. We must seek a more rigid Balance to compensate for that lack."

"Exactly. Humans must manage Balancing all aspects of their lives through trial and error. We must find the combination of work and play, seriousness and frivolity, that brings us closest to true Balance. For Prince Dmir, a single night out counterbalances weeks of studiousness."

Dmir leaned forward. "A single woman gives me the companionship and joy I need."

Not looking at Dmir took all my willpower. Yet I had to find enough not to reach over and lace my fingers with his, too. Somehow I managed. I looked from the countess to the count. "How can you say he does not value Balance?"

"I want to meet the scientists and inventors at Marcous Dzar," Lord Hanrid announced. "I need to see for myself that my money will further the search for Balance."

"Of course." Dmir smiled. "I'd be happy to take you on a tour."

"Now," Lady Mariga added after looking at her husband with a frown. "We will go now so that you cannot arrange things to show us only what we want to see. We shall conduct a surprise inspection, as it were."

"Even better."

I suppressed a grin, certain it would irritate the countess. But I wanted to squeal in delight. We had won. So long as Mistress Loretta didn't completely terrify them, Lord Hanrid and Lady Mariga would find nothing to object to at the society's headquarters. They'd sign the money over before the day was done, I knew it.

TEN

Pounding on the outer door woke me.

I was once again in Dmir's bed. I hadn't even checked to see if my father would welcome me back now that a week had passed. I had returned home long enough to collect some of my clothes and a few other possessions, but Father hadn't been around to react to my presence. Most likely, his anger had abated enough that I could return home, but I didn't want to.

For appearance's sake, I probably needed to spend at least a night or two there every week, since Dmir and I could not announce any sort of engagement until after his brother's wedding this autumn. Our relationship was hardly a secret, but having a few options for truthful comments in case I ran into Lady Mariga in the future might prove handy. Now that she and her husband had recommitted to supporting Marcous Dzar, I didn't want to antagonize them. The first payment had already gone through, but the inventors always needed more money.

"What time is it?" Dmir groaned.

I looked at the dark rectangle in the far wall; there wasn't even enough light for me to recognize it as a window if I hadn't already known it was there. "Not even close to dawn. It must be important, if they can't wait."

I disentangled myself from Dmir and nudged him toward the edge of the bed.

He stumbled to his feet and moved to the door.

"Trousers!"

He spun around, found the trousers he had been wearing the evening before in a crumpled heap with the rest of our clothes on the floor, and pulled them on. Then he exited the bedroom.

A few seconds later, the pounding stopped. I heard the murmur of voices, but couldn't make out any words. Then Dmir came back into the bedroom, his movements no longer shuffling and tired. He grabbed his shirt from the jumble of clothes.

He shrugged on the shirt. "I'm not sure what is going on, but I have to go meet with my mother—some sort of news just reached the palace, I think. I'll be back as soon as I can."

Dmir kissed me, then walked out of the room again, buttoning his shirt as he went.

I sat up. A pre-dawn summons to meet with the Empress did not sound like good news. Especially when whoever had come to inform Dmir had imparted enough urgency that he barely took the time to put on a shirt and didn't bother with the rest of getting dressed.

Despite being a prince, Dmir wasn't involved in the running of the empire. At least, not officially. He had to fight to be heard and win support for his initiatives. He and his mother did not see eye to eye on many issues, either. The Empress would not be summoning him over a political matter.

I searched out a simple gown in the collection now stored in Dmir's rooms and dressed myself. Thankfully, most of the outfits I had chosen to bring here were ones I could put on without help if necessary. Once dressed, however, I did not know what else to do.

The Empress wouldn't wake Dmir in the middle of the night to tell him she had heard about my presence in his room every night and didn't approve, would she? I felt certain Dmir would have been more worried about keeping my presence in his rooms quiet if he

suspected his mother might object. As it was, the kitchen didn't even pretend to send up only one breakfast at this point.

The first hint of pink was visible on the horizon when Dmir came back to his rooms. I had long since given up guessing what the summons had been about, and instead sat slumped in the single chair in his bedroom, watching the blackness outside the window transition to gray.

I jumped to my feet, but Dmir barely even looked at me.

"Dmir?" I asked hesitantly.

He didn't speak, but he came toward me. Then he was there, enveloping me in his arms, burying his face in my hair. He held on tightly, like the whole world was heaving and I was his only anchor.

I wrapped my arms around him and waited.

Dark gray transitioned to lighter gray, with hints of true dawn blue at the edges by the time Dmir spoke. "The Kamchena hit a storm at sea. There were no survivors."

I desperately tried to remember where I had heard the name *The Kamchena* before. An imperial ship, no doubt. A horrible tragedy that it had been destroyed, and all aboard had died. But why would Dmir be called out of bed to hear the news?

Then I realized what it meant. I didn't want to ask, and yet, I had to be sure. "Dmir, was your brother on board *The Kamchena*?"

He nodded against my hair.

Balance save us. His brother, Crown Prince Kivan, was dead. I wanted to collapse, but I knew Dmir needed me to support him, and so I stood strong as I processed my shock. I held on to Dmir and let him hold on to me.

After another eternity passed in silence, and Dmir swayed enough I feared us both toppling over, I spoke again. "Come, you need to sleep."

He shook his head.

"Then at least sit down. You are about to fall over, Dmir."

He let me guide him over to the chair and collapsed on it. I moved toward the door, hoping to find breakfast had been left in the sitting

room—would the servants leave breakfast as usual when such news must be tearing through the entire city?

Dmir reached out a hand. "Don't leave me, please."

"Of . . ." The words wouldn't form. I swallowed and tried again. "I want to find some food. You should eat."

Dmir shook his head again, and I didn't protest when he drew me into his lap. I wrapped him in my arms once more, but this time, I was the one to bury my face. I hadn't been able to tell him that I wouldn't leave him. Balance take it, I should have been able to say of course I wasn't leaving, just going into the other room. But I knew, deep down, that this morning's news meant I would have to leave Dmir.

If Kivan was dead, then Dmir was now the Crown Prince of Plumei. The heir to the throne. The next Emperor. We had no formal arrangement, and even if we had, I knew better than to expect one to withstand such a change in his situation. The heir had to marry with political alliances in mind. His bride would one day be an empress. Dmir must marry someone like Princess Josyn.



MY FATHER WASN'T home, for which I thanked the Balance. I slipped upstairs noticed only by a couple servants and retreated to my bedroom.

I hoped Dmir would forgive me for leaving once I got him in bed and asleep. I would be there if he needed me. I would always come if he asked, but I had no place in the palace today. I knew that, even if he wasn't thinking clearly enough yet.

Sitting on the bed, I hugged my knees to my chest.

Visions of the future tangled my thoughts. I didn't let myself dwell on the unlikely scenario where I married Dmir, the future I both longed for and feared. Me, Empress of Plumei? Instead, I focused my thoughts on what I considered likelier outcomes.

Dmir deciding he had to stop seeing me immediately to focus on his responsibilities as the heir.

Our relationship continuing until Dmir had to marry a woman worthy of becoming empress, at which point his scruples would demand he be faithful to his wife.

Dmir marrying, but still willing to see me as his mistress.

I prepared myself for the first option, while trying to decide if I preferred the second or third. The third seemed the happiest outcome for me personally. Even in this hypothetical future, I knew Dmir would never hide an affair from his wife, nor would I want him to. I wasn't sure his morals would even allow for an affair, but if they did, he would be open with his wife and seek her permission first. If she allowed it, then I certainly wouldn't object to any relationship I could maintain with Dmir.

"My lady?" The servant who usually filled the role of my lady's maid cracked the door open and peered in without knocking. "His Highness is here looking for you. He's in the front parlor. With His Grace."

I scrambled to my feet.

"How long?" I asked as I darted past her into the hallway.

"Barely a moment, my lady. I was already on my way up to tell you when His Grace joined the prince."

"Thank you!" I took the stairs at a reckless pace, my stockinged feet slipping on the polished wood. A firm grip on the banister kept me from disaster. I didn't slow once I reached the ground floor, running as fast as my skirts allowed to the front parlor. The last thing Dmir needed today was to deal with my father.

The door was open, and I could hear Father speaking as I raced down the hall.

"... If he had simply done his duty to the crown before sailing across the ocean. The alliance with Lyr and the next generation of the royal family could be secured by now if he hadn't been selfish."

I burst into the parlor.

Two sets of eyes turned to me in surprise.

"Eleya," my father huffed. "What are you doing running around like a hoyden? Where are your shoes?"

I ignored him. Pausing only long enough to gulp in a bit of air, I crossed the room to Dmir's side. "What are you doing out of bed? You need to rest."

He pulled me closer. "You left. I need you more than rest."

"Eleya, I'm talking to you." Father's voice sounded almost shrill.

I made a note to let my brother know that ignoring Father made him even madder than arguing with him. Turning my head just enough to look at my father, I imitated the chilly tones that Princess Josyn and the Empress always favored. "I am talking with His Highness, Your Grace. Your future sovereign, whom you were behaving abominably toward, not even offering proper condolences for the imperial family's loss. The entire empire's loss, for that matter. Whatever you have to say can wait."

I had the satisfaction of seeing my father at a total loss for words. Not that I expected it to last.

"Let's just leave," Dmir whispered. "We don't need to stay here." I hesitated.

"Ely? Why don't you want to go back to our rooms?"

But they weren't our rooms, they were his. Now, they would never be mine, even if I returned with Dmir today. "I don't belong in the palace right now. I never even met Prince Kivan. I don't want to intrude on anyone's grief."

"You belong with me," Dmir insisted. Then he pulled me tighter against his body. "Please, Ely. I don't think I can get through the next few days without you. I won't make you come with me anywhere publicly, but will you at least be there for me each night? And the rest of today?"

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"I can do that. But I need you to do something for me first."
"What?"
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"Go wait outside while I speak with my father."

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"Ely . . ."
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[&]quot;Please."

"Fine, but if you aren't out in ten minutes, I'm coming back in."

"Half an hour. I need to go find my shoes and pack up a few things, too."

"Half an hour, and not one second more."

With one final squeeze, Dmir released me and walked out of the parlor. He didn't so much as look at my father.

I, meanwhile, glared at the duke, my hands on my hips. I waited until the front door closed behind Dmir before I spoke. "Have you no common decency? Insulting Prince Kivan to his brother's face, hours after word has come of his death? I am ashamed to admit that I owe any of my existence to a person such as you. Rest assured, Your Grace, you have lost any chance of earning the next emperor's favor. Also, there's no need to threaten to throw me out of the house or even disown me. I want nothing to do with you. I'll send for my things tomorrow."

I moved toward the door.

"Don't you walk out on me."

I kept walking.

"I'm talking to you, Eleya!"

I heard the heavy tread of my father's booted feet as he followed me into the hall. "Don't think you can change your mind tomorrow, or next week, or even next month or year. If you leave now, you are gone for good, do you hear me?"

I resisted the urge to turn back and reiterate that I had already declared my intentions. That his threats meant nothing. I didn't taunt him by pointing out that Makev would welcome me back as soon as he had the title. No point dragging my brother into this argument.

My father stayed at the bottom of the stairs as I climbed. I spotted the same maid who had told me of Dmir's visit hiding just around the corner at the top of the staircase.

"Svela, could you help me pack up a few things before I go? The rest of my things should then be sent over to the Palov residence."

"The Palov residence, my lady? Not the palace?"

"No. I think it best if the bulk of my belongings go to Ketira's home for now." I suspected I'd be joining them soon. Not immediately, not when Dmir needed my support so desperately. But he'd have to think about what his new rank meant sooner rather than later.

ELEVEN

2) E

I SAT IN the Hall of Records, a folio in front of me, the journal of notes off to the right, tapping my pen against the desk. A week and a half since news of *The Kamchena's* fate had reached Tarân, and Dmir still showed no signs of realizing that our future engagement was no longer a given. I hated to mention it, but delaying the inevitable wouldn't help.

When he joined me in the Hall after his visit with the members of Marcous Dzar, I needed to bring it up.

Footsteps on the stairs had me looking up. Not Dmir—they sounded too light. I cocked my head to the side, wondering who would be coming down. I still had never seen another person besides Dmir in this room.

Princess Josyn emerged from between the shelves. She nodded at me, then looked around the rest of the room. Frowning, she looked back at me. "Dmir's not here?"

I stood. I had never heard so much emotion in her voice before. Even in the privacy of her own room, with only me and Mili as witnesses, her spurts of amusement had been restrained compared to this. There was no mistaking her anxiety and frustration.

"No, I've been doing much of the research on my own in the last week." I had volunteered, because it gave me a way to spend the

day while Dmir attended the various meetings that required his presence, or simply sat with his mother.

"I thought he had resumed coming here in the afternoons a few days ago," Josyn said, her voice rising at the end.

"He did, but today I sent him to the Marcous Dzar building. The scientists and engineers will be good for him." A distraction. The men and women of the society would pull him out of his own thoughts and instill excitement for the future when they discussed their progress.

"Then you and I will have to start planning without him. This can't wait."

The princess paced along the edge of the room between tables and shelves. I started to sweat, seeing her so agitated about something that concerned me.

"What's wrong?"

"They're already discussing replacing one brother with another. As if it should be of no consequence for me to spend half my life engaged to one man and then marry his brother!"

I was confused. Josyn acted like it was a surprise, not that people—whoever "they" were—would push for the change so soon after Prince Kivan's death, but that they would make the suggestion at all. I spoke haltingly, sure I was misinterpreting. "You didn't expect this?"

Josyn's hands flew up. "Of course I didn't expect this. Not after my engagement to Kivan. Dmir is like a brother. An arranged marriage is awkward enough in general without adding in any hints of incest."

"Yes, but you didn't marry Kivan. The Empress has spent the last eight years training you to take her place. Also, the marriage is part of an alliance between Plumei and Lyr. Surely you realized people would want to ignore the name of the crown prince and make everything work out the way they had envisioned?"

"Put that way, I don't know why I didn't see it, but I didn't." Josyn sighed and stopped pacing. "No, I do know why I didn't see

it. I didn't want to. As horrible as it sounds, when I heard Kivan had died, my first reaction was relief. I miss Lyr."

In a rush, I realized why Josyn was here. What she had meant when she said we needed to start planning. "You don't want to marry Dmir."

"No offense, but I really don't. Especially not when I know he is in love with another woman."

"You want to find a way to avoid the marriage, even with the Empress and her advisors pushing for it."

"I'm not sure the Empress is pushing for it, actually. I'm sure she'd be happy to still welcome me into the family as a daughter and place me on her throne. However, I don't think she is pushing for it. But no, I don't simply want to avoid this marriage; I want to help you and Dmir find the happiness you both deserve." Josyn laughed without humor. "I realize now that you had already accepted the fact that Her Majesty's blessing was no longer all the permission you needed to marry Dmir, but I don't think his change in status should rob you of the future you had envisioned. Are you willing to fight for him? Or will you concede defeat without a murmur of protest?"

Was that what I was doing? I had thought my outlook pragmatic. Realistic. Perhaps Plumei needed a future empress who brought alliances and knew more about ruling than I did. Dmir needed me. But would he regret the decision later?

I stared past Josyn. "I'm not sure I can be his empress. I'm just—"
The princess crossed her arms. "You're just a brilliant woman, who cares about the people of Plumei, and isn't afraid to stand up for what you believe in. You are the daughter of a duke. And you are the woman who loves Dmir. In what way does that sound like you can't be his empress?"

I rolled my shoulders back and met Josyn square in the eye. "Then I'll fight."

The journal of notes on the impact of coal mining soon became a list of battle plans. Each advisor and noble pushing for Josyn to

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marry Dmir was listed, their allies, motivations, and weaknesses detailed.

"I can handle Lord Gregin, but you'll have to tackle Hanrid and Mariga—after Dmir's and my last visit, I think I've used up all of my goodwill with them."

"Can you deal with Master Roiv, too? I don't want to tip my hand before I've spoken with Her Majesty."

"With the information you provided about his habits? A child could manipulate Roiv. But when will you approach Her Majesty?"

"As soon as I get a reply from my brother. It will be easier to go to her with a letter in hand detailing how much my brother needs my help back in Lyr and assuring her that he will happily maintain the terms of the alliance, even without a state marriage to seal it. Too bad I can't trust such a sensitive message to the telegram lines, or we could have his answer today."

"Will your brother write what you want?"

"Absolutely. He's always hated that I was sent away to Plumei at age fifteen. And ever since father died, he has struggled to gain the respect he deserves from his councilors. He needs an ally at home."

"He needs your network of servant-spies, you mean."

Josyn smiled. "It will take a bit to form an information network as complete as the one I have in Tarân, but Mili and I enjoy the challenge."

"You wrote to your brother asking to go home the same day word came of the accident, didn't you?"

"I did."

"You are extremely motivated to return to Lyr. Do you have somebody back home that you had to leave behind because of your engagement?" I knew the princess usually returned to Lyr for a month or so each year. She could have a lover waiting for her.

"No."

I raised an eyebrow. She hadn't lied, but there was certainly someone that came to mind when I made the suggestion. "Who is he?"

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"No one. There's no one." Josyn's shoulders slumped. "He hates me these days anyway—and after . . . well, let's just say I'm not too fond of him, either."

"But at one point?"

"At one point, I considered him a very good friend, and I often daydreamed about kissing him. But I was still a girl, then. I want to go home because I miss Lyr and my brother needs me. That's all."

I ignored the bitter taste her final two words left in my mouth and tore out a page from the journal. "Then let's get you home. Here are your targets."

Josyn accepted the page. "Are you sure you don't want me to stay and explain matters to Dmir?"

"I'll be fine explaining on my own." Now that I had committed, I knew it was the truth. I would fight for Dmir. I knew he would fight for me, too. Together, we could face anything, even taking the throne. "You need to go fill Mili in on the plan."

"I'll see you tomorrow, then."

"Until tomorrow, Your Highness."

TWELVE

3) E

"IT WILL BE fine," Dmir said for the third—or fifth—time. With his hand on the small of my back, he urged me to keep walking.

"But what if—"

"No ifs. You and Josyn planned this out to the finest detail. Do you really think you missed anything?"

"But what—"

Dmir stepped in front of me and put a single finger on my lips. "Everything will be fine, Ely. I promise."

He replaced his finger with his lips, and I relaxed against him, my worries dissolving in the simple assurance of his kiss. When he pulled away, I held onto that feeling of rightness with all I was worth. I had to believe everything would work. It was simply the only choice.

"All right, I'm ready."

Dmir slid back into place at my side, his hand once more on the small of my back. He led us the final few steps to his mother's private study. After a perfunctory knock, he opened the door and ushered me inside.

I curtsied. "Your Majesty."

"Come in, Lady Eleya. Dmir. Please take a seat, both of you."

I perched on the edge of one of the chairs facing the Empress's desk. Meanwhile, Dmir sprawled in the chair next to me. I made a

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face at him, but he just smiled. Then I remembered we were sitting across from the Empress and turned back to her.

A small smile tilted the corners of her mouth up, but her voice was still cool and collected when she spoke. "Princess Josyn has informed me that her brother will uphold the terms of our alliance without the need to formalize the agreement with a wedding. She plans to return to Lyr in the next week or two."

"It will be strange not having her in Tarân," Dmir said, "but I know she misses her home. I'm glad to hear His Majesty will uphold the alliance without sacrificing his sister's happiness."

"Yes, she said something about happiness, too. I believe her words were along the lines of how much of a shame it would be to condemn three people to a life of unhappiness for no reason."

"She makes a good point," Dmir drawled.

"Meanwhile, I've had several of my advisors and nobles seek me out in the last few days to mention their fears that Plumei has focused so intensively on expanding the empire over the past century that we have forgotten to strengthen the kingdom that gave our empire birth. Men and women who previously would hear of nothing less than a foreign princess marrying the crown prince are now arguing as forcefully for our next empress to be Plumese born and bred."

Neither Dmir nor I responded.

The Empress let the silence linger for a moment, while she subjected us to closer scrutiny. Then a true smile spread across her face. "I was pleased to see that you both played a part in this campaign. Dmir, we may not always agree, but you care about Plumei and are not afraid to work to make things better. Lady Eleya, you know I've spent years mentoring Princess Josyn, but I feel that you will absorb the lessons I have to teach readily, even if you do not always embrace my methods fully. Together, you two will be a formidable pair. An emperor and empress for the history books."

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She paused, and I fought not to betray how deeply her words affected me. She hadn't yet given her formal approval for us to marry, much as she implied she approved.

"There is one thing, however, that my councilors still insist on. They want to see the crown prince married within a season. The death . . ." The empress paused. Swallowed. Then she started again, her voice unwavering. "The death of Kivan has them worried. They do not want to take any chances with securing the succession."

Dmir leaned forward. "We'll do whatever you prefer, Mother. If you want to honor a full year of mourning, then the councilors will have to understand that."

"No. I find that in this case I agree. I should have had grandchildren by now. We will plan a grand wedding, a way to mark our transition from mourning and celebrate our new future. Autumn. You will marry this autumn." She nodded once, clearly not wanting our input. "Lady Eleya, would you care to inform your family before the official announcement is made?"

It was happening. I would marry Dmir, and in only a few months. And his mother wasn't mad at our meddling. I relaxed enough that I could speak. "I am meeting my brother for supper this evening. I'll inform him then. Thank you, Your Majesty."

"And your father?"

Dmir grumbled under his breath. I reached over and laid a hand on his arm. "My father is no longer family, Your Majesty. The official announcement will serve him quite well."

"He'll be quick to welcome you back after he hears the news, I've no doubt."

"He didn't disown me. I disowned him."

The Empress threw back her head and laughed. "Good for you, Lady Eleya. Good for you. I shall keep that in mind should he seek any imperial favors owing to our connection."

"Thank you, Your Majesty."

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"No, thank you. I know how much you have been there for Dmir these last few weeks. I am grateful that my son has found someone like you."

"Your son is a wonderful man."

She looked over at him and smiled, and it was the first expression I had ever seen from her that could be described as soft. "Yes, he is."

Dmir shifted in his seat.

After another heartbeat, the Empress cleared her throat and resumed her normal stern expression. "To be clear, this doesn't mean I agree with your railroad proposal."

Dmir stood, and I copied him a moment later, unsure how he planned to respond, but wanting to show my support. He tugged at the hem of his jacket and shrugged. "It doesn't matter. I have enough votes that you can't override the decision to pause expansion. Be prepared to face considerably more opposition, Mother. Ely and I aren't done advocating for change."

"Don't expect it to be so easy next time. Now that I know what you are capable of, I won't make the mistake of underestimating you."

I thought about Josyn's responses every time I ended up asking her for help—or when she offered before I even thought to ask. I smiled and reached over to lace my fingers with Dmir's. "Excellent. We love a challenge."



WE LEFT THE Empress's study hand-in-hand, but otherwise as composed and decorous as Josyn would have been. Three steps down the hall, I forgot all dignity, tugged Dmir around to face me, and kissed him. "We did it!"

He put his hands on my waist and spun. I clamped my hands on his shoulders and laughed as my feet lifted from the floor. I clung to him when he stopped, not sure if the spinning or relief left me lightheaded and giddy.

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Dmir smoothed one hand down my back.

I didn't care that we stood in the middle of a hallway. I unbuttoned his jacket and slid my hands under it and around his waist, hugging him tightly. "Did you notice your mother is already talking about grandchildren?"

"She's been talking about grandchildren since Josyn first came to Plumei. She had to wait then; she can continue to wait until we are ready. Don't let her pressure you into doing something you don't want to do."

I tilted my head back to look at Dmir's expression. "Do you not want children?"

He shook his head. "I want children, but there is no need to rush. I know everyone is worrying about the succession, but we have time. Unless you want children right away?"

I considered. For years now, I'd had no expectation of marrying. I hadn't had enough time to internalize the possibility of marrying Dmir before I feared such a future would never come to pass. Now I knew I would spend the rest of my life with him. I wanted children with him—but maybe not immediately. A year or two where we could focus exclusively on ourselves would be nice.

"I think we should make your mother wait as a matter of principle," I said with a decisive nod. "It wouldn't do to make her think she can always get what she wants from us."

"A fair point. I think we should practice, though, so that when the time comes, we'll be ready."

"Practice?" I laughed, noticing the look Dmir gave me. "I'm in favor of plenty of practice, but do you mean right now?"

His hands drifted lower and squeezed my bottom. "Why not now? You aren't going to turn prudish on me, are you, Ely?"

"Of course not. But shouldn't we find Josyn and let her know our plan worked?"

Dmir looked pointedly at the nearest servant, who was not looking at us as hard as he could while he hurried down the hall. "If she doesn't know already, she will within five minutes."

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I laughed. "At the rate you're going, everyone in Tarân will know within the hour."

Dmir gave me a wolfish grin, that rare spark of absolute confidence that turned my legs to jelly in full force. Thank the Balance that spark came out mostly in the bedroom—I wasn't sure how I'd get through the day at Dmir's side without embarrassing myself if he showed it more often.

Of course, now I was about to embarrass myself a few feet from the Empress's study.

"Dmir." My voice was breathy. I tried again. "Your mother could walk out here at any moment."

His smile didn't dim—he knew exactly what effect he had on me. "Then I suppose we had better go back to our rooms."

Our rooms.

It wasn't the first time Dmir had referred to his suite that way, but for the first time, I felt it was true. I wasn't a visitor, a temporary guest in his bed and life. Dmir and I were partners. If they had been Dmir's rooms first, that didn't make them any less mine now, because Dmir was mine now. He was mine forever.

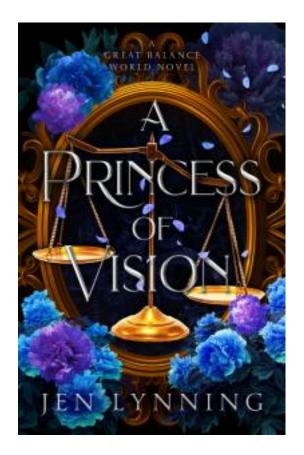
I forgot my protests and pulled him down for another kiss. "I love you, Dmir."

He pressed his forehead against mine. "I love you, Eleya Sonita Poinar. I can't wait to spend the rest of my life loving you."

Books by Jen Lynning:

Treaties of Moial Empath's Lure Heir's Dilemma Stranger's Choice Siren's Search

The Great Balance World
A Lady of Truth
A Princess of Vision
A Scholar of Beauty



When the scales tilt, kingdoms teeter. Hearts falter. And change is inevitable.



Princess Josyn is excited to return home after years abroad. She rejoices in the chance to tackle the fractious council and treasonous plots threatening her brother, the king. But his enemies don't hesitate to invoke a spell-prayer to strike her blind. Even with a new sense to Balance the loss of her sight, Josyn will need help from an old friend to navigate the court.

As a Beast, Aevin's heightened senses and instincts are Balanced by the inability to suppress natural impulses. Knowing the effect Josyn has on him, he has avoided the princess on her visits home for years rather than risk losing control. But now she is back in Lyr for good, and his best friend, King Germein, has asked him to serve as her escort and bodyguard.

Josyn doesn't know why Aevin pushed her away years ago. She is determined not to let him hurt her again, but it is hard to deny their attraction once their lives are entwined. As dangers mount and trust regrows, can they move beyond the past and make their own future?

Turn the page for a sneak peek at the first chapter.

ONE

BLACK.

Eternity folded into the space of a single heartbeat. I tumbled headfirst into the blackness, a swirling mass of darkness somehow made up of every color. Up and down lost all meaning. My body ceased to exist. Only black, colorful black, existed.

A moment—an infinity—later, I slammed back into my body. I staggered, my hand still reaching out in response to the vertigo that had hit a bare instant before the blackness. My fingers closed over the worn velvet of Germein's chair. I wobbled, then found up and down again.

But the black remained, as if someone had flipped every shadowlight in the room, every glimmer absorbed. Every glimmer but one.

A single orb of blue, suspended in the darkness, was all I saw.

"-wrong? Josyn? Josyn!"

"Just dizzy," I told my brother once his words caught up with me. I felt his hands gripping my upper arm and thought that maybe his grip had kept me upright more than finding the back of his chair. I didn't even know how long the disorientation had lasted. Germein must have leapt out of his seat the moment the blackness engulfed me, otherwise I'd probably have tumbled to the floor. Or hit my head on the low table next to the chair.

Maybe I had hit my head. It didn't hurt. Nothing hurt. I felt completely, perfectly fine. Except I could see nothing but that single orb of blue.

Turquoise streaks spread through the blue glow. I reached out a hand and hit Germein's torso. Unable to see my own hand in the darkness that now encompassed my world, I couldn't be certain, but I thought the orb floated just beyond my palm. In my brother's chest.

"Ger?" My voice shook. I squeezed my eyelids closed, took a deep breath, and opened them again. Nothing changed—even with my eyes closed. Whatever sense I was using to discern the glow, it wasn't sight. In a burst of clear thought, I was grateful that Germein and I were alone in the King's Tower, our retreat from the other denizens of Herlanse Palace. I didn't have to hide my terror. "I can't see."

Germein released my arm slowly, making sure I had my balance before he used one hand to grip my chin. He tilted my head back. "Look at me, Josyn."

I realized I had closed my eyes again and opened them.

My brother angled my head this way and that. The blue and turquoise at his core pulsated, battling for dominance. "Your eyes . . ."

The fear in Germein's voice, conversely, steadied me. One of us had to stay calm, and that was my specialty. I filled my veins with ice, my voice coming out a dispassionate drone. "What happened to my eyes?"

"They changed." Horror, shock. Germein filled those two words with every emotion I refused to feel.

"Be specific, Germein." The icy calmness came easier as I settled into my public persona. I usually dropped the facade with my brother, but it was easy, so easy, to sink into the safety of feeling nothing.

Germein breathed deeply, the glowing orb steadying in time to his breaths. He knew how to push emotion to the side when necessary, even if he occasionally needed a reminder to do so. "I can barely see the blue of your eyes, they've faded so much. Here, let me grab a shadow-light and look closer."

I held still. The glow drifted away, matching Germein's progress to the corner of the room. I knew a shadow-light sat in a wrought iron stand on a desk in that corner. When the dark half of the crystal was slotted into the stand, the bright half cast enough illumination over the desk to read even fine print without strain. Germein returned a moment later. The shadow-light offered no escape from the darkness for me; I saw not even a glimmer. Only the blue floating inside my brother's body.

Once again, Germein tilted my chin back. He studied my eyes for long moments. The cobalt blue orb lightened to sky-blue at the edges. Germein released my chin, but still said nothing.

"It's not temporary, is it?" I didn't need him to answer. I had lost my vision and had a new sense in its place. The change in my eyes was proof enough that I hadn't simply suffered a moment of faintness, my vision fading from the same mundane cause. I wasn't hallucinating the glow, my mind playing tricks on me. I could see my brother's essence, his aura. A new sense to Balance the loss of the old.

Everyone knew that once the Watcher gave a gift and resettled the scales of a person's life, it could never be undone.

"I'm sure it's temporary," Germein insisted with more hope than conviction.

Tiny pinpricks of bright orange flared and died inside the swirling blue glow. Whatever this sense was, it showed me more than a general impression of a person. What I saw was too volatile to correspond to Germein's core essence. It changed constantly.

"No," I swallowed. Then I pulled forth further reserves of icy dispassion. I couldn't give into despair now. I turned my head away from my brother. The glow still registered in my mind. "I'm not just blind. I have some sort of new sense as well."

Germein reached the same conclusion as I. To gain a sense required intervention by the Watcher. "Someone prayed for this?"

"They must have. Only a korengal could rob me of one sense while bestowing another."

I lifted my fingers from the back of the chair. No need to clutch it like I would fall over without the support. The dizziness from when the spell-prayer hit was gone as if it had never been. Like my vision.

The glow turned pure turquoise, then eddies of dark brown swirled around the turquoise, growing stronger as Germein's voice rose. "Why would anyone want to blind you?"

"Because they want to get me out of the way or keep me from discovering some court intrigue. Maybe some lady is jealous of my rank and thinks I'm a threat to her potential suitors." I turned back to my brother and the shock isolating me from my emotions cracked. "What does it matter? It won't change anything!"

Despair crashed over me. Strong arms wrapped around me, and I cried against Germein's chest, the now periwinkle glow right under my cheek.

Finally, my eyes could handle no more tears.

Germein waited another few heartbeats, then gently pushed and turned me until I sat in his chair. "Why would anyone want to blind you, Jos?" he repeated.

"I don't know!" I didn't have any tears left, but I still felt raw.

My brother's voice became soft, patient. "They took a huge risk targeting you. What for?"

"What risk? It's not like they had to brave guards or sneak around to blind me."

Many people came and went from Herlanse Palace on a regular basis. But to strike with a korengal didn't even require proximity. Just a knowledge of Ancient Koreini.

"They have to realize that when I find out who did this—"

I slashed my hand through the air and cut Germein off. "You'll do nothing. You *can* do nothing."

"I'm the king," Germein growled. "That ought to mean something!"

Germein was the king of Lyr, but his authority was severely hampered by a council that considered him too young to be on the throne. They considered Germein's reign to be the chance they needed to wrest power from the throne and reverse the progressive changes our father had made. Luckily for Germein, they worked against each other as much as him.

But even if it was still our father on the throne, there was nothing the king could do about a korengal.

"It's not illegal," I reminded Germein.

How could a korengal honored by the Watcher be illegal? If the Watcher honored the spell-prayer, then it was Balanced. Whatever he took away, he replaced with something of equal value. Of every country on the continent, only the kingdom of Moran had laws against appealing to the Watcher without consent. The belief that Balance trumped all else was so ubiquitous that even the lesson learned by the Moranians a hundred years ago wasn't enough to impact the laws outside their borders.

"It should be." A thump of skin against leather and the vibration that jolted through my seat told me that Germein had punched the arm of the chair to punctuate his declaration. "I'll make it illegal."

"It should be," I agreed. Then I slipped back into the comfort of frosty, imperial assurance. "But you will not make it illegal. It is not worth the battle with your council at this point. You have bigger issues to tackle first."

"Don't you go ice princess on me, Jos. Somebody blinded you because they are afraid you'll see something now that you've returned home. They will be punished."

I couldn't fake a smile, but I dropped the mask that hid my fear, letting Germein see the determination that accompanied it. "They will be. I will learn whatever this new sense is—which the Watcher deemed a Balanced exchange for my sight—and use it to uncover whatever plot they want to hide. Then you will punish them for that, not for this."

I leaned towards the colorful swirl at my brother's core. It now pulsed with streaks of blue through brown, hints of that bright orange poking through intermittently. "We are going to use this to our advantage. We won't tell anyone about the korengal. If the perpetrators betray themselves, fine. Otherwise, once I learn to interpret my new sense, I will have a secret weapon. When my blindness becomes public knowledge, people will underestimate me. It will be even easier for me to help you uncover the plots brewing at court."

I couldn't see Germein's face, but I could picture his expression perfectly when he next spoke. He'd have his head tilted, his eyes not quite rolling, but halfway there, as he blew out a breath. "How are we going to explain you going blind? Don't bother trying to convince me you can fake being able to see; your eyes changed, Josyn. It's clear something happened."

"I have a few ideas. Let me sleep on it and I'll tell you my plan tomorrow."

In truth, I didn't need to think over my options. I needed to talk to my maid Mili, though. It would be best to do that without Germein around offering his opinions.

"Fine." The glow at Germein's core—I decided to continue calling it an aura, for lack of any better word—rose as he straightened from where he had crouched or sat next to the chair. "Let me walk you to your room."

I clung to his arm as he led me down the tower stairs and through the hall to my suite. I hadn't considered pretending I hadn't lost my sight, but after that short walk, I knew for sure it was not a viable option. Never before had I needed to look at my feet or watch the ground as I walked through a hallway, but when unable to see anything, even the flat floor conspired to trip me.

Germein steered me through the sitting room all the way to my bedroom door. "Do you need anything else?"

"No, Mili will help me from here."

"If you're sure. I'll see you tomorrow, Josyn."

Now mostly mauve, my brother's aura drifted away from me. "Ger?"

He stopped.

"Thank you for distracting me. For giving me something else to focus on." Germein had let me have my tears, but he hadn't let me wallow in despair. He understood me. With a goal in mind, and schemes to plot, I didn't have time to wallow.

He stayed still for a moment. His aura darkened from mauve to puce. "You don't owe me any thanks."

Then he moved again, and I heard the door open and close.



THE NEXT MORNING, I woke to someone shaking my shoulder. A scan of his aura informed me that Germein had decided to disturb my rest. It probably wasn't even sunrise yet; he started his day unnaturally early.

Still half asleep, I didn't question my certainty that my brother had been the one to invade my room. I had only sensed his and Mili's auras so far, and the colors were completely different this morning, but I knew that weird blend of orange and purple belonged to Germein.

"Shouldn't orange and purple make brown?" I muttered as I pushed his hand off my shoulder. "They're all mixed together, but it's clearly still orange and purple. Not like the brown last night."

Since I rarely made sense before the sun drifted well above the horizon, Germein ignored my muttering. "We need to talk before you put into motion whatever plan you've concocted."

I sat up and tugged the shadow-light switch on my bedside table. My parents had installed shadow-lights on the ceiling throughout the palace. Pull on one side of the pan-balance shaped switch, and a series of pulleys and gears rotated the crystals so the light halves

illuminated the room. Pull on the other side, and the shadows once more filled the space.

No light filled the room, though. Then I remembered, I simply could not see the light. I focused on my brother, refusing to dwell on my loss of sight. "I assumed you didn't stop by at such an unholy hour for no reason. Or at least, you'd better hope you didn't."

"I've thought it over, Josyn. I agree about hiding the origin of your blindness, but I don't want you to stay at the palace and try to uncover who did it." A hint of puce radiated out from the center of his aura. Then the edges of the glow sharpened and everything went back to that strange combination of purple and orange. "I want you to go to Olrey."

"Olrey?" I repeated the word, but it made no sense. After a moment, the name navigated the fog of my mostly asleep brain and I remembered. "The lake estate?"

"Yes. I think you should live at the manor there."

I pictured the quiet lake shore and lovely manor house that Germein had inherited. Before my betrothal and subsequent move to Plumei, our mother had taken us to Olrey every summer when the courtiers abandoned the city for their estates. We only stayed a fortnight or so. Getting away from the bustle of the city had always been a treat. The only reason to visit that estate, however, was bucolic isolation. Even the nearest village—a tiny hamlet without even a market day—took a quarter day's ride to reach. The nearest rail station was more than a day distant.

I shook off the last vestiges of sleep. "No."

I'd go mad at Olrey.

"Well, maybe not Olrey, but one of the other country estates."

I recognized that prevaricating tone. The head nursemaid from when I was four and Germein six had used it constantly. Whenever she had an unpleasant task for us, she would start by asking us to do something much worse. Then when we balked, she'd sigh and use that exact tone to say, "well . . ." and suggest the real task as an alternative. She hadn't lasted long in the nursery before Mama hired

someone with the backbone to command royal children without all the shilly-shallying. Nevertheless, I hadn't forgotten that trick in all the years since.

It hadn't worked on me when I was four, and it wouldn't work now, nearly two decades later.

"No," I said with more force. I swung my legs off the bed and used Germein's aura as a beacon to poke him in the chest. "I will not let you take my life away."

"That's why I want you away from court. It's not safe for you here, Josyn." The puce returned and dominated his aura. "I asked you to help me dig up the court's secrets and now you are blind! They targeted you for a reason. I don't want anything else to happen to you."

"Absolutely not. I will not let them—or you—take away my life. I don't mean death, Germein. I mean taking away my every choice and curtailing my activities until my life is hollow."

"You'd still make your own choices and pursue your own interests, just not at court."

"But my interests are here. I'd still be able to make choices at one of the country estates, but they'd all be meaningless." I realized I had clenched my hand into a fist as I spoke. I pulled it into my lap and took a deep breath. "When Prince Kivan died, I told you I wanted to come home and help, Germein. I meant it. You gave me the choice and let me return to Lyr rather than arranging a new betrothal. Don't take that away from me now."

Dark blue and hints of deep green spread over Germein's aura as he considered my plea.

"Oh!" I clapped my hands together. "It's not really an aura, it is a reflection of your thoughts and emotions."

Turquoise momentarily veiled the other colors as Germein asked for an explanation.

"My new sense is showing me some sort of combination of your thoughts and emotions at any given moment. Last night, I had first thought it was just an aura, something I could use to identify people and maybe know a bit about their personality, but it changes far too much. It is showing me current emotions. So just now, your glow turned turquoise; that must be confusion. Once I figure out what every color means, this will be incredibly useful."

"Empathy would provide plenty of insights at court."

"You'll let me stay, won't you?" I realized I was pleading and changed my tone. I didn't want to ask. I needed to tell Germein I was staying. "I can still help you."

"You could help if you knew what your new aura reading—or empathy, or whatever it is—was telling you. You admitted you don't even know what the colors mean. Besides, you can't even walk down the hall safely by yourself now."

"So? I'll learn." I had to. Bemoaning my fate would accomplish nothing and simply waste time I could be using to master my new sense. If I wanted to be useful to my brother as anything other than a bargaining chip in a marriage of state, then I needed to learn. The help I had intended to provide him now that I was home would have relied on observing people, reading body language, and putting it all together with the gossip and secrets whispered in every corner.

I'd go as mad at court if I couldn't accomplish anything as if I were banished to Olrey. I didn't have time for self-pity.

I shrugged. "The more I'm around people, the faster I'll learn. People have lived their lives blind before. I can manage."

Blindness was rare, though. Most people used a korengal to replace lost vision or hearing, deeming them more valuable than taste or smell. Depending on the extent of the loss, I had heard that some people had given up both taste and smell to balance regaining their vision or hearing. That wasn't an option for me. With my vision taken away by a korengal, no other spell-prayer could replace it.

No. I would not focus on what I couldn't do. What I'd never be able to do again. I would adapt. "I'll need an escort at first, probably, but Mili can help me get to and from places for the most part. I'd only need help during court functions."

The purple and orange mixture came back in Germein's aura.

"Not just an escort." His voice held smug satisfaction. "You need a bodyguard. I know exactly the person to serve ostensibly as your escort while he really protects you."

"No." I didn't object to a bodyguard—not enough to waste my time arguing over it—but Germein wasn't proposing a random guard. Only one person fit the criteria necessary for this job: highborn, skilled fighter, and utterly trustworthy. "He hates me."

"Aevin doesn't hate you."

Germein hadn't witnessed the falling out between me and his best friend. He hadn't heard the disgust in Aevin's voice when he called me a manipulative shrew and pushed me out the door. I had never even told Germein about what had happened, but he had to have noticed how Aevin had avoided me since that day.

Even with me living in Plumei the majority of the year until this past month, the avoidance had been painfully obvious.

I pushed off the bed. I needed to move, but where could I go? Even navigating my own bedroom was dangerous at the moment. How many steps to my vanity? "Yes, he does."

"Josyn, you haven't seen him in three years."

"Exactly." I shuffled forward, my hands out in search of the vanity table in the corner. "He's been avoiding me since my visit home three summers ago. Because he hates me."

"His trips to court haven't overlapped with yours recently, that's all."

I turned around and crossed my arms. "I'll keep it in mind to never believe you when I see this combination of colors in your aura. You are a terrible liar, Germein."

He sighed. "Fine, he's been avoiding you. I still don't think he hates you."

I didn't argue the point. I attempted to stare Germein down instead, but I had no idea how effective my glare was when I couldn't even be sure I was looking at his face. I resumed my journey. Germein didn't sound intimidated. "It doesn't matter. Aevin is the only person who could serve as both your bodyguard and escort. Even if he hates you, he'd still do it."

I found the table and pulled out the matching stool.

Germein made a good point. Aevin would protect me. Because he was a Beast—born with instincts akin to a wild predator's thanks to an ongoing korengal invoked by the Moranian king nearly a century earlier—Aevin would have no trouble protecting me. As a Beast, he not only had the natural instincts that let him react without thinking, but also better senses than the average man. He was faster, stronger, and entirely more dangerous in a physical altercation than anyone else at court.

Nor would he ever betray Germein. That meant he would never betray me—except maybe to my brother. A part of me whispered that Aevin wouldn't betray me even to Germein, but I had learned to ignore that part in the years since Aevin had pushed me away. Clinging to my childhood faith in him and ignoring the changes adulthood had forced upon us both would do me no good.

Knowing that Germein was right didn't mean I wanted to spend time with Aevin, though. In public, he was polite and distant unless someone really got under his skin. Despite my years of practice and infamous ability to remain icily calm in all situations, having Aevin treat me like that would send me over the edge. I didn't want to be a chore to him. I didn't want to crash against a shield of indifference.

I'd have to forget that he was the first man I had felt a glimmer of attraction for. I'd have to ignore our years of history. In order to not embarrass myself, I'd have to fight tooth and nail to maintain my court mask around him—one of the only people I had never donned that mask around in the past.

I had lived for seven years in Plumei, controlling my every expression, hiding every thought. I could handle a few weeks with Aevin. I had to.

I didn't bother to agree with Germein; he knew he was right. Time to focus on the logistics. "I will play sick to explain my blindness, so I'll stay confined to my room suffering from a strange fever and headaches until Aevin gets here. How long do you think it will take?"

"He'll need to arrange a replacement trainer at the base before traveling, so he probably won't make it here for at least a week."

"Why will it take a week to get a replacement? There are plenty of trainers who can step in—even if they aren't as good as Aevin."

"Three or four days to arrange everything and prepare to come into the city, another two or three to get here. He hates the train, Josyn."

"He won't take it even for an emergency?"

"Give me some credit. If Aevin came into the city by rail, everyone would know there was an emergency. You want us to play down what happened, don't you?"

Balance take it, Germein was right. A week was longer than I wanted to be confined to my rooms, however. I blew out a breath. "Fine. A week. I can handle a week."

"Uh, Jos?"

"What?"

"You realize that if you are playing sick for a week, it will look odd if I don't summon a physician, right?"

"Of course. Since this is going to be an illness that strikes me blind, I'm guessing you'll summon several."

"And you are going to fool them into believing you are sick.
You."

I stuck out my tongue. "You don't have to sound so disbelieving. I barely have to do anything to fool them. Mili will handle most of it. I simply lie abed and act tired. I can handle that."

"If you say so."

I reached back and grabbed the pillow from my bed and threw it in his direction.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

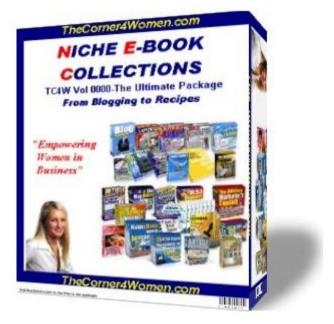


Jen Lynning never outgrew her love of fairy tales. (She may have studied German just so she could read the Brothers Grimm in the original.) When she wasn't reading about life in a magical world, she was imagining it. Eventually she decided to start writing her own stories where magic and romance meet.

Jen lives in Northern Virginia with her two cats, who make their own contributions to her writing by walking across the keyboard, and her bird, who offers commentary on the whole process.

Visit jenlynning.com to see what's coming next and sign up for Jen's newsletter. Newsletter subscribers will receive a free short story.

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