

Voice of Dominion

Lucas – Midwinter

I had a purpose for being in the middle of the ballroom floor, but I could no longer remember what it was. Elena had arrived, and my mind focused on her to the exclusion of all else. She was draped in red—the color of blood and of my family. I knew without having to look that mine weren't the only eyes trained on her. Elena might have begun as a commonborn nobody, but the Spoken Mage now commanded the attention of everyone. And she had just reminded us that her presence was as powerful in a mage's ballroom as it was in a battle camp.

But it wasn't the Spoken Mage who made me freeze. It was Elena herself. She looked incredible—distractingly, devastatingly incredible—but she also looked powerful. She looked like she belonged. The girl I loved, claiming her place in the world I inhabited. It was too much like a dream to be real.

But it was real. The general approached her, and I watched her face as she spoke with him, her eyes straying to someone else beyond them both. My own eyes didn't move from her.

I saw the moment her gaze caught on me, although she didn't immediately turn to face me. I willed her to do so. She was the only one I saw in the room, and I suddenly, urgently, needed to know she felt the same pull.

Apparently she did. She began to move toward me, although Coralie tried to steal her attention. I felt an intense surge of satisfaction when she gave no sign of even noticing her friend. And that feeling roared into triumph when she finally stood in front of me. We matched—black and gold and red. We belonged together. And everyone could see it. Everyone could see what should have been obvious to them already. And, for once, I didn't care how I should feel. I only knew how I did feel. And that I was right.

"Elena," I whispered, not wanting to break the moment.

"Lucas," she replied, my name on her lips causing another spike of satisfaction. It had been hard—almost too hard—to be always so near her and yet unable, despite all my efforts, to speak to her.

My hand reached out without conscious command, and she didn't hesitate to put hers into it. The musicians must have seen me because they began to play, and I retained just enough sense to pull her into a dance rather than an embrace.

Did she know how she looked? The effect she had on me?

"You look—" I began, but she cut me off.

"I'm sorry. Finnian—"

My hand tightened involuntarily around her waist at the Callinos boy's name. How often I had wished myself in his place beside her, free to interact with Elena without hindrance. He had been the one to provide her dress? What right had he to involve himself in such a matter?

But a breath passed, and I forced myself to relax. Finnian was her friend, and in this, perhaps he was my friend as well. He was the son of a powerful duke, after all. He might laugh, but he knew almost as much of our world as I did. No coincidence, then, that Elena had come gowned in blood red. I should have known no one else would dare such impudence.

"Ah yes," I said. "I should have guessed. The duke's son has a dangerous mix of mischief and perception."

I could see that she wanted to laugh at the description of her friend, but her amusement didn't last long.

"Maybe I shouldn't have come tonight," she said. "The general certainly didn't seem overjoyed to see me."

My hand tightened again, seeming to have escaped entirely from my usual control. If the general couldn't see that Elena belonged here, then he was a fool.

"I'm glad you did," I said.

I spun her through a turn, guiding her across the ballroom, several other dancers flashing past my eyes. War waged inside me. I had her in my arms, her attention mine, but we weren't alone. Too many things needed to be said, but I couldn't say them here. Slowly, painfully, the long years of my training won, and I reasserted control over myself, pushing down the words that wanted to tumble from me.

"It's an impressive party, given the circumstances," I said, my voice falsely light. "You could almost forget we spent yesterday training in the mud."

It took her a moment, but she responded in kind, and some of the tension eased. The dance continued, and I uttered whatever inanity came to my lips, most of my mind focused on the feel of her in my arms, and the play of expressions across her face. When the music ended, she didn't immediately notice. I made no move to release her.

She jolted after a moment, though, pulling free and giving me a small curtsy. I thanked her, bowing in return, wishing I could pull her back into the next dance. But the prince was back in control, and I could once again feel the pressure of the eyes that surrounded us. The Spoken Mage commanded my attention, the mages could understand and accept that, but if I refused to let her go, it would be another matter. There were already dangerous whispers of the truth—that it was not the Spoken Mage, but Elena, I wanted.

She retreated with haste, and I forced myself to scan the crowd for Natalya. Her family was hosting the event, and if I didn't dance with her soon, I would make the whole situation worse. Not surprisingly, I didn't have to look far.

I held myself stiff and rigid as we danced, but she still pressed herself too close. I said something mindless, and she laughed, although I didn't think I had been particularly amusing. This was why I hated these events. It would be nice for once to celebrate my birthday without such painful machinations.

A series of dance partners followed as I tried desperately to mask the true object of my interest. Did everyone see the way my eyes sought her out? Did they note the way I breathed a hypocritical sigh of relief every time I saw she wasn't dancing? Or the way I maneuvered my partners so I might brush against her on the dance floor the few times she did? I could only hope not. Perhaps my court mask protected me. I could feel myself slipping, though, as I never let myself do.

The midnight bells began to chime, and I braced myself for a stream of birthday wishes—every one of them delivered by someone who wanted something from me. My eyes sought out Elena again, only to see her slipping out toward the gardens.

My feet were moving before my mind had time to remonstrate with them. In the middle of a ballroom full of mages, I was free of my two guards. There was no one to stop me or trail at my heels. I had just wished I could spend my birthday differently, and here was the chance. I would make my own choice—for once. I could not wait any longer—I had to see and speak to her alone.

I found her standing in the gardens in the moonlight—almost as if she was waiting for me.

“You look stunning,” I said.

She kept her back to me. “Shouldn't you be inside receiving birthday congratulations?”

I closed the remaining distance between us, circling around to stand in front of her.

“There's only one birthday congratulation I want.” My eyes drank her in.

“Happy Birthday,” she whispered.

“Elena, I—” Now that my moment had come, I didn't know where to begin. It was hard to think clearly out here alone in the moonlight with her.

My feet moved of their own accord once again, carrying me closer. My hand stretched out and cupped her cheek, the feel of her soft skin making me trace my fingers down her neck and arm until I could grip her hand.

She trembled at my touch, and the satisfaction inside roared again. Unlike all the others, what Elena wanted from me I was more than happy to give. We had both spent too long fighting our feelings. I couldn't do it for another moment.

But she swayed away from me, questioning our presence together.

“It's so busy at the camp,” I said. “I can't get you alone there.” She couldn't have failed to notice how I had tried, always looking for an opportunity to escape our ever-present companions.

“Why...why would you want me alone?” she asked, apparently having missed my attempts after all—or perhaps just sharing my difficulty in focusing.

I tried to pull my thoughts together enough to answer coherently, although I couldn't bring myself to let go of her hand.

“I told you that when we came to the front, you would realize I was right,” I said. “But the truth is, I was the one to learn *you* were right.”

“Me?” She stared at me. “But I can see it now—what you meant, what's been driving you all this time. I can see how important winning this war is, how many lives are being lost. Only...I can't do it. I can't be your weapon, Lucas.”

My insides clenched, as if they had received a blow, and I sucked in a breath, my eyes focused on the unshed tears in hers. That's what she had been thinking all this time? That I wanted to turn her into a killing tool? She thought I had seen the anguish she suffered from the lives she had taken and wanted to inflict more of the same?

"I don't see you as a weapon, Elena." I pulled her closer, urgency filling me. "I don't want to send you out to kill. I could never want that for you. But there are lots of ways you could help the war, lots of ways your strength could be used to our advantage. And there is always the possibility that you might unlock some further secret regarding how we access power. One that all of us could then apply. When it comes to you, the possibilities seem endless."

Did she believe me? Did she understand? I needed her to know that when we fought in the library—and every time I had spoken to her about the war—that hadn't been what was in my mind. But I also needed to tell her what I had been trying to find an opportunity to say ever since the attack. I needed to tell her that while she had come to see my side, I had long since realized she was the one in the right. Lying in my bed in the dark of the night, it had been a bitter pill to swallow. But winning the war meant more than anything—even my pride. More than anything except my love for this girl.

I shook my head at my own foolishness, even as I didn't attempt to deny it to myself.

"Ending the war has been my focus for so long," I said. "I couldn't let anything else in to distract me. And yet suddenly there you were, filling my heart and mind. It exhilarated and terrified me at the same time. I thought if I agreed to try to bring change to our laws, to our mindsets, to everything about the way we run our kingdom, I would be leading all of Ardann down the same path of madness that had swallowed me."

That beautiful, glorious path that led me here to this moment, alone in the moonlight with Elena.

"You were trying to do what you believed was right," she said, gazing at me earnestly in the reflected light. "And I can finally see why the war has been so important to you. How important it is to all of us. Just think if all these young lives could be used elsewhere instead of needlessly lost."

My jaw tightened. This failure belonged to me and my family. She saw clearly what I should have seen long ago. We had ignored our own resources for far too long.

"Yes," I said. "We must stop the war. But being here has helped me to see that the war isn't separate to the rest of the kingdom's issues. They're entwined together."

"What do you mean?" Her bright eyes continued to stare up at me, tormenting me with their nearness as they had done so many times before.

But no one was here now to make us hold back. I tugged softly on her hand, closing the distance between us. Our clothes brushed against each other, her nearness igniting everything inside me. I needed her to know that this time was different—this time I wasn't going to let her go.

"You want change," I whispered. "Change in the way we see the commonborns. And you're right."

"I...I am?" she asked.

“That attack in the gully would never have happened if an incompetent child hadn’t been placed in command over experienced soldiers.”

How many nights had I lain awake, reliving it over and over again in my mind? So many failures. I hurried through my conclusions, acknowledging our need to use the experience and ideas of the commonborn. And I saw the moment the fire lit in her eyes as she instantly grasped the more personal significance of my words.

“Are you saying...are you saying you’re ready to fight for change now?”

I swayed toward her, my face hovering as close to hers as I dared. I had more to say, but it was almost impossible not to be distracted by the nearness of her lips, and her delicious smell.

“I’m saying that for the kingdom you were right,” I said. “We need to bring change.” I paused, knowing that once I said the rest, we would both plummet off a cliff with no possibility of return. I drew a deep breath as an unfamiliar feeling of freedom soared inside me. I was ready to stop thinking about consequences and fall.

“And I’m saying that for me, you were even more right,” I continued. “I need us to be together—truly together no matter what laws I have to overturn to achieve it. I cannot bear to be always so close to you, and yet so far away. I cannot keep on like this. I will fight for us. I have to fight for us.”

I would face down my family and the whole kingdom if I had to. I would make this girl my princess no matter what it cost me. She loved our people in a way I was still struggling to learn, and I loved her to distraction and far beyond. I needed her beside me always.

Elena was the one to close the breath of distance between us, doing what I had dreamed of so many times and pressing her soft lips against mine. My arms enclosed her, crushing her tightly against me, unable to bear the slightest space between us after enduring so much forced separation.

Unlike everyone else, Elena wanted my love—as she gave me hers. And here in this moonlit moment, nothing else existed. Just two people who loved each other enough to break down every barrier and imagine an impossible future when I would never have to let her go again.