

Voice of Command

Finnian – The Kiss

It was satisfying to see Abalene as it should be without the unnatural quiet and pall of an epidemic. The bright material strung between the buildings now reflected the same colorful energy that burst from every part of the city. Without material blocking the doorways and large windows, the city looked open and inviting, and people mingled as freely on the flat roofs as on the streets below, perhaps hoping to catch a breeze.

I hadn't been to Abalene for years, other than with the Academy during the epidemic, and I had forgotten what the city was truly like. It felt right that this was Coralie's home. Her irrepressible personality and open, joyful nature fit with this place.

"It's warm like home, but too sticky," said Saffron, coming to stand beside me.

I grinned down at my favorite cousin. "At least we're more used to the heat than poor Elena."

Saffron bit her lip in quick sympathy. "Our previous trip didn't prepare her for what it would be like here in summer, did it? I hope she doesn't regret coming."

"Of course I don't!" Elena's cheerful voice sounded from Saffron's other side. "If I only get two weeks of freedom this summer, I'm going to enjoy every moment of them." She scrunched up her nose. "However unpleasant the weather."

"Talking about using every moment, we don't have long before Coralie will be wondering where we are." Saffron looked around the bustling market with a crinkle in her brow. "And we still haven't chosen a present for her."

Elena laughed. "Somehow I don't think Coralie will be coming out after us or asking any questions about our whereabouts when we get back. That girl is far too canny where things like birthdays are concerned, and what other reason could the three of us have for slipping away to the market without her?"

I chuckled. "You're no doubt right. When it comes to birthdays, Coralie is certainly queen."

Saffron groaned. "Which means we need to come up with the perfect present for her. So, once again, can the two of you please focus?"

I looked around at the many stalls surrounding us, but no flashes of inspiration hit me. A girl as unique as Coralie needed something special. We didn't want to produce a disappointing gift right at the pinnacle of what had so far been an outstanding birthday celebration.

Years of being forced to attend balls and soirees of the great families had inured me to the idea of festivities, but I should have known Coralie wouldn't host anything so boring as those

events. Instead of a single large ball, the entire week had been one long birthday celebration. A small number of Coralie's local friends—either younger than us like her brother and yet to start at the Academy, or old enough to have completed their terms at the front—joined us as we picnicked and swam in one of the Overon's small tributaries, completed elaborate scavenger hunts, hosted a traveling team of Players, danced, and generally entertained ourselves with laughter and an endless succession of food and drink. Particularly cake.

Coralie's family cook had made an elaborate new cake every day, and I was still debating which of the flavors reigned supreme—much to Saffron's disgust. My cousin thought I had too much interest in cake. Which just showed that for all her sense, she could sometimes be foolish.

Now that Coralie's actual birthday had arrived, I didn't doubt an enormous chocolate cake would appear before the day was through. My thoughts wandered to the upcoming family feast Coralie had promised for the evening meal. Her cook had proven surprisingly gifted, and the possible contents of the menu absorbed all my focus.

"Finnian!" Saffron recalled my attention with an exasperated look. Before we could go back and enjoy the cook's considerable skills, we needed to choose Coralie a gift.

When I had suggested to the girls that we get a joint gift, Elena had hesitated, but I had assured her that her expertise where Coralie was concerned would make up for her lack of funds. And a glad cry from her as she darted across the market square suggested she might be about to hold up her end of the bargain.

Saffron and I followed behind and found her examining a glassmaker's stall.

"Look!" She pointed at one of the display pieces which had been placed in a prominent position on a raised box.

Saffron sucked in a breath. "It's beautiful!"

"And entirely frivolous." Elena caught her bottom lip between her teeth as if suddenly second-guessing her discovery.

"Which makes it perfect," I announced quickly. "Eighteenth birthday gifts should be entirely frivolous."

Elena chuckled. "Which I suppose is why you chose me a fan—not exactly one of the practical items I picked to take with me to the Armed Forces barracks the next day."

Saffron rolled her eyes. "Yes, because *Finnian* chose that present. That's definitely how I remember it." She gave Elena a significant look. "There's a reason he likes joint presents, you know."

"It's called teamwork and delegation." I assumed a lofty tone. "The qualities of a true leader." I could hardly take any real offence at Saffron's words since I'd been making my cousin choose most of my gifts for me since we were small children.

Elena ignored me, busy assuring Saffron that she had loved the impractical gift the two of us had given her in the spring.

"I'm not used to owning such beautiful things, and I love it." She made a rueful face. "Even if I don't know when I'm likely to get a chance to use it now that I'm a private."

"Oh, you never know," I said vaguely, turning back to the stall. Elena had thanked me at the beginning of the year for sending Beatrice to heal her sister, and at the time I'd been just

as bemused as the rest of them as to who was really behind it. But my father had spent more time than usual in the capital this last year, due to the epidemic, among other things, and I had eventually remembered to ask him about it.

I now knew exactly who had sent Beatrice, and I couldn't help but wonder if Elena might have more elaborate entertaining in her future than she currently seemed to suspect. I didn't mention it, though. I was fairly certain she had also worked out the true identity of her benefactor, but she hadn't brought it up, and I certainly wasn't going to do so.

My eyes ran over the glassware on display, many of the pieces practical, created for the local commonborn populace. Several appeared purely decorative, however—no doubt produced with the local mage families in mind. Or perhaps even some of the richer commonborn families. Abalene had been a significant trading hub for centuries—since long before our current war began—and some of the most established merchant families had branches here.

I nodded once. Elena's royal admirer might have bought her a practical gift for her own birthday, but an entirely decorative gift seemed right for Coralie.

Saffron reached out gentle hands and lifted the glass vase from the box. Its elegant lines directed the eye to the true feature of the piece. Someone—clearly a master glassblower since I sensed no hint of power about the stall—had crafted a bouquet of glass flowers. Each of the blooms exactly matched some of the more elaborate local varieties, and they looked like they could have been picked from Coralie's own garden.

"We'll have suites next year instead of just rooms," Elena said. "Coralie could keep it in her sitting room to remind her of home. Especially in the colder months." She glanced at the stallholder who was watching us eagerly and hesitated, her eyes flashing to me.

I could read the unspoken words in her gaze. The piece was made up of a number of individual pieces of exquisite artwork, and it likely cost a hefty sum.

"As long as you ladies don't think it's too small," I said. "Funds are not an issue. Given I'm stuck at the Academy, I hardly get any chances to spend the allowance my father gives me—and I wouldn't want him to go getting the idea that I don't need such a generous amount." I grinned at them both.

At my mention of the Academy, a look of certainty came over the stallholder's face, as if I had confirmed his suspicions.

"It is a great honor that my humble wares find favor with the Spoken Mage." His eyes lingered on Elena. "I would be honored to sell you the piece at a bargain price."

"Oh no, we couldn't—" Elena began with discomfort in her voice before breaking off and looking toward me, as if remembering whose money we were spending.

"Both of my children had the green fever this winter," the man said, his focus still on Elena. "My wife refused to take them to the healing clinics until we got word of your new testing composition."

Elena shifted awkwardly. "It wasn't my composition. Beatrice and Reese did all the work."

"I saw you there at the clinic myself," the man said, seeming oblivious to her protestations as well as her discomfort. "And the master craftsman who made this very piece

had the fever as well. He would be vastly displeased with me if I tried to charge you full price.”

“Excellent,” I said, stepping in.

This wasn't the first awkward encounter Elena had experienced here in Abalene, and I knew she would be wanting to get back behind the walls of Coralie's home as soon as possible. There was a reason we had left it so late to venture out among the throngs of the market to purchase a gift. Too many of the locals had seen Elena in the healing tents during the epidemic, and the girl had a tendency to make a lasting impression.

The stallholder reluctantly turned his attention to me, naming a price that sounded far too low. I agreed without any negotiation, and he happily wrapped the pieces for us, each one receiving its own individual cocoon. As soon as he had bundled the entire package and handed it across to Elena, I thrust a small pouch in his direction and herded the girls away from the stall. By the time he realized I had given him more than his asking price, we would be safely away.

Neither Saffron nor Elena protested at my hurried pace, and we had soon cleared the market entirely. Elena let out a tiny sigh of relief, and Saffron slipped a comforting arm around her shoulders, giving them a silent squeeze.

“Success!” I said, with cheerful briskness, hoping to turn the mood. “And you may rest easy, Elena, at contributing your share to the gift-giving endeavor.”

Saffron gave me a small glare, but I grinned unashamedly at them both. “Clearly I should go shopping with you more often, Elena.”

She rolled her eyes at me, but a smile had reappeared on her face. “I thought you had so much money you didn't know what to do with it all.”

“It's true that some of us must carry greater burdens than others,” I replied. “But as you know, I never complain.”

Saffron gave a disgusted growl and pulled Elena ahead of me. I trailed behind them, chuckling to myself.

The chocolate cake appeared as expected that night, a full three tiers high. And it tasted even more incredible than I had anticipated. Coralie looked radiant, her eyes glowing as she surveyed the spread of food and the beautiful blooms she had used to transform the dining room into an elegant bower.

Seeing her decorations had made me even more certain in our choice of gift, and an unexpected warmth filled my insides at the way her face lit up when Elena and Saffron presented the glass bouquet to her. But as she gushed over it, thanking us all extravagantly and saying over and over how perfect it would be in her suite back at the Academy, a strange dissatisfaction filled me.

Only when Coralie wished us all goodnight at the end of the evening did my dissatisfaction find a focus. She thanked all three of us again, her eyes darting between us as we stood poised to separate to our various rooms. I fumbled my way through our subsequent

goodnights with less ease than usual, and by the time I closed the door on the guest suite I had been given for my stay, a strange resolve had filled me.

Saffron was right about my usual practice when it came to gifts. I had long relied on combined gifts as a way to leave the hard work of choosing the right item to others—usually my long-suffering cousin. But I suddenly felt determined that the next time I gave a gift to Coralie, it would be a solo gift. I would choose it myself.

As I slipped into bed, I tried not to think too closely about my motivations or why I felt so determined to see all of her gratitude and pleasure directed toward me alone.

None of us showed much liveliness at breakfast the next morning, a certain flat feeling pervading everything given the end of the birthday festivities and the breaking up of our group. Although Saffron and I were to stay on for a little longer, Elena had completed the week Lorcan had granted her and had to return to the Academy.

The remaining three of us spent a quiet day, helping to return Coralie's family home to its usual order after the protracted celebrations. Coralie had at first seemed embarrassed to have us help with such tasks, but my usual flow of joking good humor soon achieved its purpose. And the afternoon was enlivened by the arrival of a messenger. Some of my distant cousins lived in Abalene, and apparently they had heard of Saffron and my stay.

Or at least that was Coralie's interpretation of the invitation they had sent for us to spend the following afternoon at their estate.

"I've certainly never received such a personal invite before," she assured us. "The local members of the great families will sometimes include us in social events when they're hosting grand celebrations and including all the mage families in the region, but we don't get invites for casual occasions like this."

"Their loss," I said with a smile that might have come out a little warmer than I had intended. But I couldn't regret the slight flush of color that sprang to Coralie's face before she looked quickly away and began writing an acceptance to send back with the messenger.

As we approached the estate the next day, I couldn't help a feeling of distaste and unease creeping over me. After a week of such relaxed enjoyment, I didn't look forward to what was likely to be a terribly stuffy and boring affair.

But it turned out it was not my father's third cousin who was hosting us, but his children—sixteen-year-old twins who wanted to ply us with questions about the Academy. I wasn't sure whether they were more nervous or more excited about starting there in the autumn, but either way they were overflowing with enthusiasm, their sociability spilling over us all equally as we consumed an afternoon spread in a picturesque spot in their vast gardens.

Watching one of them converse animatedly with Coralie, I almost didn't notice the smile lingering on my face. No one could be better to put them at their ease about their imminent start at the Academy than Coralie.

Slowly the smile dropped off my face as the truth of my earlier emotions darted through my mind. I hadn't been uncomfortable at the thought of a boring afternoon with distant

relatives my parents' age. I had been worried at the idea that they might be openly condescending—or even rude—toward my Cygnet friend.

I didn't have long to dwell on the revelation, however, before one of the twins leaped up and declared that the finale of the picnic was to take place at the center of their large hedge maze.

"If there's anything left by the time you find the middle, that is," she said with a twinkle in her eye before dashing off between the towering hedges.

"No compositions," her twin told us sternly. "And no working together. You each have to find your own way. Those are the rules for your first time."

When he too had disappeared, the three of us looked at each other before I shrugged and strolled into the maze. I would have preferred to stay with Saffron and Coralie, but the twins had been good hosts, and it seemed a harmless request.

After a number of dead ends, however, I had to admit that I had gotten lost more quickly than I expected. Whether it was because my sense of direction wasn't as good as I thought, or because my mind was otherwise occupied, I wasn't sure.

I turned a corner to find yet another dead end. But this one was occupied—by the person at the center of most of my distracted thoughts.

"Oh good!" Coralie grinned at me. "I'm not the only one lost, then. I was starting to have terrifying images of myself wandering lost and alone until I collapsed of hunger and thirst."

I grinned back and without intending to do so, found myself closing the distance between us. She looked up at my suddenly close face, and the earlier flush reappeared on her cheeks. I felt my grin change into a smile that was far more serious and intimate.

Some distant part of my brain urged caution, reminding me that I was always careful never to take my light-hearted flirtations too far. As the son of a duke, I had always tried to make sure I didn't give the wrong impression by making any one girl the focus of my attention. But the protesting part of my mind shrunk smaller and smaller until I couldn't hear it at all anymore.

If I had increased the interest I showed Coralie over the last year, it had been an irresistible response to that smug Player Edmond. How could I resist? But something had changed. I didn't normally worry about what my family would think of the girls I smiled at.

I shook my head slightly. No, that wasn't right. I hadn't been worried today about what my family would think of Coralie. I had been worried for her—almost sick with dread that they would say something to wound or upset her. Something that might embarrass me and prove all of Coralie's prejudices against the great families right.

A slight crease appeared in Coralie's brow at the shake of my head. I reached out a finger and smoothed it away, unable to bear seeing concern on her face that had been put there by me. How had I never noticed before how satisfyingly tall she was? I barely had to look down at all to meet her eyes. One unnamed member of our year might prefer short girls like Elena, but I loved that talking to Coralie didn't put a crick in my neck.

And neither would kissing her. The thought flashed unbidden across my mind, and I knew that it had already taken root. How had I not spent the last two years thinking about kissing

this bright, unique, joy-filled girl? I would no doubt spend the next two years thinking about it far more than I ought.

“Coralie,” I said, my voice barely a whisper.

Her eyes widened, and for a moment I feared she would pull away. But instead she swayed toward me, her eyes dropping to my mouth, and I needed no further encouragement. Wrapping my arms around her, I pulled her the rest of the way against my chest and lowered my lips to hers.

They tasted even more sweet than I had imagined, and she fit perfectly within my arms. The warm air surrounded us, cushioning us from the rest of the world, as the green of the surrounding hedges faded away. It was just Coralie and me—as it should always be.

All too soon, she pulled back, her hands resting gently against my chest for leverage. But I noticed they lingered there, her palms flat against my muscles, so I pulled her back in for another kiss. She made no protest, and this one held more fire than sweetness.

When she pulled back this time, my breathing had grown ragged. Taking a step away, she laughed breathlessly and reached up to check her hair.

“Goodness,” she said, clearly fighting to keep her voice light. “Now I see why the twins said we had to explore this place alone. There must be some kind of enchantment in these hedges.”

“Coralie...”

I let my voice trail off as I examined her eyes. I had never been so serious about anything in my life. Somehow, for a while there, I had managed to fool even myself with my light-hearted persona, but any lingering uncertainty was gone. Whatever voice of protest had sounded in my mind earlier, it had been silenced for good. I had never been more serious about anyone than I was about Coralie—beautiful, kind, effervescent Coralie.

She had been the first to befriend Elena at the Academy because she was the most truly good and kind-hearted among us. Her warmth—overflowing from the beauty that lay at her center—drew me like a moth to a flame. And I knew with blinding clarity that I would be circling around her for the rest of my life. How could I not?

And yet, I forced myself to slowly draw back. The sudden intensity of my true feelings had taken me by surprise—and they were my own feelings. Would they be even more of a shock to her? Would they drive her away?

As if confirming my fears, she gave a chuckle. “Summer kisses—what a beautiful end to a perfect birthday. I should have known I could trust you for it, Finnian.”

I frowned at her dismissal of my action. I wouldn’t have kissed her unless it meant more to me than that. But when I opened my mouth to protest, she cut me off.

“Don’t worry, I know better than to take such things seriously when we’re only halfway through the Academy.”

I paused, her words cutting through me, and she pressed on.

“I’m not so foolish,” she assured me. “Even if it was not a perfect birthday kiss—rather than anything more serious—I would know better. The Academy is difficult and stressful enough without trying to add a romance to the mix. Not with two more years still to go.”

I opened my mouth again but slowly shut it. Surely she couldn't have just participated in those kisses and thought them nothing more than a birthday affection, light-heartedly bestowed? No, instead she was being her kind self and warning me off in the most gentle way possible. Coralie wanted me to remain my usual self—her light-hearted friend. She was telling me not to change our relationship, and if I loved her, then I had to respect her wishes.

And it didn't even cross my mind to question that I loved her.

All of me wanted to pull her back into my arms and to assure her of the strength of my feelings and my determination to win her over. But her comments about the Academy made me pause. I had always taken my own strength and control for granted. It was a birthright I had never been without. But I knew Saffron sometimes struggled to keep up with me, her father coming from a weaker branch of the Callinos family. How much harder must it be for Coralie? If she felt she needed to keep her whole focus on her studies, I couldn't insist on romancing her merely for my own satisfaction.

No. It wasn't as if she had said we must have no contact. We could remain friends for now, as close as we had ever been, and I could begin a more subtle campaign. Perhaps by the time we finished our studies, she would be ready to hear the truth of my emotions.

Reluctantly I took another step back, to be rewarded with her smile.

"Come on," she said. "We'd better get moving or there won't be any food left."

I forced a smile, but as soon as she had turned to lead me from the dead end, it dropped from my face. I shook my head as I watched her move away from me. Two years suddenly felt like an eternity. It was going to be difficult to wait so long. Very difficult indeed.