

# Voice of Life

## Lucas – Midsummer

Elena came into view at the end of the corridor, moving with purpose although she hadn't seen me yet. As always, the unexpected sight of her took my breath away. I might have spent the best part of four years in close proximity to her, but I hadn't yet adjusted to seeing her here in the palace. Our betrothal would be officially announced at the Midsummer Ball in a few hours, but everyone knew it was coming. After the attack at the Academy and the end of the war with Kallorway, no one questioned that the Spoken Mage belonged here at the center of court and power.

But my heart still sometimes forgot that all my dreams had come true.

I stepped back into a shallow alcove so I could watch her for a little longer without being seen. One day, seeing her striding down the halls of the palace would feel as normal to me as seeing her in the Academy library, but I never wanted to forget the way I felt right now.

The initial euphoria of the end of the war was already fading, fractures appearing and rumbles of discontent sounding along the fault lines. With all the deep changes taking place across Ardann, every member of my family was being called on to use their training and experience to hold our kingdom together and forge a new future. And yet, to my surprise, the intrigues of power no longer felt like chains around my neck. Keeping my court mask in place had never been easier now that I knew there was someone I didn't have to wear it with. When Elena and I were alone, I never needed to fear being myself.

I had slept well the night before, and my body thrummed with energy. It was a small change, but noticeable. Ever since Declan's healing composition gifted me a portion of his energy, I had noticed the difference whenever I was at full reserves. Once upon a time, the increase in my power would have felt significant. But against the endless capacity of Elena, it paled into insignificance.

A smile slipped across my face as I watched my wife-to-be approach closer. She was the greatest wonder our world had ever seen. And while she claimed to envy my ability to prepare compositions in advance, I had seen her overcome every disadvantage time and time again. And if there was ever a need for prepared compositions, she had me. Together we had already proved we were an unstoppable team.

I was about to step out to surprise her, when someone else entered the corridor from a side passage. The woman hurried, head down, nearly barreling into Elena. When the newcomer looked up and saw who she'd almost collided with, an unmistakable look of distaste crossed her face.

I stiffened, anger washing over me. The woman looked vaguely familiar, but I couldn't recall a name. Once I had known every face at court, no matter how inconsequential, but four years away had taken a toll. Although, on further reflection, it was possible she wasn't from court at all but had traveled to the capital for the annual Midsummer celebrations. All mages in the kingdom were invited, and many of them flocked in for the chance to mingle with others outside their usual social circles.

My hands fisted at my sides. This mage—most likely a member of some minor family given my lack of recognition—came into my home at my family's invitation and disrespected the Spoken Mage. Elena had won her place here, and I would not stand by while other mages questioned that.

"Spoken Mage." The woman's greeting sounded more like an accusation, and I nearly burst from the shadows to stand at Elena's side. But someone else beat me to the place.

"Selina." Araminta's cool tone held neither welcome nor approbation. If anything, it held a faint hint of surprise. "I didn't realize you were traveling up this year. I thought the journey might be beyond your means."

Elena gave our old year mate—now a palace official answering directly to the Spoken Mage—a look of slight surprise before turning back to Selena.

"It's a pleasure to meet you," she said. "I see you already know both Araminta and me." She gave a light chuckle. "You're doing better than I am, in that case. I feel like I'm meeting a new face every time I turn around. But I'm grateful for the opportunity to meet so many at once, and I'm glad you were able to accept the invitation to come into Corrin. It's a historic year as we celebrate the end of such prolonged hostilities, and every mage should be present for the festivities, don't you think?"

The woman gave a slight, stiff bow. "If they are able, certainly. I would not have wanted to miss the occasion."

"No, indeed." Elena gave her a warm smile. "Please do make yourself at home, and have a wonderful Midsummer."

The woman, looking a little taken aback, gave the same stiff bow and hurried off down the corridor with a murmured farewell too quiet for me to catch.

As soon as she was out of sight, Elena rolled her eyes. "There's another one to add to the growing mental list you keep for me, Araminta."

"The list of your enemies or of the people whose names you should really remember but are definitely going to forget?" A laugh sounded in Araminta's voice.

Elena grimaced. "Both, I suspect." Then she chuckled. "I didn't know what a treasure I was hiring when I asked you to stick around and help me out, Araminta. Have I thanked you today for shadowing me everywhere I go?"

Araminta grinned. "Only twice, so you're falling a little behind."

"Please accept my humble apologies—and my thanks," Elena said gravely before grinning back. "I really had no idea you knew how to be so quelling, Araminta."

Araminta shook her head. "When everyone looks askance at your family, you learn how to respond to all the slights and rudeness that comes your way. I have no experience among the great families—you can't imagine how hopelessly out of place I felt in our year at the

Academy—but among the minor families, I’m used to fighting for every ounce of respect I possess.”

Elena shook her head, as the tension leaked out of my body. “I know a little something about feeling out of place. But with Leila to keep the commonborn in line, and you to know the background of every mage from a minor family, I’m doing better than I feared I would here at court. Now we just need to convince Dariela to join the team and we’ll have the great families covered too.”

She paused, a sad look crossing her face. “If they still accept her now.”

Araminta shrugged. “They don’t really accept me. I was weak to begin with, and now I’m sealed, just like Dariela. But that doesn’t mean I’ve forgotten a lifetime of knowledge about how they think and operate.” Her voice took on a rueful edge. “And you have enough power for the rest of us combined.”

Elena sighed. “For a group of people who have so much respect for raw power, mages seem to create a lot of problems that can’t be solved with it.”

I stepped forward, the burning need to wrap her in my arms overcoming me. She started and gave me a disapproving look.

“Lucas! Are you trying to give me a heart attack lurking around in the shadows like that?”

I smiled and pulled her into my arms. “Not at all. I was just enjoying the sight of my soon-to-be-betrothed putting one of the mageborn in their place.” I nodded a greeting at Araminta. “That poor woman had no idea how to respond to so much friendliness combined with such a sharp reminder of her place. There was no question who was the gracious host and who the insignificant visitor.”

Araminta smiled, but it looked a little sad. “Good afternoon, Your Highness. I only wish such interactions were less common. We’ve almost got a routine worked out now.”

I glanced with concern at Elena, but she shrugged it off. “It’s no more than I expected. Less, in some ways. And Araminta’s assistance is invaluable. She knows who everyone is, and she always knows what to say to put them off balance at the beginning.”

Araminta’s smile grew into a grin. “Is it indecorous of me to admit that I love it? Now that I’m a sealed official of the Spoken Mage and not a weak mage, trying to win a place, I don’t have to hold back. And it’s terribly satisfying.”

I laughed. “I can only imagine the feeling.” I wasn’t likely to ever be that free.

Discomfort still lingered to know that so many people were being unpleasant to Elena—and that she hadn’t mentioned it to me. But I shouldn’t have needed her to say anything. I knew what state the court—and all of mage society—was in. And glancing between the two women in front of me, I reminded myself that it had been a long time since first year when Elena had been oblivious and naïve, needing me to shelter her at every turn. Her choice to hire Araminta alone was proof of that.

Still, I squeezed Elena closer, just for a moment. She might not need me to shelter her from all of life’s blows, but that didn’t stop me from wishing I had the power and freedom to do it.

“We should have foreseen the minor families would have even more trouble adjusting to the new reality than the great families,” I said.

Araminta shrugged. “They have more to lose. The great families have spent many lifetimes amassing wealth and power, and it will take more than this social upheaval to unseat them.”

“Exactly,” I said, my voice low. “So we should have foreseen it.”

Elena frowned at me. “Stop blaming yourself for not being able to predict everything. It all happened fast, remember? Your family had a lot to oversee.”

I sighed internally and shook myself. “Never mind all of that. It’s Midsummer, and a time for celebrating. Shouldn’t the two of you be…” I waved my hand vaguely. I was familiar with a lifetime’s worth of court maneuvering, but I knew nothing about female preparations for balls.

Elena giggled. “Yes, we’re on our way to get dressed now.”

“Well, don’t let me hold you up, then,” I said, but my arms didn’t release her.

She rolled her eyes and pushed me away. “Remember that we don’t have to pretend disinterest anymore. You’ll see me soon enough. We can dance every dance together if you want.”

I gave a slight grimace, and she sighed.

“Maybe not every dance. I suppose you’ll have to complete at least some obligatory dances with important people at court.”

I looked down at her. “And don’t forget yourself, Spoken Mage. You’re as important as I am these days.”

“Ugh.” She pushed me away with even more determination. “I can’t imagine who would want to dance with me.”

I shook my head. “Don’t let the disapproving ones weigh you down. Not all mages have forgotten who ended the war. And there are plenty who are fascinated by your power and strength. They understand that you’re an asset to our kingdom.”

She made a face. “And some are scared. You’ve heard the mutters—that no one person should have so much power.”

I nearly pulled her back into my arms, but someone came racing down the corridor, thrusting herself between the three of us.

“There you are! I’ve been waiting forever!” Coralie wound her arm through Elena’s and began to tug her friend down the corridor. “Come on, Araminta.” She looked back over her shoulder at the third girl, her eyes laden with recrimination. “How are we going to be ready on time when the two of you don’t show up? Elena needs to look perfect tonight!”

Elena threw an apologetic look at me over her shoulder as she disappeared down the hall, but I just grinned after her. Her friends could provide an altogether different kind of comfort and shelter from what I could, and they had long since proven themselves loyal, no matter what.

My thoughts strayed to just how Elena was going to look tonight once her friends were finished, but I firmly pulled them elsewhere. I had preparations of my own for the evening,

both in terms of grooming and of politics, and thoughts of Elena had a tendency to prove far too distracting.

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We had danced once before as a matched pair—in the makeshift ballroom of a war front, draped in red and black, the colors of war. The girl in my arms now matched me just as perfectly, but this time we wore triumphant red and gold, the colors of royalty.

Satisfaction roared within me as I held Elena close and didn't care who saw us. In less than an hour, our betrothal would be announced and our connection would be official.

"You look like a princess," I told her.

She actually grimaced before glancing down at her elaborate gown. "I don't disgrace you, then? I thought Coralie and Araminta did a good job, but it still feels a bit foreign." She glanced around the rest of the dance floor. "Do you remember the first time we met here in this ballroom?"

I chuckled. "How could I forget? You nearly plummeted to your death from a balcony."

She shook her head, although a smile lingered on her face. "It feels like a lifetime ago."

"It was all worth it, though," I murmured. "All the pain and the waiting."

"And don't forget the danger," she interjected.

"Yes, even that. Everything we've been through since then was worth it to be back here again with you beside me as my equal."

She looked up at me with warmth in her eyes, but something else lurking behind them as well. Something thoughtful.

"That was the first time I'd really seen you in a royal setting. Even back then, when we hardly spoke, I had the sense you weren't happy. Are you happy now, Lucas?"

My arms tightened around her, a laugh tinging my voice. "Deliriously happy, of course. Could you doubt it?"

She smiled reluctantly, before giving me a stern look. "No, I mean the question seriously. Are you happy now, here at court?"

"I'm happy with you," I said, continuing quickly when I could see she wanted to protest again. "And that is a serious answer. As for court..." I frowned as I considered the question.

My family loved me, I knew that, but neither my sister nor I had ever been encouraged to put much thought into our own happiness. My dedication toward my family and our kingdom had been absolute until Elena came along to shake everything. I hadn't been prepared for my heart to make such an effort to overrule my head.

My arms tightened around her again as I thought how many times and how many different ways I had nearly lost her. And yet, here we were. My head and my heart at peace again. But it wasn't like before. Elena was right. I hadn't been happy then—not really. But now?

Nothing was easy at court at the moment. It probably wouldn't be easy for a long time—if ever. But I didn't need easy. I had achieved my previous life purpose of seeing the wasteful war with Kallorway ended, and I had achieved something I never dreamed possible—a true

love outside the machinations of politics and court and power. My life was more full than I could have imagined four years ago, and if I might not always feel happy, I was content.

“Happiness may come and go,” I said, finally answering her question. “But what matters is that we have love. And that’s what I didn’t realize I was missing three and a half years ago.” I paused to chuckle. “I’m sure you won’t make my life easy. The last four years have certainly proven that. But you love me—and our people—with a fire that is nothing like the cold duty that used to motivate me. That’s what’s changed, and that’s what makes all the difference. My love for you makes court bearable, and your love for our people will make me a better prince. How could I ask for more than that?”

She gave a little sigh and rested her head against my chest, sparking warmth throughout my body. Elena, the one and only Spoken Mage, had chosen to direct her fiercest love toward me. I would never stop marveling at the wonder of it, and I would never stop trying to make our world into a place more worthy of the love she poured out on it. And one day every member of court would accept and value her. Even if it took my whole life to achieve it. It was a task worth dedicating my life to.