

Voice of Power

Lucas – The University

I leaned against the University wall, under the cover of an arched walkway, my eyes fixed on the fountains in the main courtyard. The general would have to come this way to leave the University, and I would be ready for him when he did.

The wind had picked up, biting and cold, but the walkway shielded me somewhat. My sister had already returned to the palace, driven by the demanding schedule of a crown princess, but she had managed to take the courtiers with her. Both of us had spent too many years at court to be surprised at the number of people who had found a way to be present at my sister's unofficial meeting with General Griffith.

That same experience had made it easy for me to interpret the look she sent my way as she excused herself and left. Most likely it was the reason she had sent a note asking for my presence in the first place. It was certainly the reason she had taken a quiet moment before the meeting to fill me in on her true purposes.

Our father wanted the general's reaction to certain pieces of sensitive information—the kind of reactions he wouldn't give openly to his king—or to an audience of any substantial size. And the only way another member of the royal family could get a private word with the Head of the Armed Forces—at least without advertising that they desired such a private word—was to engineer an accidental encounter such as this. I just wished the general would hurry with whatever other business was causing him to linger at the University. I wanted to get out of the cold.

But I didn't budge from my place. No matter the weather, I would wait as long as it took. I hadn't even realized the general was back on a short visit from the front lines until I got Lucienne's note. Some days it felt like the lowliest courtier was better informed than me, and I hated it. If my separation from court occasionally proved useful—as it did now—then I intended to utilize that to the full.

While I waited, I reviewed the information that had been discussed in the over-crowded meeting. The general's report had been grim and his outlook far less hopeful than I would have liked.

My thoughts turned to Elena, as they all too often did these days. I still hoped her new ability might somehow hold the key to our war efforts. But she would have to learn to control and access her power before it could be studied—and, more importantly, she needed to remain alive long enough to do any of that.

I wasn't sure what reports of her had been delivered to Griffith on the border, or what he thought of having missed the demonstration of her ability. He had brought her up, of course,

but Lucienne had skillfully turned the conversation aside. I had seen the look in his eyes before she did so, however. While the general might welcome any new weapon for his war, he didn't like potential new threats or elements he couldn't control—like a commonborn with power. He had a daily, first-hand view of the discontent of the conscripted commonborn.

I had invoked Griffith's name and the war itself to General Thaddeus once to keep Elena safe, but I wasn't sure that argument would continue to serve. Lucienne's approach of evasion seemed sound—until Elena had more time to prove she wasn't a threat our best chance was to keep her out of Devoras and Stantorn minds altogether.

A cloaked girl entered the courtyard, bracing herself against the wind. As she moved toward the gate, I caught a glimpse of her lowered face.

"Elena?" Her name slipped out before I had time to think, shock disrupting my usual control. If I didn't know better, I might wonder if I had conjured her with my thoughts.

She stopped and looked toward me, surprise and confusion warring across her face.

What was she doing at the University? What was she doing out of the Academy at all? She waited for me to say something else, but I didn't have time to formulate a complete sentence before voices called my attention to an arched opening further down the walkway.

I cursed silently. Of course the general would choose to appear at exactly this moment. Elena's presence could hardly fail to raise Griffith's interest, despite our efforts to keep her out of sight and mind.

There was no time to do anything but act.

I pushed off the wall and strode over to her, grabbing her arm. Somewhat to my surprise, she offered no resistance, stumbling after me as I tugged her back to where I had been standing.

Retaking my place at the wall, I positioned her in front of me, my arms holding her in a position that left us both obscured. The University had as many young students as aged academics—an embracing couple would raise no interest from a passerby.

I looked down into her face—suddenly so near my own—and for a moment I forgot all about the general. Her eyes were hazel, luminous, and they gazed at me with shock—but also something else. Something I suddenly, desperately wanted to understand.

Did she know that she glowed? Alight with an inner passion that enhanced the beauty of her features. And they were beautiful—*she* was beautiful. I had noticed it even when I thought her an enemy—I could hardly fail to notice it now when I held her just short of a full embrace.

The sound of the general's entourage drew my attention back to the courtyard behind her, bringing me back to reality. Elena pulled at my hold, trying to turn to follow my gaze, so I gripped her more tightly. If she moved, we would both be revealed, and then we would be in an even worse position than before. I should have thought of a better way to hide her.

She sighed but, again to my surprise, didn't actually protest or twist herself away from me. Instead she cocked her head slightly, her eyes losing focus. The general's group moved between two of the fountains, heading for the gate. I clenched my teeth. There went my opportunity to accost him. But hiding Elena was more important. My family would find another way to speak with him.

One of his attendants addressed him by name, and Elena stiffened, her mouth dropping open slightly. My eyes were drawn to the movement, and an insane desire to pull her all the way against me and press my lips down over hers swept through me, once again driving out all thought of the general.

Distantly I heard the gates open and close, and I knew I should let go and put some distance between us, but I remained frozen in place. I tried to remind myself that it was the use of her ability for our war efforts that I wanted, not the girl herself, but somehow it was Elena and not her power that filled my mind.

She snapped her mouth closed, but the movement only intensified my urge to kiss her. I needed to grab hold of myself, and fast—before I did something utterly foolish. Elena was a commonborn, and a pawn in the complicated game of politics that I had been born to play. She could never be mine.

An irrational flare of anger shook me.

I reined it in. I should never have let myself touch her or pull her so close.

“Did someone say...was that...General Griffith?” She stumbled over the words, her voice breaking the moment and pulling me back from the brink.

What madness had gripped me? Since when did I let fleeting emotions overpower me like that?

I nodded, looking away and pushing her back, giving myself some space. One hand clung stubbornly to her arm, however, anchoring her in place. My eyes roved over the courtyard, checking that no one remained to observe us.

“But I thought he was at the front lines?” she said.

I kept my eyes carefully away from her face. “He was.”

“But what’s he doing here?”

I shrugged. “Consulting with Jessamine, I imagine. Or even visiting Julian.”

I glanced back at her at last, her look of confusion reminding me forcibly of why any attraction to Elena was mere foolishness. She wasn’t a part of my world.

“The general’s older son,” I explained. “The twins’ brother. He’s doing a brief stint here at the University.”

“Oh.” She seemed to be struggling to master some emotion.

Something about this girl disarmed my well-honed defenses. I knew she lacked any knowledge or experience of court, and yet somehow I kept forgetting it. Just like I seemed to have momentarily forgotten that she was nothing more than my year mate and an advantage Ardann might one day wield over our enemies.

If she could stay alive long enough, that was. My earlier confusion returned, and I shook my head. Shouldn’t Lorcan be keeping her restricted to the Academy grounds where she wouldn’t go wandering into the path of someone like General Griffith?

“You’re like a child, you don’t know anything. Whose bright idea was it to let you out of the Academy?”

This time she did pull herself free of my hold, bristling at my words.

I felt the briefest pang at the loss of contact but drowned it under a wave of anger. Far too many influential people frequented the University—people who might respond to her

presence in their world by calling for her death. Only the palace could be a more dangerous place for her. What could have possessed her to come here?

“What are you doing here, anyway?” I frowned. “This is almost the last place you should be.”

“I was told access to the University was open to the public.” Her voice and expression were cold.

I laughed, although I felt little amusement. She spoke as if she was merely one among a crowd—rather than utterly unique, a matter of far too much interest, and the possessor of unknown power.

“You’re hardly the public, Elena.”

She hissed in a breath, clearly angered by my words, although I couldn’t quite fathom why. Was she really so reckless as to court her own undoing?

“No one *let me out* of the Academy. I’m just taking my rest day, the same as everyone else. And for your information, I was visiting my brother. Although I didn’t realize I needed to give an accounting of my movements to you.”

I rubbed a hand across my face. No one spoke to me like that.

“That’s right, I’d forgotten about your brother,” I muttered.

Her every word only emphasized how unequipped she was for the mageborn sphere she now navigated. And I should have known better than to think I could trust her to ensure her own safety. Just like I should have remembered Jasper.

My mention of her brother seemed to give her pause, and for a moment we stood in silence, our gazes locked. Then she spun and took off toward the gates, hurrying back to the Academy—I hoped.

I remained behind, alone. Elena infuriated me, and I let myself dwell for a moment in the emotion, pretending it could drive off, rather than just mask, the altogether different feelings that had been evoked by holding her close.

But all too soon my irritation turned toward myself. I should have remembered about her brother. It wasn’t like me to lose track of important details.

Clearly I couldn’t trust myself to think clearly enough where she was concerned. Just like I couldn’t trust her to make sensible decisions. If she would wander alone into the University, she might go anywhere. I needed to keep a closer watch on her movements in case she decided to leave the Academy alone again.

I frowned, deep in thought. A composition of some sort, perhaps?

I finally moved toward the gates, already making plans. If Elena wouldn’t protect herself, then I would have to do it for her. For the good of Ardann, of course.