

Legacy of the Curse Bonus Epilogue

By Deborah Grace White

Eamon

Eamon tried not to fidget as he rose to his feet beside his mother. This was Jocelyn's day, and he was happy for her.

He was.

He wasn't lonely at the thought of losing his sister to Valoria. He wasn't heartsick over the girl who would walk down the aisle in front of his twin. He wasn't consumed by the fear that some of the watching crowd might know of his part in the near-disaster that had recently befallen his kingdom. He wasn't any of those things.

He was happy. Truly.

His eyes were drawn to the dais at the front of the long throne room of Valoria's castle. Prince Kincaid—who would be his brother-in-law in minutes—certainly showed no sign of mixed emotions. His face shone with excitement as the music swelled. Eamon couldn't deny that Kincaid looked every inch the prince in his ceremonial tunic of Valorian purple and silver. He was tall and handsome, his auburn hair brushed back in uncharacteristic neatness for the occasion. And he was besotted with Jocelyn, no one could doubt that for a second.

It wasn't that Eamon didn't like the match. The original intention may have been for an alliance between Jocelyn and Crown Prince Ormond, Kincaid's older brother, but both royal families seemed perfectly content with the new arrangement. And quite apart from the benefit to Kyona of such an alliance with Valoria, it was clear that Kincaid and Jocelyn would be very happy together. In fact, Eamon had never seen his sister so happy as she was when she was with Kincaid.

It pained him to admit it, but his own misguided attempts to help Jocelyn live with her secret power had done much more harm than good. It had taken Kincaid no time at all to see to the heart of her power, and realize its potential for good instead of evil. And not much more time to convince Jocelyn of it, and to help her overcome her fear and free herself from the shackles she had imposed on herself for so many years.

The Valorian prince deserved his bride, and Eamon had no doubt that Kincaid would take good care of Jocelyn. Despite their rocky start, Eamon and Kincaid actually got on very well now.

They had a great deal in common, and it was hard not to warm to someone who Jocelyn thought so well of, and who thought so highly of Jocelyn. There was every reason to think that the royal couple would regularly make long visits to Kynton, so it wasn't as though Eamon would never see his sister again.

But still, it was a far cry from having the constant companionship of his twin. They had always been together, two halves of a whole. And now she would be living far away, in a different kingdom, with a husband and a new life to occupy her. She would miss her brother, he was sure, but not all that much. Not when she had Kincaid.

And what would he do with himself? Jocelyn didn't need him anymore. And not just because of Kincaid. She didn't need him to help her manage her power now, or protect her from discovery. Until she had mastered her power, Eamon had never realized how big a part of his life it was to look after his sister. To try to reduce the impact of her words, to be the one she came to in order to undo any damage she had accidentally inflicted.

He had wanted to protect her, but all he had done was to help her muzzle herself. And now he didn't know his role. And the worst of it was that he had never thought he needed help the way she did—he had always been much more in control of his own power, and he had never run to her to fix a mistake. But in the end he had made a much worse mistake than Jocelyn ever had, and it had been only thanks to her intervention that he—and the kingdom—had been saved from total disaster.

He couldn't deny that his pride was stung.

His eyes passed from Kincaid on the dais to the other end of the long aisle, and all thoughts of his sister fled. Jocelyn's day or not, the girl now stepping gracefully into sight occupied his mind much more powerfully than his twin ever could.

Luciana was always breathtaking, but today it almost hurt to look at her. She was immaculately dressed in a sweeping gown of lilac silk, fanning out from her slim form magnificently. The color set off the warm cinnamon of her skin to perfection, and her dark hair was elaborately piled on top of her head. She held her head high, but Eamon knew her well enough to read the nerves behind her composure. She must be overwhelmed to be paraded in front of so many people, most of them strangers. It would be daunting at the best of times, and Lucy hadn't been quite herself the last two months.

Not since Eamon had betrayed her trust and put her in the terrible position of killing her own uncle in order to save her little brother.

His heart twisted as he told himself for the twentieth time not to think about that today. It was Jocelyn's wedding day, the day she had awaited impatiently for weeks, and he should be focusing on her.

But it was hard to focus on anything but Lucy as she swept down the aisle toward him. It was impossible not to think that it could be—should be—they making promises today. If only he hadn't been such a fool, too full of pride and mistaken belief in his own certainty to realize he was being manipulated, then maybe it would be. He had always been far too sure of her affection, and of their future. He had been far too sure of everything, especially himself. He had known Lucy cared for him, and he had never doubted that they would eventually marry, and be as happy together as his own parents were.

But all that was changed now. He had hurt her, deeply. The weeks that had passed since the incident at Raldon had only served to highlight just how deeply. Everyone else who knew the truth had forgiven him, far more readily than he deserved, but Luciana had shown no sign of thawing. He

wondered miserably—as he had so many times before—how long she would punish him before she forgave him, too.

She kept her eyes straight ahead as she floated past him, the slight twitch of her shoulders telling him that she was as aware of his presence as he always was of hers.

He had a terrible feeling that she would never forgive him.

Eamon couldn't help his eyes following Lucy all the way to the front, and it was with difficulty that he pulled his gaze from her to watch the arrival of the next figure to flounce down the aisle. Princess Lavinia, Valoria's only princess, looked scarcely less excited than her brother. Eamon had met the fourteen-year-old princess only a couple of times, but he knew from Jocelyn that she kept her family on their toes. She was no less elegantly dressed than Lucy, but she couldn't quite match Lucy's quiet grace, not with the bounce in her steps as she moved down the long room.

According to Jocelyn, Lavinia was extremely fond of her soon-to-be sister-in-law. Jocelyn had confided in her twin that she was worried about disappointing her new parents-in-law's expectations. She had the impression that they expected the older princess to be a good influence on the volatile Lavinia. Jocelyn said that she liked Lavinia's vivacity too much to really want to curb the younger girl. But Eamon suspected that for all her protests, Jocelyn's presence would probably have a very beneficial effect on her new sister.

Princess Lavinia tossed her auburn curls as she took her place beside Lucy, sending her brother a mischievous grin. But Kincaid wasn't looking at Lavinia. His eyes were fixed on the other end of the long aisle, and the expression on his face made it unnecessary for Eamon to turn in order to identify who was finally approaching.

He turned anyway of course. For a moment even he felt his spirits lift, his melancholy forgotten. Jocelyn was resplendent in her bridal gown. Soft folds of material floated around her, and jewels twinkled from her golden curls. Her train fanned behind her, embroidered with tiny flowers. She clung affectionately to their father's arm, but it was clear she didn't need to lean on him for support. Her steps were graceful and confident. She had grown into herself so much over recent months. Gone were the frustrated silences, the self-imposed reserve, the constant fearfulness in the back of her eyes.

Eamon heard his mother give a barely audible sniff beside him, and he sent her a quick smile. Her eyes looked a little glazed, but she returned his smile serenely, her queenly calm intact. Unless Eamon was mistaken, his father's eyes also looked a little shinier than usual, but King Calinnae's expression was everything it should be. He looked strong and poised, his gait dignified as he walked his daughter toward the throne with which his own kingdom was now to be allied.

Eamon felt a small thrill of pride as a whisper of admiration went through the crowd at the appearance of the bride and her father. He liked to think that the people of Valoria knew what an advantage their alliance with Kyona would be to their kingdom.

Glancing behind him, he saw Uncle Jonan and Aunt Scarlett with their three sons. Not under such scrutiny as the Kyonan queen, Aunt Scarlett was openly wiping tears from her eyes as she watched Jocelyn approach the now-beaming Kincaid. Uncle Jonan was smiling broadly himself, although Eamon had the impression that the satisfaction in his gaze was directed as much toward his daughter on the dais as to the groom waiting eagerly near her.

And Kincaid certainly looked eager. From the way he was holding himself, Eamon half expected him to run down the aisle and meet his bride halfway. But of course he didn't. He waited very properly, contenting himself with locking eyes with the approaching princess, the two of them

sharing a look so personal that it made Eamon want to look away. He had always been the one who knew Jocelyn better than anyone. It was strange to realize that would no longer be true.

But he couldn't help but feel buoyed by the joy on Jocelyn's face as she walked past her mother and her brother, and as her father gave her hand symbolically to the young Valorian prince. Jocelyn was happy, and that was the main thing.

The ceremony was long and formal, and Eamon quickly lost interest in the endless flow of words coming from the Valorian master of ceremonies. He couldn't help his eyes straying frequently to Luciana, who was standing alert and tranquil, her eyes on the speaker, and every appearance of interest on her face.

How tired she must be, having to stand so stiffly for all this time. Not that she showed it—her command of herself was equal to that of any of the royals present. Eamon thought with a familiar pang what an exquisite princess—what a capable queen—she would make. It took great self-possession not to show self-consciousness with so many eyes watching her.

And there were many eyes watching her. As beautiful as Jocelyn was on her wedding day, it was simply inevitable that Luciana would attract attention.

As if it wasn't enough that she was ravishingly beautiful, she was also unusual and exotic due to her mixed heritage. It was still so rare to see a South Lander living in the North Lands, let alone one close enough to the Kyonan royal family to be an attendant at the princess's wedding. Eamon was all too aware of the effect Lucy had on men when they saw her for the first time, and it was all he could do to keep a scowl off his face as he saw more than one Valorian attendee staring at her with undisguised awe.

One such person was Lord Henrik, Kincaid's closest friend and his only attendant other than his brother, Crown Prince Ormond. Eamon knew that it wasn't the first time Henrik had seen Lucy, but strangely enough that didn't make Eamon feel any better about the admiration in Henrik's eyes as they rested on her for far too much of the ceremony.

Eamon returned his gaze resolutely to the bride and groom, reminding himself gloomily that he had no actual right to take offense at anyone making eyes at Lucy, however much his heart might tell him that she belonged with him.

He was a little amused to see that to his practiced eye, Jocelyn wasn't paying much more attention to the master of ceremonies' speech than the rest of the bridal party. She was smiling up at Kincaid from under her eyelashes, and he was unashamedly grinning down at her. As Eamon watched, Jocelyn gave a strange little flick of her wrist, and Kincaid's eyes were drawn to something. The prince's grin broadened, and he looked like he was holding back a laugh.

Eamon leaned forward slightly, frowning in bewilderment as he tried to see what the couple found so amusing. But all he could see on Jocelyn's wrist was a favorite bracelet of hers. He knew it hadn't been purchased for the wedding, because he recognized it as one their parents had given her a couple of years before. She loved that bracelet, and often wore it, but he was a little surprised to see her wearing it on her wedding day. The rest of her petite form was hung with much more costly jewelry, diamonds glinting from her ears and throat and hair, along with sapphires to represent Kyona's royal house and amethysts to represent Valoria's.

If he was honest, the simple bracelet, pretty as it was, looked quite out of place amongst its more exalted cousins. But for whatever reason, both the bride and groom seemed to take great delight from its presence. Kincaid's grin softened into something more intimate as he looked down at his bride, and Eamon hastily returned his gaze to the master of ceremonies. He was glad that

Jocelyn was happy and all that, but there was a limit to how much he could handle watching someone moon over his sister.

When the ceremony finally ended, Kincaid barely waited for the official prompt before kissing his bride, a little too enthusiastically for the setting in Eamon's opinion. Not that Jocelyn seemed to mind. Eamon's eyes again slid involuntarily across to Lucy, unable to help imagining what might have been. He was unprepared to find her gaze similarly turned toward him. For a second their eyes locked, captivated by the intensity of the moment.

For the first time since he had told her he was the one behind the attack on Raldon, her face wasn't closed and impassive. He could read her heartbreak as surely as he could feel his own, and he knew that he wasn't the only one who was thinking not of the happy scene before them but of the ruin of their own precious dreams for the future.

Eamon's breath caught in his throat at the intensity with which Lucy's eyes burned into his. In that moment it felt like if he could only speak to her, touch her, he could actually *reach* her. Then Kincaid and Jocelyn broke off from their prolonged embrace, and the throne room erupted in celebratory noise. Lucy returned her attention abruptly to her best friend, an unconvincing smile spreading across her exquisite face, and the moment was lost.

The formalities following the ceremony were tedious, but eventually they had to end, and at long last Eamon found himself seated at a long table. He eyed the sumptuous spread of food before him with relief. Regardless of the various emotions swirling through him, he knew exactly what to do with himself during this part of the festivities.

The same couldn't be said two hours later. The food had been cleared away, and the dancing had commenced. Eamon had done his duty, leading the young Princess Lavinia for the first dance. He had taken some satisfaction from the blissful happiness of Jocelyn's expression as she danced with her new husband, but it was eclipsed by the gloom with which he watched Luciana dancing with Prince Ormond. Even the stiff Valorian crown prince looked unusually animated as he held *Eamon's* Lucy in his arms, leading her through the dance with a smile of admiration on his face.

Princess Lavinia didn't seem to find much enjoyment in her dance with Kyona's prince, and it wasn't surprising that she didn't linger to chat once the music ended. Eamon felt slightly guilty as she disappeared across the room with a swish of her skirts, heading for a group of other girls her age. He hadn't even realized how distracted he had been by watching Lucy's dance, but it occurred to him now that he had neglected his partner shamefully. He had barely said a word to her. He was supposed to be representing his kingdom, and Lavinia had been assigned to him for the first dance because of her rank as Valoria's princess.

He saw her toss her curls as she joined a group of well-dressed and excited girls. He felt another jolt of guilt as she shrugged her shoulders in response to a question he couldn't hear. Now he thought about it, Princess Lavinia had been far from the vivacious chatterbox he had been led to expect.

He remembered Jocelyn telling him that Lavinia was beyond excited about the wedding festivities, given she was generally thought too young to attend such events. Dancing with Kyona's prince was probably something she had looked forward to, and Eamon had no doubt been disappointing.

Well, he reflected, as his gaze returned inevitably to Luciana, and all thought of Princess Lavinia fled from his mind, he was becoming quite adept at disappointing young ladies. Unlike Lavinia, Lucy had lingered with her partner even now that the dance had ended. Eamon wondered what she would say if he asked her to dance. A sudden shot of nerves passed through him as he

abruptly decided to take the chance. But before he could take so much as a step in her direction, she was claimed by an overly eager Lord Henrik.

Eamon clenched a fist as he watched her accept with every appearance of delight. Turning away, he seized a drink from a nearby table, trying to look as though he was standing out of the dancing by choice, and not because the girl of his dreams was otherwise occupied. But his irritation only increased as he watched Lucy sweep through dance after dance with a series of clearly starstruck Valorian nobles, her smile as dazzling as her flawless figure.

He shouldn't be surprised that she was enjoying the attention, he thought wryly. Lucy had always loved a ball, and taken much more delight in fancy dresses and compliments than Jocelyn ever had. But Eamon had always known himself to be the main focus of her excitement, and never before would it have occurred to him to fear rejection when seeking her out for a dance.

"Contrary to popular opinion, you can't actually kill someone with a look."

Eamon started at the familiar voice, his expression slightly sheepish as he turned to face Uncle Jonan.

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean," he said with what dignity he could muster.

Uncle Jonan chuckled, but the sound was a little sad. "Don't you think that as Lucy's father, *I'm* the most entitled to glare daggers at all the hotblooded young men vying for her attention?"

Eamon just shrugged, uncomfortable. He knew, of course, that Lucy's parents had been as aware of their daughter's budding romance with Kyona's prince as Eamon's parents were. And that they were all of them far too aware of Lucy's dramatic change in attitude. But he had never discussed the matter openly with his own parents, let alone with Lucy's, and he had no desire to have a candid conversation about his heartbreak with the man standing next to him.

But Uncle Jonan seemed oblivious to Eamon's reluctance. His eyes were still on his daughter as he sighed. "It was just the same with her mother, you know. Every idiot in the Balenan court was falling all over himself for her attention, and every passerby on the street could barely keep his eyes off her."

He rolled his eyes. "And that was despite thinking she was heartless and empty-headed. Lucy terrifies me even more because everyone can see she's so sweet." He scowled. "And far too beautiful. Honestly, the three boys put together haven't given me half the anxiety Lucy has." He gave Eamon a sage look. "A man might want his wife to be beautiful, but trust me, you want your daughter to be average at best."

"Well you fell short on that ambition," said Eamon dryly before he could help himself. He had no idea why Uncle Jonan was confiding all this in him, but it was hard to care much. His gaze was as focused on Lucy as her father's was, and he couldn't help but narrow his eyes as Prince Ormond approached her for a second dance.

"Yes, I did," said Uncle Jonan with a touch of humor. He scanned the room. "I think the groom is about the only young man present who isn't making a fool of himself."

Eamon followed Uncle Jonan's gaze to see Kincaid, dancing very responsibly with a middle-aged Valorian woman who was obviously of high rank and importance. Eamon barely restrained a smile. Kincaid's actions might be correct, but his face betrayed him. His gaze wandered constantly to his bride, dancing now with Lord Henrik, and he looked almost as disgruntled as Eamon felt to be separated even temporarily from the woman he really wanted for a partner.

If only Eamon could be sure his separation from Lucy was temporary.

“And I’m including you in that.” Uncle Jonan’s dry words pulled Eamon from his reverie. He had to search his memory for a moment to figure out what the older man was charging him with.

“I don’t think you can accuse me of making a fool of myself over your daughter tonight, Uncle Jonan,” he protested. He hadn’t been near her all evening.

“That’s exactly what I’m accusing you of,” said Uncle Jonan curtly. “You’re being a bigger fool than any of them. You do realize that you could ask her to dance yourself, don’t you? Instead of mentally murdering everyone who does.”

Eamon raised an eyebrow. “You know, Uncle Jonan, for a man who claims to be terrified of the idea of young men pursuing his daughter, you seem pretty eager to push me in her direction.”

“Yes, well, I’m not too pleased to see all these Valorians fawning over her,” Uncle Jonan admitted. His eyes turned up the room, to where the Kyonan king and queen were in conversation with their Valorian counterparts. “Cal and Elnora are taking it pretty calmly, at least from the outside, but if I’m honest I have no desire to see my daughter move to another kingdom. I used to think Kynton was too far away from home, let alone Bryford.”

Eamon swallowed, not sure how to respond to this veiled reference to everyone’s previous assumption that Luciana would spend her life in Kyona’s capital, with him.

“And I know you,” Uncle Jonan added candidly. “I don’t know the first thing about any of these puppies, and whether they’re trustworthy. I’ve known you since you were born, and I know the strength of your character. I’d rather you were dangling after Lucy than any of these idiots.”

“That’s generous of you to say,” said Eamon dryly, torn between embarrassment and amusement. “Given recent events.”

“You’re being too hard on yourself,” said Uncle Jonan. “I won’t deny I was ready to strangle you at the time, but the very fact that I know you almost as well as my own sons is what made it obvious to me that Joss was telling the truth about you being under some kind of unnatural influence. What you were part of was completely contrary to everything we know of you, and Lucy knows it as well as the rest of us, deep down.”

“Then why will she barely look at me?” asked Eamon desperately, abandoning the last shred of pretense that he wasn’t going to discuss his heartbreak over Lucy with Uncle Jonan.

Uncle Jonan sighed. “Don’t ask me to unravel the female mind. I know she was hit hard by everything that happened, harder than really makes sense to me.” He shrugged helplessly. “Scarlett says it’s not surprising, and to be fair, she knows plenty about loss and grief. According to her, Lucy probably didn’t dislike the idea of being the damsel in distress, and it’s not easy for her to recover from turning for rescue to her knight in shining armor, only to find that, you know...”

“He was actually the ogre,” finished Eamon miserably.

“Exactly,” said Uncle Jonan, sounding like he was trying not to chuckle. But his voice became serious again as he continued. “I might not be the perceptive one like Scarlett, but even I can tell that being estranged from you is making Lucy unhappy. And I don’t like to see her unhappy. She’ll be lonely enough as it is, with Joss moving so far away.”

“Another thing I’m trying not to think about,” sighed Eamon, watching Jocelyn’s progress with the dashing Lord Henrik. At least if the annoyingly charming nobleman was dancing with Eamon’s sister, it meant he wasn’t dancing with Lucy. “Lucy’s not the only one losing her best friend.” He looked back at Uncle Jonan. “And it’s hardly me you need to convince about a reconciliation.”

Uncle Jonan gave him a look. “If you think the one who’s angry is going to make the first move, then there’s no hope for either of you, and I wash my hands of the whole affair.”

Eamon gave a half-hearted smile. Uncle Jonan was probably right that he should just go and talk to Lucy, but it was hard to make himself do it in front of such a huge room full of witnesses to his potential humiliation.

“That’s more than enough relationship advice from me,” said Uncle Jonan bracingly. “I don’t think the role fits me—it’s more Scarlett’s thing. And here she is now,” he added warmly.

The satisfaction was evident in his gaze as it rested on his approaching wife, and Eamon could understand why. Lucy’s good looks didn’t come from her father. Not that Uncle Jonan was an ugly man, but Aunt Scarlett was as striking as her daughter. The older woman looked glorious tonight, and far too young to be Lucy’s mother.

“There you are, Scar,” said Uncle Jonan as she reached them. “I was just thinking of going to talk to Cal, commiserate with him on having his daughter snatched away, that kind of thing. Care to join me?”

“Jo,” said Aunt Scarlett reproachfully, glancing quickly around to check that no one was listening.

Uncle Jonan rolled his eyes. “My mistake. What I meant to say was, would you like to come and seek an audience with His Magnificent Majesty King Calinnae Dragonfriend?”

Aunt Scarlett ignored her husband, turning to Eamon with a softened expression. “Good evening, Eamon.”

“Good evening Aunt Scarlett,” said Eamon hastily. “Don’t let me keep you.” He was probably being uncivil, but he had a feeling that Aunt Scarlett’s sympathy and advice would be even more embarrassing than Uncle Jonan’s. As her husband had said, she was far too perceptive.

Her expression was more understanding than offended as Eamon moved away. The music was just ending, and he had decided to steel himself and ask Lucy to dance with him. Surely if they were dancing then she would have to speak to him. But to his chagrin, he wasn’t quick enough. He was only halfway across the room when Lord Henrik materialized at her side. Eamon stopped mid-stride, right in front of a table laden with food. The blasted nobleman must have virtually run from his dance with Jocelyn in order to reach Lucy so quickly. Eamon ground his teeth.

Casting his eyes around, he spotted Jocelyn. If she had been abandoned by her previous partner with unflattering haste, she didn’t seem to mind. Kincaid had claimed her as quickly as Henrik had claimed Lucy, clearly delighted to be done with duty and free to return to his bride. Jocelyn appeared to have followed Henrik’s progress across the room, however. To Eamon’s embarrassment, her eyes flicked from Henrik’s new dance partner straight to Eamon, as if she had predicted to perfection what his reaction would be to Henrik’s behavior.

The twins’ eyes locked, and Eamon felt heat rise up his neck at the rueful sympathy in his sister’s eyes. Apparently Lucy didn’t need to actually turn him down for his humiliation to be on display. He turned to the food table, trying to look as though he had walked there merely to help himself to refreshments.

“You look about as happy as I feel.”

Eamon turned in surprise. He hadn’t even noticed that he wasn’t alone at the table. Princess Lavinia was also looking at Lucy and Henrik, who had now begun to move gracefully across the floor, and her expression was strangely familiar. It took Eamon a moment to realize that it was because he had been wearing the same expression himself half the night. He hid a smile. He

supposed it wasn't exactly surprising if the young princess had a fondness for her brother's dashing best friend.

"You're not enjoying the festivities?" he asked mildly. Princess Lavinia shot him an unimpressed look, and it was all he could do to keep a straight face.

"You'd think being a princess would guarantee me a partner for every dance," she said artlessly. "But it's been more like half the dances. Evidently I'm not as irresistible as princesses are supposed to be."

"More likely it's that only half the people here want to take advantage of your status," said Eamon soothingly. "Perhaps the other half are intimidated by it."

Lavinia cocked her head to one side, looking faintly reassured. "I hadn't thought of that." She sighed. "Although I don't think I can use that explanation when it comes to..."

She trailed off, her eyes fixed again on Henrik and Lucy. All of a sudden the young Valorian princess looked up at Eamon, a sparkle of mischief in her eyes.

"If I was a few years older, I'd suggest we flirt outrageously with each other to try to make them both jealous."

The unexpectedly candid suggestion surprised a genuine laugh out of Eamon. As much as he didn't love Lavinia's blatant implication that he was mooning over Lucy, he couldn't help but be disarmed by the readiness with which she acknowledged that she was doing the same over Henrik.

"If you were a few years older," he said with a grin, "I'd probably agree."

Lavinia made a little noise of triumph, a grin spreading over her face. "You seemed as stiff and serious as Ormond when we danced, but I knew you had to be more fun somewhere underneath if you're Jocelyn's twin."

Eamon chuckled. "I see Jocelyn didn't exaggerate when she told me you're a handful."

Lavinia tossed her hair coquettishly. "Whatever you've heard about me, I can guarantee you none of it was exaggerated."

Eamon shook his head, amused. "I'm sorry I was such a disappointing partner to dance with. If you give me another chance, I'll attempt to make amends."

"I'm all for second chances," said Lavinia eagerly. Her foot was already tapping in time to the music.

Eamon swept her onto the floor, trying to banish Lucy from his mind and catch a little of Lavinia's contagious enthusiasm.

"You dance delightfully, at all events," he said merrily as they swirled across the room. "How old are you, anyway?"

"I'm almost fifteen," she said, a definite note of defiance in her voice.

"Clearly old enough to be at galas," said Eamon solemnly, remembering what Jocelyn had told him about the flighty young princess.

"That's what I keep saying!" she cried, and he chuckled in spite of his best efforts. "You're teasing me," said Lavinia suspiciously. "Well, I don't care if you are." She lifted her chin. "Being teased by a handsome foreign prince is much more entertaining than standing by the food table."

"You flatter me," said Eamon politely, his sense of humor tickled by the incorrigible princess.

“No I don’t,” said Lavinia mischievously, casting a demure look up at him from under long dark eyelashes. “You’re *extremely* handsome.”

For a moment Eamon was disconcerted, unsure how to respond to the sudden increase in flirtation. She might be young, but Lavinia was clearly practiced in making the most of her charms. And in fact, she seemed somehow much older all of a sudden. Then an almost imperceptible flicker in her gaze distracted him, and he realized that they were swirling right past Lucy and Henrik, who seemed to have become aware of the rival couple.

“I’ll treasure the compliment all the more, coming from such a beautiful young lady,” returned Eamon outrageously, in his most gallant voice.

Lavinia was clearly delighted, but nothing could be more modest than her tone as she responded, “You’ll turn my head, Your Highness.”

Eamon waited until the dance had moved them a decent distance from their intended audience before shaking his head at his young partner. “You are shameless, Princess.”

Lavinia grinned. “So I’m frequently told.”

“Your parents have my sympathy,” said Eamon wryly. *As does Jocelyn, if she’s expected to tame you*, he added in his head.

When the dance ended, Eamon deposited Lavinia back near the food table, with every intention of once again seeking Lucy out. But he hadn’t even turned away when Lavinia’s face lit up at something over his shoulder.

“I think it might have worked, a little,” she said, sounding delighted. Eamon turned around hopefully, but his heart fell when he saw that it was only Henrik making his way toward them, Lucy nowhere to be seen. He was surprised that Henrik had abandoned her so quickly. He wondered if the Valorian nobleman really had hurried over because he didn’t like to see Lavinia apparently flirting with the foreign prince. Lavinia, clearly optimistic, seemed to think so. But Lord Henrik’s greeting didn’t exactly support the theory.

“You look all dolled up tonight, Lavvy,” he said jovially, looking Lavinia up and down much the way one might assess a horse. “Come have a jig with me before some overbearing chaperone comes to shoo you off to bed.”

It was almost comical the way Lavinia’s face fell at this unromantic offer from the usually charming young man. Her eyes flicked to Eamon, and he could tell that she was tempted to turn Henrik down to punish him for his lack of gallantry. Eamon gave her a half shrug, as if to say, ‘take what you can get’.

With a sigh, Lavinia accepted Lord Henrik’s offered hand, and the two of them disappeared into the throng, leaving Eamon once again alone. The evening had begun to feel interminable. He’d thought the engagement was too short, gloomy as he was about losing his twin, but now he would be relieved when the wedding was finally over.

“Having fun?”

He turned at the teasing question. As if summoned by his thoughts, Jocelyn had appeared.

“More to the point, are *you* having fun?” Eamon asked.

Jocelyn gave him a look, well aware that he was deflecting the question, but she clearly couldn’t help the slow smile that spread over her face. “I am, actually.”

“No need to sound so apologetic,” said Eamon humorously. “It is your wedding, after all. I think you’re supposed to enjoy it.”

“I know,” said Jocelyn softly. “I just wish you weren’t having such a hard time.” She gave him a candid look. “You’ve been watching Lucy all night, and you look like a grumpy bear.”

Eamon just shrugged. He had nothing to say about the topic that Jocelyn didn’t already know.

“Do you want me to, you know...” Jocelyn shot him a mischievous grin, along with a spurt of power that Eamon was much more adept at recognizing since the training he and Jocelyn had done together in the last couple of months. “Try to change her mind?”

Eamon chuckled in spite of himself, knowing full well that Jocelyn was joking. “Does it make me a terrible person if I admit that I’m tempted?”

She smiled. “I think it would be a worse crime to deny it.” She turned to him expectantly. “Aren’t you going to dance with the bride?”

“Of course,” he said, holding out his hand and summoning a smile. It was the last thing he felt like doing, but this was Jocelyn’s day. He needed to stop being such a wet blanket. He cast his eyes idly around the room as he led Jocelyn to join the other dancers. His gaze caught on a man deep in conversation with Crown Prince Ormond, and he frowned. The man’s coloring clearly identified him as a South Lander, and Eamon was surprised he hadn’t noticed the foreigner before now.

“Who’s that?” he asked Jocelyn. “Talking to your new brother-in-law? Surely there isn’t another Balenan visiting Bryford? I thought the Valorians were pretty frosty toward Balenol since the whole Scanlon situation.”

That was an understatement. From what Eamon understood, after Scanlon died, everyone in the Valorian court whom the Balenan had influenced came to their senses as rapidly as Eamon had done. The first they heard of the change was when an express sent by the horrified Valorian king and queen reached Kynton, with anxious inquiries as to the wellbeing of their younger son and the Kyonan princess he had rescued from Scanlon.

Eamon could only imagine the emotions of the Valorian royals upon realizing that not only had the visiting princess been spirited right out of their castle by their own guest, but that they had not even taken her disappearance seriously enough to properly search for her. It was a very good thing that Kincaid had been determined enough to disobey his father and ride after Scanlon immediately.

“Who?” Jocelyn asked, following his gaze. “Oh, he’s not Balenan. He’s from Thorania. He arrived in Kynton shortly after we left, apparently, and followed us here. He came to see Father.”

“Thorania?” Eamon frowned at the mention of the kingdom immediately to the east of Balenol, in the South Lands. He didn’t know much about the place. “What does he want from Father?”

“I don’t know,” said Jocelyn, raising a humorous eyebrow. “I’ve been a bit preoccupied with other things.”

Eamon gave a perfunctory smile, his eyes still on the Thoranian man. He was well-dressed, with all the air of a royal official. Eamon couldn’t remember anyone from Thorania ever seeking an audience with his father before.

“Why don’t you ask Father now?” Jocelyn prompted, drawing his attention away to a commanding figure approaching them through the crowd. The two of them stopped their dance as King Calinnae reached them, smiling wistfully at his daughter.

“The night’s almost over, and I haven’t claimed my dance with the bride,” he said. “You don’t mind me cutting in, do you Eamon?”

“Not in the least,” said Eamon, a little too readily. He relinquished his sister’s hand, only too happy to retreat from the dance. He watched the pair for a moment, but their farewell dance was a bit too bittersweet for his current mood. He saw his mother standing not far away, and made his way over to her, greeting her wearily. If she was as exhausted by the festivities as he was, it didn’t show.

“Jocelyn told me that there’s someone here from Thorania to see Father,” he said as soon as she’d greeted him.

Queen Elnora sighed. “Yes. You’d think the man would realize our only daughter’s wedding isn’t the best time, but apparently not.”

“What does he want?” Eamon prompted.

She frowned to herself before answering. “He wanted to speak about the slaves. Or their descendants, rather.”

“What about them?” Eamon asked, surprised. “What does that have to do with Thorania?”

“Apparently there are descendants of Kyonans living in Thorania even now. It seems not all the slaves who escaped over the years perished attempting to cross the ocean back to Kyona. There’s a possibility some of them may want assistance relocating to Kyona, like the Kyonans in Balenol did.”

“What will Father do?” Eamon asked, his interest captured by the idea of Kyonans living intermingled with the Thoranians all this time.

“He hasn’t decided,” said the queen simply. “He said someone will probably need to go to the South Lands to investigate.”

Eamon nodded. “That sounds sensible.” His eyes were still on his father and his sister, so it took him a moment to realize that his mother was watching him surreptitiously. He turned to her with a questioning look.

“You could probably do with a change of scenery, couldn’t you?” she asked, concern in her eyes.

“Me?” asked Eamon, too surprised to decide whether or not he liked the idea. He shook his head, dejection creeping over him. “I don’t think anyone will be trusting me with that level of responsibility any time soon.”

“Nonsense,” said Queen Elnora sternly. “You know your father trusts you, Eamon.”

“If he does, then I don’t know why,” said Eamon bitterly.

Perhaps it wasn’t the most gracious reply, but his father’s lenience regarding Eamon’s recent near-catastrophic mistake only increased his guilt. King Calinnae had sought his only son out for a heart-to-heart conversation the day after Jocelyn had told her family her story. Eamon had been dreading the interview, but it hadn’t gone as he expected, to say the least.

Even now he winced as he remembered the sincerity with which the king had apologized. It had been Eamon who should have been apologizing—and he had certainly done enough of that to last him a lifetime—and his father’s contrition had been like salt in the wound of Eamon’s regret.

For a moment Eamon was lost in the recollection of the astonishing revelation his father had made during that memorable conversation. The secret of the Esvallere was something Eamon was still struggling to wrap his mind around. He had known of the friendship between the dragons and his father’s royal line since his earliest memories, but he had never heard even a rumor of the magic sphere that the dragons had gifted to the Kyonan royals. It certainly helped explain the stability and wisdom of his father’s rule, even in light of the king’s relative youth and inexperience. But the

secret had been well-guarded. Apparently Eamon's mother and Uncle Jonan both knew about it, although it wasn't clear whether they really should, but they had both kept the confidence as far as Eamon was aware.

And he could only be grateful that they had. Eamon would certainly not be telling anyone, not even Jocelyn. If he was honest, a small part of him wished his father hadn't even told him, and not just because the power and potential of the object was overwhelming. He still felt nervous at the information that a terrible curse would be unleashed on the royal line if anyone but the king or his direct heir was to look in the sphere. The kind of curse that had happened once before, and had led to the centuries-long exile of the true royal line from the throne.

As honored as he was by his father's trust, Eamon had been astounded that the king had chosen such a moment to tell him about the Esvallere. From where Eamon was standing, he had just shown himself to be anything but trustworthy. He couldn't deny that he was mesmerized by the information, and desperately curious to wield the object, but he had never felt less worthy of his position as his father's heir.

But King Calinnae had insisted that some of the blame at least should lie with him. Eamon still felt the sting of guilt as he thought about his father's penitent expression when he apologized for not trusting Eamon with the information earlier. The king had assured his son that he had only wished to shield him, because the incredible knowledge that came from using the Esvallere was as much burden as gift, and he hadn't wanted Eamon to be weighed down by it so early in his life, as his father had been. But King Calinnae was convinced that had he not been so cautious, had he honored the maturity his son had already shown, Eamon would have had a source of wisdom that Scanlon knew nothing about, and would not have been so easily captured by the Balenan's power.

Eamon would like to think that was true. But when he remembered how strong the nobleman's influence over him had been, he had a horrible fear that in reality, if he had known about the Esvallere, he would have handed the information straight to Scanlon. He shuddered to think what the outcome of that would have been.

But the king had rebuked him for suggesting that he was unfit to share the benefits and the responsibility of the Esvallere. Eamon would never forget the look on his father's face when he said that no mistake could ever take away Eamon's place as his father's heir, and the keeper of his bloodline. So he had given in, as much to his own curiosity as to his father's insistence, and had wielded the sphere.

It was probably for the best that he wasn't allowed to talk about it to anyone, because there were no words to describe the experience. He had seen things—a lot of things—about the past, both recent and ancient. One note of relief was that for the first time he really understood the strength and nature of Scanlon's power, and he began to believe that he really hadn't been acting fully of his own free will. It would be too much to say that he had forgiven himself, but he had taken a step in that direction.

He pulled his attention back to the present with a sigh. He had spent many hours contemplating the revelations of the sphere. And he would no doubt spend many more. Already his father had begun to teach him how to wield it—a benefit the king had never received himself.

But this wasn't the time or the place. Eamon looked over to see his mother watching him shrewdly, patiently waiting for him to return to her.

"I'm not sure what you were so deep in thought about," she said softly, "but I don't think it was Thorania."

"No," Eamon acknowledged with a wry smile. "It wasn't."

“Well.” The queen turned her attention back to her husband and daughter, whose dance was coming to a close. “You should think about it.”

Eamon nodded absently. Perhaps she was right that it was just what he needed. Perhaps he needed a change. Perhaps—it gave his heart a bit of a wrench to think about it—he even needed some distance from Lucy in order to sort all this mess out.

“It’s time,” said Queen Elnora suddenly. For once she looked as though her emotions might break through her restraint, and Eamon looked up to realize that Kincaid had materialized next to his bride, ready to claim her from her father once again. It was well past midnight now, and all around them the festivities were showing signs of winding down.

Eamon joined his mother in moving forward to say a final farewell to his twin. His own emotions were unusually close to the surface as he embraced her, no words necessary between them. She would always be his sister, but now she was Kincaid’s wife first. She would always be Kyonan, but now she owed a loyalty to Valoria, one that he would never share.

He felt something stirring within him as he watched the couple make their way from the emptying ballroom. Jocelyn had found her place, and her peace. He didn’t begrudge her any of it, but he needed to find his. His life seemed to have fallen apart just as hers had come together, but if she had managed to persevere through years of fear and frustration, surely he could overcome his setback. He was the only heir to a powerful kingdom and an ancient bloodline, and if he didn’t want to give up on his people, it meant that he couldn’t give up on himself, either.

There must be a way to demonstrate to his kingdom that he could serve them as faithfully as his father had always done. He was willing to spend his life trying, at least.

His eyes caught a flash of lilac silk among the throng leaving the ballroom in the wake of the bridal couple’s departure. And while on the topic of things he was willing to spend his life trying to achieve...surely there must also be a way to show Lucy that she shouldn’t give up on him either.

He turned away with a new sense of determination. He would convince her. He had to.