The Jewel by Amy Ewing

Twenty-Two

I can hear a faint humming, almost like the Arcana. I try to open my eyes, but they're so heavy. My tongue is swollen, and it takes an effort to swallow.

"She's waking up, Doctor."

The Duchess's voice pierces through the thick fog of darkness. I can feel something sticking in my arm—I try to reach for it, but I can't seem to move.

"Not to worry, my lady. We're nearly finished."

Dr. Blythe. The medical room. The needle. The stitches.

Consciousness comes back to me in a rush and I feel my heavy eyelids open. At first I can't make sense of anything—a bright white glow. Then slowly, the world comes into focus.

I wish I'd stayed unconscious.

My arms are restrained with straps, and there is a taut band across my shoulders as well. An IV pokes into my skin at the crook of my elbow. My legs are propped up and open, a sheet of stiff white fabric draped over my knees like a tent.

My lungs feel compressed—I can't seem to catch my breath.

The Duchess's face appears in my view. "Calm down," she says, dabbing at my forehead with a damp cloth. "You'll hyperventilate."

The air is too thin, like I can't get enough oxygen. My heart thumps in my chest, too fast, far too fast. "What's... happening?" I gasp.

"Deep breathe." Dr. Blythe's voice comes from behind the drape. "Relax. You're all right."

"I can't... I can't... feel my legs..." I'm suffocating—white lights pop in front of my eyes. My heart feels like it's about to explode.

"My lady, there is an oxygen mask just to your left. Would you mind placing it over her nose and mouth?"

I feel something hard and plastic on my face, then I inhale a wonderfully clean, fresh breath of air. My heartbeat slows.

"There now, see? You're fine." The Duchess pats my head with the cloth. "You shouldn't have woken up so soon," she says, as though it's my fault.

"All done," Dr. Blythe says, emerging from behind the cloth. He removes a light blue procedure mask. I cringe at the snap of latex as he takes off his gloves. "Everything went fine, my lady."

"Excellent," the Duchess says brusquely. "I have an engagement party to organize."
I hear the elevator doors open then close. Gently, the doctor removes my feet from the stirrups. My legs dangle limply off the end of the bed.

"I've given you a mild sedative," he says, pressing his fingers against the inside of my wrist to check my pulse. "It should be wearing off now." He takes a small penlight and flashes it in my eyes, then makes some notations on the screen.

"I think we can remove these," he says, undoing the straps on my arms and across my shoulders. I try to sit up, but the room tilts and a wave of vertigo hits me.

"Lie back, Violet," Dr. Blythe says. I don't have a choice. I stare at the smooth white ceiling and wait for the dizziness to subside. There is a tiny sting in my arm as the doctor takes the IV out. "Do you still need the oxygen mask?"

I shake my head. I want to get out of here. Tears prick the corners of my eyes. Dr. Blythe removes the mask. I feel a tingling sensation, like pins and needles, in my toes. I want to know what happened, but the question sits like a lump in my throat. I don't want to hear the answer. Dr. Blythe just sits there, watching me, waiting.

The tingling sensation spreads up my calves and into my thighs. The vertigo fades. Very slowly, I slide myself back on the bed, into a more upright position. My body feels like dead weight, my movements clunky.

Dr. Blythe smiles. "Would you like some water?"

I nod. He holds up a cup with a straw and I take a sip—my lips are dry and the cool water feels good.

"You may experience some mild cramping tonight," the doctor says brusquely, "but by tomorrow, you'll be feeling like your old self, I promise. We should know the results in about a week."

"Results?" I croak.

"Yes, Violet. The results." Dr. Blythe squeezes my hand. "In one week, we are going to find out if you're pregnant."

**Pregnant.**

The word sounds strange in my head, foreign, like the more I think about it, the less sense it makes. I lie in bed that night, staring at the frothy canopy above me, and try to notice some difference. I press my hands against my stomach, as if I might feel a tiny heartbeat or a small bump. Nothing. There's nothing.

"Please don't let it work," I whisper, as if by wishing it out loud, it might come true. "Please . . ."

I feel contaminated. They put something inside me, without my permission, against my will. Knowing that it would happen and experiencing it are two entirely different things.

At least I'm not crying anymore. I cried all afternoon, until I ran out of tears and it was just an awful, dry, aching sob that shuddered through my chest. I called Lucien's name over and over into the arcan, until I got so frustrated by the silence that I threw it against the wall. The arcan is back in its hiding place now.

I try very hard not to think about Ash. How stupid of me, to worry about the risks of being with him. Our time is over.

There is a tentative knock on the door, and Annabelle pokes her head in. She scribbles something on her slate, but I don't look at it. I just keep staring at the ceiling.
The slate appears in my line of vision.

_D is here_

Without a word, I slide up into a sitting position, hugging my knees to my chest. Annabelle gives my wrist a squeeze and flits out the door. The Duchess enters slowly, almost like she’s afraid she’ll startle me.

“How are you feeling?” she asks.

“Fine, my lady,” I say through clenched teeth.

She walks forward and sits on the edge of my bed.

“I know this must be difficult for you,” she says.

“No,” I say in a flat voice, unable to lie in this instance.

“You don’t.”

“Don’t sit there and sulk and pretend as though you didn’t know this was going to happen,” the Duchess says. “The doctor said the procedure went very well.”

“Yes, my lady.”

“If there is anything you need, you will let me or Annabelle know immediately.”

I glare at her. “I’d like to be left alone.”

“Why do you look at me like that?” she snaps. “As if I am the villain. Why are you not grateful for everything I am giving you? Fine clothes, the best food, a new cello, jewels, balls... I am trying to take care of you. I am trying to make you happy.”

“You stole my body and my _life_ and you expect me to be grateful?” I need to calm down, but it’s so hard. I’m too angry.


“Yes!” I cry. “A thousand times over if I could be.”

my family again. If I could have my own life, make my own choices. I would do anything for that sort of freedom.”

“I have given you freedom!” she shrieks.

“Walking around the palace without an escort is _not_ freedom!” I shout.

There is a tense silence as we glare at each other. The Duchess inhales deeply through her nose.

“I did not make these rules,” she says. “I did not take you away from your family. I didn’t create the Auction. There are many in the Jewel who would not have given you a fraction of what I have given.”

I look away, refusing to respond. The Duchess sighs. “Did you know that the Electress wishes to abolish the Auction?”

I turn back to her, hope swelling inside my chest. “Really?”

The Duchess laughs at my expression. “Oh no, she doesn’t wish to end surrogacy. Just the Auction. She despises the surrogates.”

“Why?”

The Duchess gives me a pitying look. “Because she did not _need_ one. She isn’t royalty, remember? She was perfectly capable of bearing her own children. But in order to marry the Elector, she was forced to give up that power. All royal women are sterilized upon marriage—a necessary precaution against pregnancy.” Something flickers in her eyes, an emotion I can’t quite place. “Do you remember when I told you about the two schools of thought concerning surrogates? I believe your personalities are necessary. There are many who disagree, and the Electress has sided with them. She has a plan to... adjust the surrogates.”
“Adjust us how?” I ask.

“Why bother training your surrogate? Why spend the money, risk an unfavorable result because your surrogate has a character flaw, or does not try hard enough, or resents you? All we really need are your bodies. The stimulant gun can induce the Auguries. The Electress subscribes to the view that your minds are of no use to us.”

I gasp. “What, she wants to . . . lobotomize surrogates?”

“That is exactly what she wants.”

I feel sick. “She can’t do that.”

“Yes, she can. She is the Electress. The Exetor has no interest in surrogacy—like all the other men in the Jewels, he considers it a ‘lady’s issue.’” The Duchess rolls her eyes. “If she has enough support from the right people, there is no reason why she couldn’t create a new law.”

“What’s stopping her?”

“So far, the experiments haven’t worked. But once they do . . .” The Duchess shrugs. “No more holding facilities. No more compensation for the families. Once a girl is ready to be impregnated, she will simply disappear.” She looks me full in the face, her black eyes sparkling. “You do realize there are others who wish to secure the young Exetor’s hand, to put a daughter in the Royal Palace who will continue the Electress’ work. We cannot let that happen.”

I don’t like the way she’s put us together, on the same side, even though it’s exactly what Lucien has been pushing for. “Why do you hate her so much?” I ask. “Just because she married the Exetor and you didn’t?”

All the color drains from the Duchess’s face. “You have absolutely no idea what you are talking about. That woman cannot be permitted to make new law. I will not allow her to come into my circle—my circle, the circle my family built—with her dirty blood and her coarse manners and expect to change the shape of history.”

“But . . . even if you arrange a match, your daughter will be too young to do anything. She’ll only be a baby.”

The Duchess’s mouth curves into a small, cruel smile. “Oh, you do not need to concern yourself with that. Your only job is to produce her as fast as you can.”

My stomach tightens. “I know what my job is, my lady.”

Her smile widens. “Good.”

“Doesn’t anyone love anyone here?” I ask. “Isn’t there any part of you that just wants a child?”

The Duchess’s face becomes very still. “I have loved more deeply than you can possibly imagine,” she says. For an instant, she looks like an entirely different person. I am too stunned to speak.

The Duchess seems to realize she’s revealed too much of herself. She rises, straightening her skirts. “That’s that, then. As you may have heard, my son is engaged. The party is tomorrow evening. You will attend. I have arranged for you to play a small concert.” She looks around my room as if searching for the right words to end this conversation, then gives up. “Good night,” she says, without meeting my eyes.

As she leaves, I hear her say to Annabelle, “Make sure she looks stunning.”