

Leiun

## Chapter 1

Once upon a time, as all good stories begin, the city of Ekron enjoyed a beautifully warm summer day. A whispering breeze wafted through the gardens surrounding the Ekron palace. It stood upon a great hill, looking down at the rolling green countryside and moderately spaced houses. Sandy stone pillars stretched upwards, leading to a roof with great gaping holes for the sunshine to pour into the courtyard below. Plants and wells of water absorbed the rays beneath these gaping holes. Vines trailed up the columns and into the holes, where trellises filled the gaps, holding them up. For hundreds of years, Ekron had stood as the capital city of Plenoria. This country existed peacefully for more than two centuries. Most of the people farmed, working in the vineyards and fields. Little did her citizens know darkness crept around the corner.

Outside, circling the building, existed a peaceful garden of Jackorandas, ferns, mosses, lush grass, and lilies. The sparrows sang, the sun shone, and squirrels chattered happily. Beyond the gardens, down the hill that is, a few of the Ekron citizens strolled outside, heading to the fields and orchards to work. There was one person, however, not enjoying the beautiful weather—Leiun. The tall, brown-haired man forced a smile as his future bride babbled on and on about the lovely day. His vibrant green eyes met her brown ones. He mentally sighed. Her lovely dark skin, braided chestnut hair, and bright smile made her quite attractive. So innocent and sweet. Too bad she had fallen in love with the captain of the guard and not him. Their arranged marriage would seal the peace treaty between King Heroon of Terris, Astoria's father, and Diskak of Plenoria, Leiun's father. With whispers of the lady of the dark realm gathering forces to take over Arison, Terris and Plenoria's neighboring country, Dishak and Heroon had

come together to decide to create the peace pact. Leiun was startled out of his reverie when Arista suddenly clutched his arm.

“Leiun! Look over there!” She cried in her high pitched (though not unpleasant) voice.

He looked. A drab brown ground squirrel, not nearly as handsome as the tree squirrel with his fluffy auburn tail, glared at them from twenty feet away. Leiun could imagine quite clearly all the legions of fleas hopping merrily on the creature.

“Isn’t that such a sweet creature!”

The poor prince instantly realized he was in a trap. *Think! What will be the truth and yet will not offend her?* Leiun rapidly calculated. He always attempted to be an honest person with high character. The words of his mother flashed in his mind. *“Leiun, some day you will be king over these people. To be a good king, you must first be a good man.”* And so quickly he found something that would not be rude to Arista, but would still keep his integrity.

“A worthy specimen of it’s kind.” *An ugly, flea-bitten kind, that is.* He mentally grimaced. Luckily for him, Arista could not hear these mental complaints and smiled at his response.

*Poor Arista, the hopeless Romantic stuck with a Realist. It is a true shame she is not matched with someone who can see a flea bitten squirrel as beautiful.*

Arista loved everyone. Her head-in-the-clouds perspective shone a kind light on all. Leiun, on the other hand, was reserved in his love of others and was grounded on the here and now—in reality. *Click, clack!* Leiun looked up to see Jackone, the foresaid captain of the guard, running towards him. For the hundredth time that day, he internally sighed, slightly annoyed. Jackone had short blond hair, bright blue eyes, and very fair skin. All the ladies practically swooned after him. It was a shame Arista was an impractical person. Leiun had given up all

attempts to make Arista realize they were going to be together for the rest of their mortal lives. There was only a month before the wedding, and yet she just couldn't seem to stop staring at Jackone with a lovestruck look on her face whenever she saw him. Not that it was Arista's fault. She was merely a pawn in her father's hand, just as he was a pawn in his father's hand. And it wasn't as if Jackone had done anything wrong either. Lately, as he had respectable character, he avoided Arista, seeing her attraction to him. Arrangements for marriage or not, she had fallen in love with Jackone. He couldn't blame her. After all, he wasn't in love with her either. They had very different personalities. Her constantly bright and vivacious personality rubbed against his more pessimistic one.

Seeing Arista there, the captain of the guard glanced nervously at her for a second before looking back to Leiun. He bowed.

"My lord, the king requests that you speak with him immediately."

The prince nodded. "My lady, I am afraid I will have to take your leave."

"Oh—of course," came the distant reply as she stared at Jackone, cheeks pink. He pretended not to notice and, to his credit, never once looked her way. The two men hurried back to the palace, the beauty of the columns lost on them as they rushed towards the dreaded encounter. Out of Arista's presence, the formality disappeared. Societal hierarchy vanished, and in its place was comfortable companionship.

"Leiun, what do you think this is about?" Jackone wondered.

"Well Jack, I'm sure it's nothing good. With all the things I've overheard from the advisors, I fear impending disaster will befall our world."

In the throne room at the end of the hall stood a silver throne. In it sat a man with short cropped black hair and venom green eyes. Unluckily for Leiun, King Dishak was in a mood.

Jackone bowed. "I have brought him as you requested, my lord."

"I can see that for myself, thank you very much," the king scowled.

Jackone reddened but said nothing. The king turned then to Leiun.

"I have just received a peace treaty request from Elor. I need you to go as an ambassador and take the signed treaty back. Perhaps you can prove you are not completely worthless."

"I will do so, father," Leiun responded quietly.

"Good. Take Jackone with you to meet Regent, captain of the Unicorn, and sail out south from the Nar Inlet towards Paron's Gulf. Leave tomorrow, and do not forget *this*," he emphasized, holding out a box. "This is the treaty. Do try not to lose it. It's been sealed with wax so it won't get soaked at sea."

Leiun took the wood box, which had a inch layer of wax all around it, and bowed before starting towards the library.

"Oh and boy don't get stranded. I hear there's been pirates around. I'm sure they want ransoms, and believe me, I am most certainly not going to pay a ransom for you."

Leiun nodded, turned away and headed back to the garden. Really, the king's speech did not surprise him. Ever since Leiun's mother, the queen, had died, Dishak had become more and more harsh and bitter. He attempted to put the incident behind him and continued on to return to his fiance. *Please, not squirrels again*, he internally groaned as he walked towards Arista, who appeared to be staring at something in the trees.

"You've come back!" She smiled brightly. He returned the favor with a smile he didn't feel. It ended up looking rather like he'd eaten a lemon.

"Arista, tomorrow I set sail for Elor with Jackone."

Completely oblivious to his weary look she cried, "Oh! When will you return?"

“In three, perhaps four weeks.”

“I wish you didn’t have to leave with the wedding in only little after a month! A shame Elor has such strict ambassador policies. It doesn’t seem fair for a prince to be the only ambassador option.”

“The rules are, as ever, ignorant of princes’ wedding schedules,” he replied. “Well, I shall see you soon, my lady. Pray to Fieren for my safe return.”

“I shall, I shall. May your return be safe and expedient.”

By this time, the sun had begun to lower itself beyond the hemisphere, the peaceful palette of colors seemingly ignorant of the black that would soon seek to block them out. Leion bowed, then worked his way to the back of the palace where his room was.

## Chapter 2

Leion slept peacefully until someone announced “Good morning!” quite close to his ear. Or rather, something. For there on Leion’s bed sat a rather large and colorful bird. Leion groaned.

“Is it really time to wake up?” He sighed, rolling over.

“Yes, it is,” the bird responded.

The prince stiffly sat up and hobbled towards his wardrobe. “Am I going to see you on this trip? Or are you going to abandon me again for several weeks like you did last month?”

“I never abandon you. I always am around.”

Leion shook his head. “Hmph! Around? I certainly didn’t see you! And you didn’t answer my question.”

“That remains to be seen.”

“You know, people would tell me I was crazy if I told them I talked to a *bird*. What would they think? A man of twenty one years talking to an imaginary friend? Sometimes I wonder if you are just a figment of my imagination, especially when you disappear for a long time. Two fortnights is a long time to be away.”

“I am more real than you know. Also you cannot think of me as a slave. I will not come to your every beck and call.”

Leiun looked at the bird as he put a clean shirt on. The bird’s royal blue feathers with lines of silver on its’ wings glinted from the sunlight streaming in the window. His great, beautiful tail of enormously long midnight feathers contrasted with the lighter wing and body colors. On top of his head sat a small crest of feathers. Dark brown eyes shone with a strange intelligence that stood out. Phoenixes were the creatures of legends, seen in centuries past. Some stories even suggested that only one phoenix had ever existed. And yet, here the magnificent creature sat on Leiun’s bed.

“Fieren, do you think my father ever cared about me?”

“Of course he did. Unfortunately, he chose to become bitter and angry instead of overcoming his loss to become a better person. He of course turns that anger and bitterness towards everyone around him.”

“Do you think that will ever change?”

“It all depends on the decisions that he makes and the decisions you make.”

“You’re so wise, but you can be amazingly elusive sometimes!”

“You have to make your own choices, I can only suggest things and point you in the right direction. Goodbye, Leiun.”

And with that, the bird disappeared. One instant there, the next gone. The prince was once again left alone.