

Pact of Princes: Silent Siren

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Chapter 1

Thane turned toward what he was sure had been the sound of very soft footfalls. It was unlikely since his mother, the queen, wasn't in residence, and the hallway where he stood led to her suite of rooms.

He strode down the corridor, head tilted, listening intently. Silence ruled now, the way frigid temperatures ruled the mountaintops in the distant lands of Saaman.

Thane stared at the door to his mother's library. There was no reason for someone to sneak inside. Anyone in the queendom could use the main library where far more stories were collected.

Thane opened the door slowly, pursing his lips together to keep any sound from escaping. He moved from the stone floor of the hall to the padded floor of the library. Once inside, he closed the door carefully and walked past the wooden partition then stopped suddenly.

Part of a woman's face in profile floated in the air where the veil of an anti-detection frock had been pulled down. The intruder's eyes were staring at the holographic streaming of letters and symbols in front of her.

"Is it a good story?" he asked.

The figure leapt up, replacing the veil as she rose. She streaked away from him, her body blending into the background. He strained his eyes, trying to spot her, but couldn't.

Thane jumped over a bench and sprinted back to the door. He knew that whoever the girl was, she wasn't faster than he was. He slammed the divider screen against the door, effectively blocking the only exit.

Then he waited, looking around carefully.

"If you've been here before, you know that behind me lies the only way out. Show yourself."

The intruder didn't reveal herself. Thane waited, wondering who she was. His mother's small library was always unlocked and unguarded; it didn't contain secrets worthy of spying.

"I will wait all night if necessary," he announced.

A moment later, she pulled the hood of the frock back and yanked off the veil. The girl stood directly in front of him and, with a start, he recognized her pretty face. Veylin, the silent one.

Veylin stared up at Thane. He was the tallest of the three princes of Melotin and, to her mind, the most beautiful. He was golden-haired and amber-skinned, with a body of athletic perfection and a square-jawed face to boil a girl in her own juices.

She frowned. How many times had she secretly wanted to examine him this closely? Too many to count. But she'd also hoped even more vehemently never to be caught using the Melotiner queen's library. Fate had an ironic sense of humor.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, curious blue eyes scanning the room behind her before returning to her face.

She put a hand to her throat and opened her mouth, indicating that she couldn't speak.

He nodded, taking a hold of her arm. "Let's get a board, and you can show me."

She shook her head, trying to free her arm from his strong grip.

"Look," he said, taking her other arm and holding her still in front of him. "I saw how quickly the text was streaming. Your mind works perfectly well even if you can't speak." His bright eyes searched her face for the truth. "You can communicate, can't you?"

Her heart pounded. This was terrible. She'd been hoping that Thane, always more easy-going than the other princes, might not have realized what she'd been doing. Of course, her secret was exposed anyway, for what, other than reading, would she have been doing in the queen's library?

She tried to make her face vacant as she stared up at him.

"Don't give me that innocent look. You read faster than I do," he said, letting go of her right arm, but pulling her gently by the left. His large hand circled her upper arm easily.

She shivered at the touch and looked away, blushing at the fact that she'd been thinking about his long fingers touching her naked body. Why did she have to like the look of him so much? It would be easier to deceive him if she could keep her face neutral.

"You've grown so beautiful," he murmured. "I remember when you first arrived. We all wanted to show off for you since you were new, but you never paid any attention to us. All you seemed to notice were the sun and the ground. Always looking over our heads or down at your feet. You had such a pretty smile on your face for no apparent reason. You convinced everyone that you were daft."

She frowned at his use of the past tense and noticed him stealing a sideways glance at her. "You don't look like your mind is empty now."

Cre's Curse, she needed to concentrate! This was getting worse and worse. She tried to turn her face into a placid mask.

He stopped them in front of a table where a communication board was lying. It was made of dark metal in the shape of a woman's mouth. They'd been designed for silent communication on battlefields or in hunting parties, but their use had spread to other places where quiet was preferred, like libraries. She had but to touch it and her words could appear before him.

He pushed her down onto a deep-cushioned chair and sat opposite her.

"What are you doing in my mother's library?" he asked.

She decided that she loved his voice. Fruit slurry over naked skin.

He sighed when she didn't touch the board to answer. "You know I could turn you over for interrogation. My older brother, Gatler, has always been concerned about the suspicious way you came to be among us."

Her most closely guarded secret. The last thing she wanted was to be officially questioned, and she fought not to let her fear show. Veylin folded her arms across her chest, stubbornly ignoring the board.

"Okay, then. Should I place you in one of the glass cells to await interrogation?"

She stared at his face. He looked perfectly sincere. Finally, she shook her head.

"So what are you doing in this library?"

She rapped her knuckles over the board and her sarcastic words flashed in the air. "What does one usually do in a library? I would think that even one as disdainful of studies as you are wouldn't have failed to recognize reading when he saw it."

He frowned at her. "*I know* you were reading. I want to know why you were reading *here*."

She gave him a defiant look and touched her fingertip to the board. "No one ever said we couldn't use the queen's library. The door wasn't locked."

"Don't give me that," he said. "How stupid do you think I am?"

She raised her eyebrows in contemplation and reached a finger toward the board. He caught her hand in his to prevent her from responding. "I wouldn't answer that if I were you," he said, trying to look menacing.

If she hadn't known for certain that he was sweet natured and kind, his expression might have concerned her. Her lips curved into a smile.

"Are you laughing at me?" he asked slowly.

She shrugged dramatically. She was teasing him to distract him. Maybe she'd make him mad enough to stalk off and leave her alone. That way she could avoid his questions. Now that she'd had a moment to think, she didn't really believe he'd turn her over for interrogation.

"I guess you've been laughing at us all along," he said, appraising her. "Pretending to be something you're not. Always blending into the landscape, escaping our notice. How many private conversations have you listened to while pretending to study the sky?" Her smirk faded completely. "As much as I hoped it wouldn't be, I

can't help but believe this is a security concern that can't be ignored. Gatler was obviously right; you're here to spy for some other nation."

She snatched her hand away from him, tapping the board in earnest. "No. No. No."

"Then explain yourself."

"I can't, but I swear I would never spy. Melotin is my home. I am a Melotiner."

"How can I believe you? There's no logical explanation for you keeping it a secret that you can communicate."

"I was abused. I worried that if people here knew I could communicate, they would have questioned me until I told them where I was from... and then returned me there. I would rather be completely alone in the world than go back."

He narrowed his eyes, studying her face. "Do you swear on the queendom?"

She nodded.

"You know it'll cost you your life if you swear an oath on the queendom and lie," he said.

She nodded solemnly, touching the board. "I understand, and I swear."

"Who abused you?" he asked, as the suspicion leaked out of his eyes.

"It doesn't matter. It was a long time ago."

"It matters to me. No Melotiner could ever accept lightly the abuse of another. As one of us, I'm sure you understand that. And, as champion, I'm sworn to challenge anyone who threatens misuse of a citizen of the queendom."

She touched the board. "To protect me, all you have to do is keep my secret."

He paused, still looking closely at her face. "For someone with such dark eyes, you have very pale skin," he whispered.

Her heart missed a beat. Why was he talking about her eyes and her skin?

"By pretending to be a simpleton, you've excluded yourself from participation in the frolic."

She gave a brief nod and concentrated on not blushing. Learning to be sexual occurred in stages in the land of Melotin. The frolic was the final stage of exploration,

and one could only enter into the frolic when mind and body had matured sufficiently in the eyes of the mistress of the frolic. Of course, Veylin's mind had never been judged mature enough to enter. So while the other young women would stumble back into the quarters after the frolic with glowing skin and gushing praise for men and their bodies, Veylin would pretend not to notice or care.

"The frolic is, without question, the best thing in life."

She smiled at the seriousness of his tone. She touched the board. "I'm sure it's wonderful, but some things are more important."

"I don't agree."

She jabbed the board impatiently. "If your liberty were ever truly threatened, you would feel differently. Survival always eclipses pleasure as one's desire."

"I don't think so," he repeated.

She smiled and shook her head.

"You condescend because I've never known true fear for my freedom. But I can turn that back on you. You know nothing of the frolic so how can you dismiss it as not worth risking death for?" he asked.

Her smile faded. It was a fair question, but she hated hearing it. She didn't want to believe that anything could be so delicious that it would be worth the risk of exposing her true identity; for a long time, she'd maintained her isolation by telling herself that nothing was more important than survival.

She studied his handsome face and then carefully reached out and touched the board. "You could show me."

"Impossible. There's no way I could sneak you into the frolic without people knowing."

"That wasn't what I meant."

His eyes deepened several shades of blue. "What *did* you mean?" he asked.

"You could show me some of the things that men do to women there. While we're alone."

He swallowed hard. "It's forbidden."

He seemed to study her mouth. Wondering perhaps how she'd taste? She'd wondered that about him for the longest time.

"What will happen if we're caught?" she demanded with a sharp rap on the board. "They'll kill us?" she mused sarcastically.

"I'd be banned from the frolic, for one. And if you didn't communicate and prove you weren't simple, I'd probably be jailed... possibly even executed. So, yes, they might kill one of us. You're considered a child, you know."

"I'd give up the ruse if it came to that."

"Even if it meant they'd send you back where you came from?" he countered.

She nodded. *What am I doing?* Would she really risk everything just to taste him?

"Well, I can't do it. There are rules. I'm a prince. I'm supposed to lead by example."

She ran her finger slowly over the board. "I thought that's what I was asking you to do." They smiled at each other then.

"There are reasons for the rules," he said slowly, trying to suppress his smile.

She nodded and shrugged, standing up.

His hand shot out, catching hers. "Where are you going?"

She leaned toward the board and let her fingertips graze it. "What more is there for us to discuss?"

"Anything," he said and then added, "everything."

"You are so very beautiful," she said. Her words appeared and then she touched his cheek with her fingertips. Her hand floated away from his jaw and to the board. "I regret that I will never taste those lips. They look worth risking my life for."

His mouth had gone slack with surprise, and his eyes burned indigo.

She pulled her arm free of his grasp and walked backward away from him, mouthing the word goodbye.

Thane watched her move. The curve of her lips... and her hips. He'd never felt so focused on any one woman in all his life, as if the rest of the world had fallen away and

left only her. Her dark hair falling softly around her delicate face made him want to run his fingers through her curls.

“Wait,” he said, hearing the slight rasp in his voice.

She kept moving backward as she pulled the hood up. In a second she’d be invisible again.

He pounced. Before he had really considered what he was doing, they were on the padded floor. Her smaller, softer body pinned beneath him. Her large liquid brown eyes studying him.

He knew she must be able to feel his erection and wondered if she knew what it was. His heart throbbed in his groin, begging him to show her.

He lowered his mouth to hers, knowing that if he kissed her he might never stop, but not really caring.

Chapter 2

Veylin lowered her gaze to his mouth. Forbidden fruit pulp. She licked her lips, wanting them to be as moist as the rest of her.

“Vey.” The word slipped from his mouth. There was no question in it; he wasn’t asking her permission. It seemed more like he was acknowledging his need to possess and understand what had previously seemed unknowable.

The first tentative brush of his lips reverberated throughout her body. She opened her mouth, wanting his tongue inside her the way she wanted all of him.

He deepened the kiss and she could taste him... finally. Heat and sugar slurry soaking into her tongue, a thrumming addiction for him building at her core. How could a man built of such hard muscles have a tongue that moved with such velvety strokes?

She became aware of the heat of his body. She liked the way it pressed down, trapping her. His face might be golden and light, but his form was hardness and strength. The cock that she had so often pondered pressed against her, and she wanted to unwrap it and run her fingers over it. She wanted to touch him and lick him until he was as wet as she. Then maybe he would bury himself in her drenched folds and quench the never-ending thirst she had for his body.

Her fingertips grazed his hair. She wanted his hands on her, but his palms were still planted on the floor on either side of her. An uncomfortable ache settled between her legs, making her want to spread them.

Images flashed across her mind from memories past. Naked bodies splayed open, writhing against the bonds that held them. Sex. Power. Domination. The memories made fear spike her blood, but it also fueled the frenzy of lust that was gripping her soul.

She arched against him, swallowing his groan. She knew he'd had sex many, many more times than she, but she'd seen dark things the likes of which his kind only played out in games where everyone was safe. The pent up secrets which once had made her shy away from him now made her bold.

She snaked her hands around him. With one hand she pulled a fistful of his tunic shirt up and with the other she pressed her fingers into the smooth skin of his lower back, trailing down until they were inside his pants rubbing against the flesh of his muscled buttocks.

He pushed his palms against the floor, breaking the kiss and rising onto his hands and knees above her. Her hands couldn't reach him anymore, so she let them fall to her sides. His breath came quickly through his open mouth as he stared down at her, blue eyes blazing.

He straightened at the waist and dragged his shirt off. She stared at his naked chest, feeling overwhelmed by the need to lick his muscles. He ran a hand through his tousled hair and cleared his throat.

"I won't hurt you," he said.

Her eyes shifted to his mouth, wondering why he didn't seem to understand that she didn't need those kinds of assurances; at the moment he could do whatever he wanted to her.

"It's the custom at the frolic for the participants to shed their own clothes. It implies consent." He paused to catch his breath for a moment, eyes fixed on her face. "I want to do things to you... so badly, but you have to show that you want me by offering yourself to me."

She pushed herself to a sitting position, looking him over. Her gaze caressed the material of his pants pulled taut over his cock. She wanted to see him naked, but it would be dangerous for her to become naked herself.

She thought about her breasts. The color of her nipples and the things that would happen over time if he sucked them would give away what, and eventually who, she

was. She wondered whether he would guess what she was hiding if she kept them concealed. There was only one way to find out.

She got gingerly to her feet, unhooking the tie that held the frock in place. She shrugged it off, revealing the white band around her breasts, which almost matched her luminous skin, and the sex-covering clipped at each hip.

She put her index fingers to the clasps and tapped them expertly, causing them to spring open and the covering to fall to the floor. She glanced at him and found him staring fixedly at the dark sprig of curls that jutted out from her juicy mound.

After a moment, his eyes, heavy-lidded now, looked into hers. "Finish undressing," he said.

She shook her head.

He blinked in confusion. "Why?"

She said nothing and made no movement to remove the band circling her chest. She held her breath, desperately wanting him to touch her, but resolved not to strip down completely.

Their eyes studied each other. Finally, he reached out, placing his hands on her hips and pulling her toward him. He reached behind her, gripping her buttocks in his palms and squeezing.

She shivered as his fingers slid intimately into her crease and spread. She felt the sensation from back to front, and her sex contracted sharply. He bent his head and bit softly into the flesh along her ribs, causing her to pant.

Thane's right hand slid down her left leg, grabbing and slinging it over his shoulder. She could feel color staining her cheeks as he sniffed the air. With one leg elevated, the wet musky scent of her wafted up.

She felt slightly dizzy and was afraid that she might fall since the position was awkward... he was too tall, even on his knees. His right hand on her back steadied her and she leaned against it.

A moment later he slipped his left arm under her right leg. She gasped as he stood up. Her body swayed, but he supported her.

"I won't drop you," he said. "Put your other leg over my shoulder."

She didn't move.

"It'll give you leverage," he pointed out.

She swung her other leg up carefully and he raised her high, repositioning her so that she was sitting on his shoulders. Her engorged sex was directly in front of his face.

"Just like that," he said as he walked them over to the closest wall. "You can lean back if you want," he said, staring directly at her lower lips, "because I'm going to be a while."

Her heart hammered. Then his hands tilted her lower body to his mouth.

Her back came gently into contact with the wall behind her as he nuzzled her sex. She arched toward his mouth involuntarily. His face ground into her, making her want to wail.

He withdrew a fraction of an inch and then his tongue licked the damp crevice between her lips. She reached a hand down, gripping his golden hair and pushing his head forward again.

He ignored her unspoken plea to grind against her. Instead, he licked and sucked on her from her pussy to clit and back, tongue circling like a predator toying with its prey. Soon the room was spinning. She rocked her upper body, smacking the wall.

She gasped over and over, all the while wanting to scream his name. When his teeth started biting her engorged labia, she thrashed frantically, no longer caring if she knocked him off balance.

He's like a rock, she decided blearily when he finally plunged his tongue into her. No matter how much she moved, his body didn't budge... except that long thick tongue.

Then he was laving her clitoris as he pressed his chin into her. The pressure was unbearable. She wanted his cock buried deep inside her. She wanted to be spread wide and pounded into. She wanted to be chained to his bed for the rest of her life, an eternal sex slave.

One orgasm crashed into the next as he devoured her. The room seemed to tilt and lurch. Her body clenched and unclenched until every muscle screamed and burned.

Afterward, her body sagged like a wilted flower. She lay across his arms limply as he turned and knelt. Then he lowered her gently to the floor. Her legs slid off his accommodating shoulders and he looked down at her, licking her juice from his lips.

"Veylin, free your breasts."

She shook her head, flinging an arm across her eyes to avoid looking into his.

"Whatever makes you hesitate won't matter to me. If they're scarred or marked, I won't care. The state I'm in... I'm so hard with wanting you. I know your body needs a rest. Let me suck on you a while to distract me."

She didn't respond.

"Vey," he admonished. "How can you refuse me?"

She rolled on her side away from him. The truth was that she wanted to offer her nipples to him, but she couldn't. Now that the sharpest desire had eased from the orgasm, logic was returning.

"This is why the frolic is better," he mumbled. "When one person gets tired she can move out of the fray and the person or people she was partnered with can go on to attain satisfaction elsewhere. Here there's only us, and I take it that you're going to leave me like this."

She opened her eyes and stared at the wall. She waited to see whether he would grab her and shove her legs apart and plant himself inside. She half-hoped he would. Somehow in her heart she knew that roughness from Thane would never be cruel, and she wanted to be made his in the way that lingered in the form of faint bruises and swollen lips.

After a few moments, she realized he wasn't going to take her without her permission. She rolled back toward him, planning to give him a sign, but found that she was alone in the room.

* * *

Thane walked into the princes' suite, grateful not to find his brother Calem, who was probably still at his diplomacy course. He glanced around the deserted living space where there were three mismatched chairs with accompanying shelves and cabinets. Gatler's hadn't been used in a long time, but there wasn't a spec of dust on his shelves. Calem always wiped down the surfaces to keep them clean.

Thane stripped out of his clothes, dropping them on the woven rug on his way to the bath chamber. Once inside, he opened a hold, yanking out some thermal soap, and strode into the washing cavern.

The cool slate tile walls gave way to polished green stone. Thane tapped the stone and water poured down from an overhead port. Thane stepped into the cascading water and tapped again, making it warmer.

He didn't need to close his eyes to picture Veylin's luminous skin, but he did anyway. He squeezed the tube of thermal soap, letting the thick gel pool in his palm. He didn't hesitate. His hand went directly to his erection. He groaned at the heat as he rubbed the gel onto his erect cock and then tightened his grip around himself with his left hand. He reached out his right, placing it flat on the wall to steady himself as he stroked.

Images of her face swam before him. Her mouth, lips... a perfect faded red, and tasting like fruit pulp. Her lower lips were more red-violet and saltier. He tightened his grip and slowed his hand. He pictured her legs wrapped over his shoulders while he tongued her. He'd looked through his lashes at her body above his, leaning against the wall. He'd seen the exquisite pleasure on her face when she'd come... when he'd made her come.

It was probably the first time anyone had ever licked her like that. Maybe it was the first time she'd ever had an orgasm. His breath caught in his throat. It was hard to breathe thinking about her. His chest was tight, as if too much desire had been squeezed into him. He dragged air into his open mouth, trying to get enough.

He pictured her naked ass. He'd had a moment to study it while she was lying on her side, turned away from him. Even in her rejection, her ass had been perfect.

Round, smooth, and soft. He'd felt it, squeezed it in his hands while he was holding her, lifting her up.

The recalled texture of her drove his body temperature up even more than the thermal soap. He rested his forehead against the cool stone, yanking on himself until the pain became too sharp. Why hadn't he shoved himself into her plush folds? He could imagine the way she would have felt around his hardness. It would have been pure pleasure to feel her sex gripping his as he plunged in and out of her accommodating body.

Why did he want her so much more than anyone he'd ever wanted before? Why did her features and her scent entice him to the point of frenzy? And why didn't she want him as much? She'd kept her chest covered, refusing to surrender herself to him. Had it been out of fear and embarrassment? That seemed possible; she was, after all, innocent. Although she'd given her sex over to him easily enough.

He ran his tongue over his teeth, trying to find any drop of her left in his mouth. He wanted to swallow her essence again, but he couldn't taste her anymore. He couldn't smell her. And that was an agony in itself. His hand slid over his cock in a smooth familiar rhythm, but even as he came he wasn't satisfied. She was all he wanted. And he wanted her completely.

Chapter 3

Veylin sat on the many-cushioned bed in her small room when a tap on the door made her look up. She plastered a simple smile onto her face as the door opened.

It was Bettis, a tall girl with black hair, summoning her with a wave of her graceful hand.

"Leave her, Bettis," someone in the common room said.

"No, she's a very good cook. Let her come with us," Bettis said over her shoulder to the other girl. Bettis turned her head back and smiled at Veylin.

Bettis, it seemed, was on feast duty and wanted help. Cooking was one of the few things that Veylin allowed others to see her doing competently. Most of the time she tried to keep her eyes vacant, but while preparing food, she lost herself in the moment.

All those in Melotin's Galinea Palace shared in the duties of maintaining it. They rotated and sometimes traded tasks. Many, for example, didn't like donning a harness and scrubbing the outside of the high towers. The height made most dizzy and terrified, which was why Thane, who didn't mind it, always had tower scrubbing duty. As a result, Veylin could go to the kitchen at the moment without fear of seeing him there.

Veylin slid off the soft fleece-covered pillows, dropping her gaze and following Bettis. She trailed behind the gaggle of girls who were discussing their coursework and a prank that one of the young males had played on the mistress of history.

Veylin's mind drifted to Thane, and she was trapped for a moment in memories of the library, of Thane's skin and hard muscles, of the way the light had played against his remarkable hair. She bit hard on her lip to force her mind away from her lust. She knew he must be angry with her. He'd left the queen's library without saying goodbye. There had been such unhappiness in his voice when he'd asked her to bare her chest to

him and she hadn't. But there was nothing to be done about it. She couldn't let him suckle her breasts. It was too dangerous.

"Well, look who we have here," one of the girls murmured. "What other land can boast princes as beautiful as ours?"

Veylin's head snapped up. Sure enough, Thane and Calem were walking directly in front of them. Thane was slightly taller, and Calem was darker in hair and skin, but they had identical tightly muscled butts. A foreign princess had once commented that all three of the Melotin princes had inherited asses of such surpassing perfection that it made a girl want to spread ju butter on them and steal a bite. Veylin could not have agreed more.

"Hello, ladies," Calem said, turning his head. His bright green eyes captured her own.

Veylin dropped her gaze instantly.

"I'm on feast duty," Calem said. "Who among you is with me?"

Two of the girls chimed in and then Bettis said, "And me. We've brought Veylin with us. You know it's her one genius."

"It is?" Thane asked.

She could see his feet. He'd turned toward the group.

"Yes, you've never seen because you're never in the kitchen with us," Bettis said, petting the top of Veylin's hair as if she were a pretty rucky bird that so many of the females liked to keep in their rooms as pets.

Another young woman chimed in. "Yes, she's very good with a sauce. And I daresay, the kitchen's the only place she's ever gotten her pot to boil."

There was laughter, and Veylin struggled not to blush. She mustn't let them see that she understood their ribald humor. The comment stung her, but she knew that the girl didn't believe that she could hear or understand and so it hadn't been done maliciously. From the girl's point of view, Veylin was a sexless lump. Veylin wondered what the girl would have said if she'd had a clue that it had only been hours since Thane had given her the most intimate kiss possible.

"Well, I would be very interested to see Veylin at work," Thane said. "I'm intrigued by the idea that she has hidden talents."

Veylin blushed furiously, studying her slippered feet all the more closely. She hoped her short curls were hiding her cheeks.

"And I thought you were only interested in girls' talents if they could be put to use in the frolic," Bettis teased Thane.

Veylin was tempted to look up. She expected that he might be smiling. He had the most gorgeous smile. She almost sighed, and then she bit her lip in frustration. *Why don't you just admit that you love everything about him and have done with it?*

"Actually, the frolic isn't the only thing that interests me," Thane said.

The party had started to walk again.

"What else then? Scrubbing towers. And the games of sport?" one of the girls said with a laugh. "What ever interested you that didn't give your muscles a workout?"

"Easy now, ladies," Calem said. "My brother's prowess as a champion has kept us out of war. Let's not try to convince him he needs to ignore his brawn in favor of learning something dull like Advanced Solvents."

There was a general protest from the assembled women. They were all suddenly fawning over Thane, wanting to be sure that they hadn't hurt his feelings. Veylin envied them. They could clutch his arms and give him a friendly pat on his butt while she couldn't so much as look at him, even in friendship.

"What word of your brother Gatler?" Bettis asked.

"The army reached the outskirts of Kenart today," Calem said. Veylin froze at the mention of her homeland. "Apparently that kingdom has become quite dangerous. The surrounding regions are overwhelmed by the changes there," Calem continued.

Veylin forced herself forward. She held her breath, waiting for him to say something else. She stared downward, unseeing. *What news? What news,* she wondered frantically.

"Is the queen thinking of making a diplomatic journey to Kenart?"

“Not that I’m aware of,” Calem said. “But if Gatler leads the army into that region, it can only mean that it concerns her.”

Veylin took a deep breath in, trying to slow her wildly beating heart. She had never been particularly enamored of Gatler, but for once she wished him well in his military pursuits. It was her fondest desire that Gatler and Melotin’s army would decide to march right into Kenart and conquer it. The people of Kenart would be infinitely better off if they were ruled by Melotin’s Queen Lemoar.

Instantly, fear and the memory of her cousin Likus’ stone-white fingers tightening around her throat came to her. His betrayal had come only moments after... she forced the memory from her mind with a shiver. Likus was evil, and Equeid, her younger brother, seemed to have been using him as mentor. She hadn’t seen either of them for a long time. She hoped she’d never see them again.

There was only one person she wondered about constantly. Lalanc, her half-sister, was still in Kenart. Of course, she was safely living on the edge of the realm. And the terrible pair of Likus and Equeid wouldn’t be interested in Lalanc because she couldn’t usurp their power. Unlike Veylin.

* * *

Thane was in a prison of his own making. In the kitchen he stood precariously close to Veylin. There was a lot of laughter and conversation going on around them, but neither of them made a sound. Part of him wanted to leave the feast duties so that he could return to the cavern in the bath chamber and release the tension that had built in his body again simply by her proximity. Another part of him couldn’t tear himself away.

He chopped roots slowly. He could have cut them faster if she hadn’t been there, but he wasn’t concentrating on the food. The thing he wanted to consume had dark hair and was sprinkling herbs. He watched her hands knead a plump ball of dough. His eyes darted to the swell of her breasts under her frock, thinking that he’d like to use his hands to squeeze her just the same way she worked the dough.

His eyes ran down her body, taking in everything. He noticed the way soft whorls of color merged in the pattern of her frock. He noticed the tiny beads that dotted the center of the whorls. He noticed the small muscles of her calves as she shifted her slight weight on her feet while she worked the bread.

He wanted to inhale the scent of her skin, but food scents overwhelmed his nose. Suddenly the utility of the frolic dawned on him in a way it never had before. The frolic allowed men to concentrate. Since they knew that they would be able to have sex at each frolic, there was no need to drive themselves to distraction over the beautiful girls that crossed their paths each day in all sorts of ordinary situations. Most of the time, when his lust got the best of him, he'd think, I'll get to touch her at the frolic; I'll get inside her at the frolic. Those thoughts couldn't console him at the moment though, as Veylin wasn't allowed to take part in the frolic.

There was a possibility that he'd never get to be with her. A dreaded thought. He had to stifle his voice more than once when he was tempted to announce to everyone in the kitchen that she was as smart as any of them. The thing he longed to do was to march into the suite of the mistress of the frolic and demand that Veylin be included.

If that happened though, he wanted to be her first. And last. And only. He stopped chopping, looking down at his idle hands. *What is this obsession?* No girl that he'd desired had ever turned him possessive.

He watched her ass as she walked over to one of the ovens. The material of the frock stretched across it as she bent to put a pan in. All he could think was that he wanted to yank that frock up and bury his cock inside her. He could almost feel his hands on her hips.

"Hey, brother, get your mind on what you're doing," Calem said softly.

Thane straightened up instantly, turning his head. Calem stood next to him, his younger brother's discerning green eyes reading his face.

"She's very good in the kitchen. Just like the girls were saying," Thane said, trying to sound casual.

"Yes," Calem said, dumping the roots into a pot. "And that's the only place she can handle herself."

"How do we know that?" Thane whispered.

"What?" Calem demanded.

"She's --"

"Completely innocent," Calem said, grabbing Thane by the arm and yanking him away from the counter block.

Thane allowed himself to be pulled into the empty corridor outside the kitchen.

"Listen, I know you've always found her pretty," Calem said with a warning note in his voice.

"Always?"

"Oh, come on. We all noticed how closely you watched her when she first got here."

"I was young. Back then, any pretty girl turned my head."

"Listen, we all thought she was pretty, but we all found out that she's not ripe for that sort of feast. She looks like a woman now, but in her mind she's new. *Very* new, Thane."

"How do we know that? Gatler was always suspicious that she might understand more than we gave her credit for."

"Gatler'd suspect that a root had an ulterior motive for growing. He's my brother and I respect him, but he doesn't exactly accept things at face value. And you have to admit that Veylin's face says that a baby lives behind those eyes. She's a child, Thane. You know it, and I know it."

Thane was silent.

"Honestly, I can't believe you're acting like this. Of the three of us, you're the one I'd never have suspected of contemplating taking advantage of a situation to suit himself. Gatler's the military man. I'll be the politician. Both of our careers will make us try to find ways of twisting the truth so that we can do whatever we need to do to serve the interests of the queendom. You're different."

“Oh? I’m too simple to do that?”

“No, you’re too good to do it.”

Thane took a deep breath and exhaled. He didn’t feel like being good. He felt like having Veylin.

“Why don’t you go outside? Run it out of your system. It’s only one day to the frolic,” Calem said. “You’ll have plenty of places to put that energy tomorrow.”

Thane nodded again. “It’s almost feast time.”

“Not too long. We’re nearly done in the kitchen.”

Thane waved for Calem to go back inside. As hard as it was, and it was very hard in more ways than one, Thane turned and went the other direction.

Chapter 4

The following night, Veylin stood in the corridor outside the entry to the frolic, but no one could see her. Ever since she'd stolen it, she'd contemplated wearing the anti-detection frock in order to get inside. It had always seemed too risky. Though she would be thoroughly disguised, sudden movements could sometimes cause a slight blur and sounds weren't covered at all. But, she reasoned, she'd had plenty of practice being silent and she could move slowly or stand still once she got inside.

She heard women's voices getting closer.

"This is my last one, and I want to play the captive. I asked Calem to be the bad one."

"And what did he say, Ashan?"

"He said he'd do whatever I wanted."

"Isn't he always the charming one? And so handsome. But you know, there are some who like playing bad and who have a great talent for it."

"I know, but Calem has excellent technique, and the bad one has the most time with a captive."

"What about Thane?"

"No one's ever convinced him to play bad. But we can count on him to triumph during the rescue as the good one."

They gasped. "You're going to have both princes before the night is over? Now that's an inspired plan."

Ashan laughed. "Yes. The only way it could be better is if Gatler were still here to join the fun."

"I heard he was excellent at playing the bad one."

"My older sister was in the frolic with Gatler. The games were very serious then. He was an amazing villain when they could get him to play a role. I was terrified of him, of course, but the older girls used to flock to him."

The women were wearing hooded robes. Veylin fell into step with them as they opened the heavy carved wooden door.

Inside the small entryway, they flipped back their hoods. Chenra, Mistress of the Frolic, was petite with large breasts and lovely wide eyes. She waited inside, dressed in a soft gray frock, and held out her arm. The women slipped their robes off, revealing skin tones from amber to onyx. All of them were nude except Ashan, who wore a silver gown under her robe. Tiny silver bells and sparkling crystal beads were woven into her straight blonde hair.

"I'm going to be kidnapped tonight, Mistress," Ashan said with a sly smile.

"And you're sacrificing your silver gown to the role?"

"This is heavy fabric. Calem won't have an easy time tearing it off my body."

"I think you underestimate your prince's strength," Chenra said with an amused smile. "Go in. Have pleasure."

Ashan gave her head a good shake, causing the bells to tinkle. Veylin walked through the second door and stood in amazement in the largest, most decadent room she'd ever been in since arriving at Galinea. The sounds of sex hung heavy in the air.

Inside there were several staged areas, with a masked ball happening at one end of the room. The costumed participants danced, women in diaphanous gowns and men in light wraps. At the opposite end, black partition walls hid other areas. As she walked slowly around, she found that behind the small partitions were groups of pillows, mattresses, padded tables, or chairs. There were already couples or trios using the available places.

She paused, studying a mattress where a boy she'd always considered shy was ramming his cock into the pussy of a long-haired brunette. The girl, who was on her knees with her butt in the air, had her face over the rigid cock of another young man whom she was sucking. The one being sucked was lying flat on his back, raising his

pelvis while his hand pressed her head down in time to his thrusts. The “shy” one behind her watched the man on his back so that they were thrusting in time. Veylin felt herself blushing, wondering what it felt like for the girl trapped between two erections in such a way. From the way the girl arched her back and gripped the lower man’s hips, she seemed to be enjoying herself quite well. Veylin felt a sharp contraction in the walls of her sex as she watched them. Her breath came quicker as the thrusts grew wilder. The young woman drove her body back into the man behind her. Veylin bit her lip as she watched the three of them explode with orgasm. They collapsed into a heap afterward, curling their bodies together as if trying to maintain that intimate closeness while they caught their breath.

Veylin’s excited muscles twitched, and she glanced around. At the far end of the room, filigree doors of distressed metal were partially ajar, revealing a courtyard where torches burned and vines hung down from the trees.

She meandered toward the doors, her gaze settling for brief moments on the gorgeous bodies twisted together here and there. Watching them made her feel increasingly hot and sticky.

She slid between the doors and felt as though she’d stepped into another fantasy. There were waterfalls, dripping vines, ponds and hot springs. There were naked nymph-like girls draped over rocks or rock-hard boys. She felt a longing to strip and join them, to be kissed and touched and stroked.

She froze when, in the distance, she saw Thane. He stood leaning back against a wall of rocks with water splashing down over his naked body, and she longed to lick every inch of him. His muscles rippled as he ran a hand over his forehead and through his hair.

Bettis and a younger girl walked by Veylin, oblivious to her invisible presence. “What’s Thane doing out there by himself?” Bettis wondered aloud.

“He said he wasn’t ready to join in yet,” the little blonde said.

“His cock looks like he’s ready to join in. C’mon, let’s go rape him. He’s too gorgeous to be all alone.”

Veylin grimaced, but just as the very buxom Bettis was ready to dive into the pool that led to Thane's falls, a man grabbed her from behind and pulled her into the nearby pond.

Veylin looked back to Thane. He'd turned and was climbing upward. If she hadn't been so afraid he might slip and fall from the slippery rocks, she would have enjoyed the view of his perfectly muscled buttocks at work.

True to his reputation as the best athlete in the world, he scaled the wall in no time and sat at the fount of the falls, legs dangling over. His left arm rested on a tree branch.

Her gaze traveled the course of the branch to its thick-trunked tree. She hurried over to it and clawed at the base as she crawled up.

The light grew dim as she climbed higher. When she got close enough, she hung down from a branch and stepped gingerly into the shallow pool of water that fed the falls. She waded slowly toward Thane from behind. She wanted to stand within arm's reach so that she could really see and study him.

He turned his head sharply, and she stopped instantly. She looked down at the water and realized too late that her body was disturbing it as it went around her. She watched in horror as Thane swung his legs over the ridge and into the pool and started toward her.

She turned and tried to flee quickly, but a moment later she was yanked out of the water, her body crushed against his. Her breath caught in her throat as he slid his hand over her head, pulling the veil away. He turned her in his arms so they stared into each other's eyes.

"Enjoying the view?" he whispered.

Actually, yes. Until you caught me. She shook her head in response to his question.

"No? So what are you doing here then?"

She bit her lip and shrugged.

"Have you been in here before? Watching?"

She shook her head emphatically.

"So why are you here now?"

There was only one answer that really appealed to her. She tipped her head forward and kissed him, licking his wet lips before she slipped her tongue between them.

He held her so tight that within moments she was breathless. Of course, she might have gotten that way even if he hadn't been squeezing the life out of her. Her legs dangled as Thane walked.

Finally she had to pull her mouth away and push on him to get him to loosen his grip. He swung her upward and carried her cradled in his arms. A few moments later, he set her down on the moss-covered bank.

Drops of water rained down as he knelt, leaning over her. She closed her eyes.

"You are so beautiful," he groaned.

She opened her eyes, smiling at him.

The look of surprise on his face gave her pause.

"You can hear me? The other day... I thought you were reading the words from my lips."

She stared up at his bewildered face.

"If you can hear me, you can talk too. Can't you?"

She didn't respond.

"Answer me!" he whispered furiously, shaking her by her arms.

Tears stung her eyes. She nodded.

He let go of her arms. "Let me hear your voice."

She shook her head.

"Why not?"

She mouthed, "I can't."

"Why not?"

"Can't," she mouthed.

"Yes, you can," he said, lying down next to her. "And you're going to talk to me. You're going to whisper in my ear while I pleasure you. And you're going to tell me all your secrets."

She shook her head.

"Yes, you are." His eyes blazed dark blue. "Get undressed."

Her eyes darted to the tree and the water's edge.

"They won't find us up here."

She looked back at his face. It was all hard edges and determination. She wasn't sure if he was certain that no one would find them or if he was lying to convince her to get naked.

She tried to roll away from him, but he grabbed her, pinning her body under his arm. "You're not running away. You entered the frolic. You came looking for me."

She shook her head.

"You know you did. You climbed up that tree to get close to me. Now I'm offering to get as close as you'll ever want." His breath was hot against her ear as he spoke to her. It felt so intimate. Her whole body was warm, and getting warmer now that he was so close. Between her legs she was moist and anxious to be touched.

"C'mon, Vey, you know you want to touch me." He caught her hand and pressed her palm against his chest. "Can you feel my heart beating for you?" He kissed her neck slowly, running his tongue up to her earlobe. "I'll give myself to you. All you have to do is get undressed and offer yourself to me in return."

Her breath had become uneven. She slid her hand down his body. Her fingers played over his abs, his cock bumping into her wrist. She slipped her fingers around his thick erection.

He moaned softly in her ear. "Veylin, I know you're innocent, but..." he trailed off, groaning as she stroked him slowly.

She felt powerful. He was a great deal stronger than she was, but, for the moment, he was at her mercy. His breathless gasp made her heart pound.

"I want you. More than the sun. More than winning." He covered her mouth with his.

Thane's hand found the place between her legs and gripped her there, squeezing hard. Her jaw went slack for a moment as lights exploded inside her head. He rubbed her through the frock and the sex-covering underneath.

"You're drenched," he murmured, causing her cheeks to flame.

Her juices seeped through the fabric. That he could feel the moisture made her want to hide. It also made her want to spread her legs.

Without warning, he pulled his hand away and yanked his cock from her hand.

"You have precious few moments to get naked before I rip that off you."

Through the haze and her ragged breathing, she knew that if he ripped the frock off her, she'd have to walk out of the frolic hall naked, which would be a disaster for both of them.

She rose to her feet, reached down and yanked the frock up and over her head. It was too dark for him to see her nipples clearly so she also unhooked the band around her breasts and then the clasps of the sex-cloth. She stood completely nude, an offering of flesh to his hands, his mouth, to every part of his body.

He pulled her back down and moved above her, bending his head and catching her breast between his teeth. Her body arched upward. He sucked on her hard, as though he might swallow her whole. It felt incredible. An erotic sort of pain.

He switched to her other breast, working her nipple with his teeth until she squirmed, panting wildly. He sucked her into the vortex of his mouth while she gripped the back of his head, her fingers tangled in his hair. Then his fingers seemed to remember that she too had curls. Suddenly, his hand was between her legs, rubbing her. Her excited clitoris stiffened and rose against his grinding palm.

She writhed frantically, grabbing at his back and pulling him toward her.

He moved his hand away. "What, Veylin? Tell me what you want."

She clutched him desperately.

He guided the thick tip of his cock, banging it into her clit before running it over her slick cleft. Then he moved so he was between her lips, but not inside her.

She beat her fists against his ribs in frustration.

"I'll give you what you want if you ask for it. C'mon, Vey."

She slid her legs around his waist, raising her pelvis. He put a hand on her hip so she couldn't impale herself on him.

She ached to be penetrated in a way that was incomprehensible. *Please*. She mouthed the word over and over. It was a silent scream. She raked her fingers over his arms, but it didn't make him give in.

Finally, she let her bottom fall back to the velvety moss and tried to regain a grip on her sanity. He wasn't going to fuck her because she wasn't going to let him hear her voice. They were both going to have to live with that.

Tears of frustration gathered in her eyes, making her blink. She hated her past. She hated having to hide who she was more than she'd ever hated it before because she wanted him so much. She let her legs fall back down on either side of his body. She started to push herself up and away from him, but he grabbed one of her thighs in his hand. "Don't leave me," he rasped.

She stared into his eyes and the look in them left her breathless. He wanted her just as desperately as she wanted him. He could have had any woman in the frolic, but he didn't care. He wanted her and, mirrored in his eyes, she could see that he needed her so much it was hurting him. She reached up and cupped the back of his neck, tugging his head down for a kiss. She felt his resolve crumble. The kiss became deep, rough. His cock pressed down into her, stretching her open.

She gasped against his mouth. He was even bigger, she realized, than he'd felt in her hand. When he was finally buried inside her, she could feel him all the way to the pit of her stomach.

He rocked back and forth. As wet as she was for him, there was intense friction as he pounded into her. He slipped his hand down, spreading the top of her lips open so his pelvis rubbed directly against her throbbing clitoris.

She exploded, body convulsing. He groaned loudly as she spasmed around his rock-hard erection, but he didn't spill his seed.

He kept sliding in and out of her, making her come over and over until the night receded. Her every thought and emotion was centered on her core where Thane was trying to drown himself. She found that she wanted to keep him there. When he finally flooded her vault, it felt right in a way that nothing ever had before in her life. She never wanted to be empty again. Any space inside her, she wanted him to fill. She held him tightly.

He spoke in her ear. "I want us to belong to each other."

She ran her hand through his hair tenderly. He was everything that was honest and true, and she could fall in love with him without reservations, but he had no idea what he was saying. He didn't really know anything about her, who she really was.

"I'll handle things. First, you've got to tell me everything. Then I'll make them understand why you had to deceive us."

She smiled in the darkness. She knew deep in her heart that she was already in love with him. She also knew love wouldn't save them. It could only destroy them.

Chapter 5

Thane wasn't sure how long they'd been lying together. It had been a good bit of time, but not long enough to his mind. She sat up with a start at the sound of his name being called from the ponds below.

He didn't stir. He just watched her get dressed in the low light. Her body disappeared under the frock.

"Let's go to the queen's library so we can use a board," he said. "I want to talk to you."

She looked toward the sound of his name then back at him and shook her head.

He reached out, knocking her legs out from under her. He twisted to catch her so that she fell on top of him. "I'll ignore them. I can leave the frolic right now with you."

She shook her head.

"Why not?"

She just shook her head again.

It was so frustrating that she wouldn't just speak to him. He kept wondering why. She'd hid her breasts from him that first time, so that he'd thought there was something wrong with them, but they'd tasted perfect to his mouth. Would her voice be just as perfect? Why did she refuse to let him hear it?

"Tomorrow then. We'll meet in the queen's library after my last course."

She gave a curt nod and tried to extract herself from his grasp.

"Kiss me before you go."

She smiled at him as she pulled up her hood, covering her hair and head. Only her face was left for him to look at. She brushed her lips over his as sweetly as any kiss he'd ever felt.

He let her go slowly and stood. "One more thing," he said.

She looked at him expectantly.

"If I don't participate in the frolic, everyone will know that something's wrong. I don't want to be with anyone else, but if you want me to keep things secret, I'll have to."

She froze.

"Shall I participate?" he asked.

She nodded slowly.

He frowned. He'd been hoping that sharing him would be too much for her. "All right, but I'll never be able to do it if I know you're here watching me. Promise me you'll leave right now."

She nodded.

He stood and, without hesitation, ran forward, body arcing out from the falls. A moment later he was cleaving the water below.

Thane surfaced and pulled himself out of the water, still picturing Veylin's face. It took a supreme act of will not to look over his shoulder to where she was. He slicked his hands through his hair, pushing it from his eyes, and glanced around. There were numerous bodies tangled together, all working toward a victory in the ultimate sport. Even though he'd just had her, he felt his body tighten at the thought of Veylin above. He wanted her with him. He'd never been quite the showman Calem was, but at the moment he felt like fucking Veylin in front of everyone. He wanted her flesh at his disposal in a way that made his blood pound in his veins. He'd explore and invade her every cavern and show everyone what happened to a woman who created an unquenchable thirst in the greatest champion in the realm.

Hands ran over his body as he walked past people on his way back inside. He paused for a moment, wanting to give Veylin time to leave before he found Ashan and played his role in the night's game.

He tried not to think of Ashan. Normally he would have found her attractive enough, but, at the moment, he couldn't muster any enthusiasm for sex with her. He thought about the way Calem had taken him from the kitchen and told him he couldn't

have Veylin. He tried to recreate the anger and frustration he'd felt toward his brother at that moment.

He imagined Calem, in the role of frolic villain, capturing Veylin and keeping her from him. That did it; suddenly he felt a surge of fury. He walked purposefully toward the large partition. Men appeared instantly and moved into his path. In the guise of the game, they were Calem's minions.

Thane dispensed with them easily and rounded the corner of the blue-black panel. It was near dark behind it. He heard the gasping of a woman being pleased.

"I believe you have something that belongs to me," Thane said, imagining Veylin's body tied down to the mats. Naked. Enraptured. Open.

Calem rose and turned. He wore a hooded robe, untied to reveal his body slick with sweat. "If you would have her, come through me to take her," Calem scornfully challenged. Calem was good at playing roles.

Thane didn't hesitate. He leapt forward, knocking his surprised brother down onto the mats. Instantly Calem responded with answering force. They wrestled furiously. The blows were solid. They hadn't been involved in this sort of combat for some time.

The battle raged until Thane rolled Calem into an unbreakable hold. They panted for breath as several others took over holding Calem.

Thane sprang to his feet and strolled over to the quiet girl. He looked down and could only see a shadowed image of her face and body. He wanted her silent. He wanted her to be Veylin.

He knelt between her outstretched and bound legs. "The victor's prize is very fair tonight," he said softly. He heard her breathing quicken.

He slid his hand in front of him and tested her pussy. She was drenched. Whatever sexual tortures Calem had subjected her to, she'd enjoyed it.

He stood and grabbed a scarf from the wall. He returned to his knees and gagged her. She gurgled a protest. Not the hero's usual maneuver, but he didn't care. He stretched his body over hers and leaned his mouth close to her ear. "You can scream

against the fabric if you need to," he whispered, sliding his hand down to her wet sex. "We both know you enjoy being bound." He slid three fingers into her. She writhed to the limits of her bindings, the bells in her hair chiming softly.

"It seems the dark master had a very thick cock to stretch you with. I wonder if you will feel me at all in that sea of fluid." He put his thumb over the throbbing bud of her clitoris, rubbing her mercilessly.

Within moments, she struggled fiercely against the bonds. He slid a fourth finger in. She accommodated it without difficulty. What had Calem abused her pussy with? Thane hadn't been serious when he'd first said that she might not enjoy him, but now he wondered. His cock and Calem's were pretty similar in length and thickness, but whatever his brother had fucked her with had left her amazingly dilated.

A thought came to him... a way to insure that he would stretch her enough for her to feel this climax more than any of the others. Of course, it would probably be hard for her to take. He'd seen it done by others, but all of them had had hands that were much smaller than his.

He untied the gag and listened to her gasp from the attention he was giving her clit. He didn't mind anymore if she spoke. For what he was planning, he wouldn't need to pretend she was Veylin.

He kissed her softly. "Your body's very open." He untied her arms and legs with his free hand. "I think you can take more than I'm giving you."

"Yes."

"Yes what?"

"Yes, I can take more."

"Are you brave?"

"Yes," she gasped, arching her hips wildly.

He moved both hands between her legs. His right thumb took over on her clit, driving her to madness. Slowly, he let his fingers inside her curl and he pushed his hand forward.

She screamed, and her pussy clenched tight around his fist. Her pelvic muscles were staggeringly strong. For a moment she crushed his hand, making it cramp. Then he stretched his fingers to ease the cramp and began moving it back and forth within her.

She wailed frantically.

"Tell me to stop," he said, punching into her slowly. "Ask me to withdraw," he advised.

She shrieked wildly, over and over, but never said the words that would have ended it. He looked down to where she ringed his wrist. He flexed his bicep and her hips curled. It really was amazing to use his fist. His arm was so strong that he could completely control the position of her lower body.

Her screams began to coincide with the spasms around his hand. She was getting there. He drove into her deeper and twisted. She became senseless, wilder than any beast he'd ever seen. It took several moments for the maelstrom to leave her.

"Stop," she finally begged.

He dragged his hand toward himself. It was difficult to get her muscles to release him and she screamed again as he withdrew.

Her whole body shook from her tremendous exertion, and she rolled onto her side, weeping. He lay down behind her, putting his arms around her and drawing her back against his chest. Her body felt cool and damp against his hot torso.

"You were spectacular," he said sincerely.

She continued crying for a few moments. He realized that there were throngs of people standing in a circle around them. Her screams had probably drawn them over to watch.

"Are you okay?" he asked, when she settled.

"By creation, that was the fuck of a lifetime."

He smiled and kissed the side of her face.

"If you ever come near me again, I'm going to run," she said with a shuddering laugh.

He gave her a brief smile. "As you wish." He uncurled his body and stood. The tapping started then. Bare feet slapping against the mats and floor. It became deafening. He nodded an acknowledgement. Any other night, he would have basked in the praise of his peers who were lauding his prowess at bringing someone to such pleasure, but tonight the triumph was bittersweet. It should have been Veylin that he'd made weep with pleasure. It should have been her body huddled in front of his, shivering and damp and in need of his heat and comfort.

The thought of putting his fist into her aroused him almost unbearably. Of course, doing anything, even just tonguing her mouth, aroused him. How was he ever going to keep his lust a secret?

Chapter 6

Veylin lay in bed, listening with silent tears streaming, to the squeals and excited description of Thane's fisting of Ashan at the frolic. The girls spoke of how Ashan had been unable to stand up afterward. He'd violated her so completely that her entire lower body had refused to work properly. Calem had had to carry her back to her room, with a parade of amazed spectators trailing behind them.

All the girls agreed that she might never be able to walk again, though Veylin doubted that. She also heard the girls wonder with breathless anticipation who would be Thane's next victim. It was obvious any one of them would have volunteered in an instant.

So he hadn't wanted to be with anyone else? For someone so hesitant, he'd certainly created a spectacle of himself and his lover. She bit her lip to keep from sobbing out loud.

It took all night for her to fall into a fitful sleep. When she woke up it was late in the day. The courses were half over for the others. She stretched her body, feeling an unaccustomed soreness in her muscles and between her lower lips. The decadent feel of having been loved by a well-endowed prince. She stared down at her nipples. They were pale pink with gold rims, the gold rings a telltale sign that she was descended from Cesta, the siren goddess. More telling would be the changes that would happen if she let Thane suck those signature nipples regularly. She cupped her breasts. They didn't feel larger or heavier than usual, but the nipples burned against her palms. Just the slight pressure made them thrust forward.

She pulled her hands away and got up. She washed herself with fresh herb lotion and pictured Thane's face. Then she frowned, remembering the gossip about his performance with Ashan. She imagined the tall blonde blushing pink and flirting with

Thane. They were both nearing transition, both tall and fair with strong bodies. They would be an excellent match. Surely the queen would think so. Sharp stabs of jealousy tortured her.

Veylin had never thought Ashan interested in Thane before, but she'd heard many times about men and women who had shared particularly strong physical reactions to each other deciding to be bound when they reached the age of assent. Veylin herself was younger. Not that it would matter. The only way for her and Thane to lay claim to each other would be if everyone knew that she was intelligent, which would lead to questions... which would lead to discovery. And then the match would be denounced by Equeid and Likus and she would be returned to Kenart... without Thane.

She dried and wrapped her breasts, which itched to be cupped and sucked. She had truly come of age. Having her breasts sucked had never made them so sensitive the next day. It did not bode well for her being able to resist the perfect-bodied prince.

* * *

Thane sat quietly in the queen's library, waiting for her. She did not come. And did not come. And did not come. He ignored feast time despite his growling stomach. And still she did not come.

What had happened? Veylin had more freedom than anyone. She was almost devoid of responsibilities. She had no courses. No chore duties. She could have been waiting for him in the library when he arrived. No one would be looking for her. Unlike him. Others always noticed his comings and goings. He'd had to sneak away. And if he left the library to roam around and look for her now, he'd risk someone discovering him in what should have been a deserted corridor.

He waited. Still she did not come. Finally, it was very late. He rose and looked angrily around the room. They could have been alone for hours. He could have tasted her body and she his. They could have talked using the board, but she had squandered the opportunity. Why had she?

He scowled and left the library. He slipped out of the corridor back into the main halls. He went to the kitchen first, eating some scraps, then made his way through the halls of the palace, looking around. There were small groups sitting in the common areas. Male and female mixed together in study groups. None of them seemed to be having any trouble concentrating. Discussions of harvesting food and centralized farming, harnessing the power of stars for energy, trade and the political climate of the various nations swirled around him. None of the discussions were centered on sex. The frolic had sated them. Suddenly his own sensual thoughts of Veylin seemed all the more lascivious.

He saw a group of athletes. They were talking about training strategies and waved for him to join them. He walked over slowly and glanced down at their drawings of contraptions designed to stretch and strengthen the muscles. Many of them were a second generation to the ones he'd designed himself. His creations had been built and were used regularly in training. Still, it was Melotin's ambition to continue to make progress and stay ahead of the other nations.

"That won't work," Thane said, pointing to one sketch. "The arm muscles will tear unless you stop the range of motion here." He made a mark with an inker.

The athletes all leaned over it again and studied it. "That's better," they agreed.

"Well, hello," a female voice said from behind him.

He turned to find the statuesque blonde, Ashan, smiling at him. She walked slowly and a bit awkwardly toward them. He'd heard she'd been limping around. He held out a hand to assist her as she seated herself.

He sat on the table in front of her. "Are you all right?"

She nodded with a grin. "I'm recovering. And you surprise me."

"Why?"

"Skipping the feast? When the men were celebrating you all day, watching me shuffle about. I thought you would no doubt be carried to the feast on their shoulders."

He could feel the color rising in his cheeks. His hand went to his chin and he pulled on the skin there as if trying to draw the flush down and under his hand. "No

one should be celebrating if you're lame today. My brother and fellows should be calling on me to make a public apology. Since they've failed in their duty to do so, I offer it now without prior counsel." He went to one knee before her. "Forgive me for misusing you."

She leaned forward and kissed the top of his head. "You are the best of what is good in this queendom. And there is nothing to forgive."

His skin burned worse, and he shook his head at himself, still looking at the ground. He didn't want to blush like a child in front of his athletes, but this was extremely embarrassing. As the heat in his face receded, he stood.

"Sit with us and talk about training," Ashan said, gesturing to the seat next to her.

"Another time. I fell asleep, and I'm therefore behind on preparation for courses tomorrow."

"Til tomorrow then," she said.

Thane turned and left them. He found himself jogging down the halls until he reached the mouth of the corridor that led to Veylin's room. His body froze, and he looked up and down the forked paths. He knew he couldn't go to her room. Males didn't knock on the outer doors to the females' suites. And they certainly never went inside. It was forbidden. Calem hypothesized that keeping the sexes apart in their daily living was to create suspense as to what happened behind the closed doors and to make them anxious for the post-frolic period of finding a match.

Thane had perhaps fifteen frolics left before he reached the age of transition as Ashan had. Then there was the search for a partner for life. Shortly, Ashan would leave Galinea and travel to the palaces where those in the post-frolic period began new courses, the specialized advanced education called simply "specials."

A minimum of two-thirds of specials had to be completed before the queen would bless a life match. Still, men and women could meet and dance, dine and have sex after the parties. Some made a match early and waited for the day when the younger of the pair nearly finished specials so the match could be officially recognized.

Other people hesitated even when they came of age to make a match and remained the sole keepers of their own souls. Gatler was one such. He was long-finished with his education and still alone. Thane guessed that it must have suited his brother's temperament to be that way since there were many female warriors with whom he could have found a good match.

Thane thought about Veylin. She was younger than him and far behind on her courses. He would have to wait for her. Only those who had transitioned and were post frolic could attend royal parties, and none who had already transitioned could rejoin the frolic. So when couples formed during the frolic period, the older person had to wait for the younger one to complete his or her educational track before they could be together again. The realm wanted each citizen to reach full potential.

Thane turned from Veylin's corridor and strode down to his own. He went into the princes' suite and found Calem in the common area, eyes following streaming text. The text stopped abruptly as his gaze swiveled to Thane.

Thane nodded a greeting and walked past the common room to the hanging stack of planks that led to his loft. He pulled the cord causing them to spread in a serpentine path around the cord. They could be climbed as a ladder, but it was easier to use them as stairs.

"Where have you been, Brother?" Calem asked.

"Nowhere."

"I looked for you after the feast."

Thane climbed up to his loft. "I fell asleep."

"Where?"

"What does it matter?" Thane asked, falling onto his back on his bed.

Calem's voice rose from below. "You don't feel fit for company? What troubles you, Thane?"

A part of him wanted to confide everything to his younger brother. There wasn't a great age difference between them, and Calem was intelligent and clever. If there were a way through this, Calem would probably see it at once, but Thane had made his

promises. He wouldn't break them. Anyway, what was the point? She hadn't come to him.

"Nothing troubles me," Thane said, his voice clearly dull. Thane doubted Calem would be fooled.

"Come now. Let us speak openly. Have you forgotten that we three princes have pledged to be each other's counsel?"

"I have not forgotten. When I'm in need of counsel, I will ask for it."

There was silence.

"I thought perhaps you were with someone you should not be with," Calem's voice confided, not quite as loudly as before. "But I found the child when I sought her."

Thane grimaced. Calem had seen and understood far too much in the kitchen while they were on feast duty.

"Then I thought that perhaps you were upset about Ashan's sore body, but I knew you were not foolish enough to worry over that."

"Foolish?" Thane echoed.

"Yes, foolish. The woman has been cooing all day about what an amazing experience her last frolic was. You and I both did our worst and she is the happier for it. If you should worry over anyone's pain, it should be mine."

"Yours?"

"Yes. I could hardly straighten my neck this morning after that chokehold of yours."

"Oh. I'm sorry."

"Well, it *was* poor form. I had spent a lot of my strength in the pursuit of Ashan's pleasure and my own. And along you come, hardly spent and oddly ferocious. Except in tournaments, I have never felt that level of strength and skill turned from you onto me."

"You're stronger now. If I hadn't used more force, I couldn't have subdued you."

"So it's a compliment to me that you nearly twisted my head off?" Calem said wryly.

Thane laughed. "Exactly."

Calem fell silent again and Thane suspected that he'd returned to his studies. Thane felt slightly better for having spoken with his brother even if it was not about what ripped at his heart.

He thought about Ashan and wondered suddenly what gossip Veylin had overheard. He frowned. Had she left the night before as he'd asked only to hear later all the details of his exploits? Of course she would have overheard; no one thought to conceal things from her. He grimaced, trying to imagine what he would have felt in her place.

A moment later he found that he'd risen from the bed and was standing next to it idly. His legs wanted to carry him to her so that he might explain. But explain what? He took a deep breath. To explain that he loved no one but her. She had never been to a frolic before. She might not understand that the games were just that. Every male and female who attended the frolic partnered with hundreds over time, but in the end each person chose only one person to share a life. Still, jealousies did occur even among those who should have known better. And Veylin, who'd been isolated, would not be used to accepting such sharing as occurred in the frolic. She had probably felt betrayed.

He wanted to go to her, but of course, he couldn't. He would have to wait for her to seek him out. Though he doubted he could wait very long.

Chapter 7

"Our golden boy is strangely subdued these days," Bettis said crossly. "We must find a way to cheer him."

Veylin's eyes didn't leave her slippers, but she listened attentively. She had been specifically avoiding Thane. She slipped in and out of the feasts quickly and avoided hallways and common areas at any times when she might bump into him. Most of all she avoided his mother's library.

"Ashan is excited to think he is in love with her."

No!

Veylin could not help but steal a glance at Chubin, the round-faced girl with fuzzy reddish hair who had spoken.

"What makes her think so?" Bettis asked.

"Well, it's not like him to be so quiet or to disappear to think so much. It started after the frolic, and he only joined there with her. Since she's gone from the frolic now, she wonders if he's troubled by the waiting period. He still has much time before he transitions."

"I think she's wrong. Thane has never sought Ashan out, and he didn't do so at the frolic."

"I know, but she never really looked at him as a possible match until that night either."

"I think she's being silly," Bettis continued. "She wants him to be in love with her because she finds herself in love with him, but it won't last. Ashan was overwhelmed by the heat of the frolic. As time passes, she'll be drawn to someone else."

Veylin wondered if Bettis, like herself, had logic born of wishful thinking. No one who was enamored with the golden-boy prince wanted to believe he was in love with someone else.

Veylin rose and wandered from the room. It had been four days since the frolic. Ashan was walking normally... no, actually, she was strolling and sauntering normally now. Jealousy and all its wicked wishes rose instantly as Veylin considered Ashan and Thane together. In the depths of her mind, she knew she should let the other woman have him, but it lacerated her heart.

She tried to keep her eyes void of purpose as she set off toward the queen's library. He probably wouldn't be there, but she wanted to see him. It would ease her longing for him if she could talk to him using the board. She needed to tell him they couldn't be together again though it was hard to tolerate the idea.

She slid inside silently, wondering how she'd get a message to him. Her slippers padded silently over the soft matting of the floor. She rounded the turn and smiled.

The golden prince of Melotin was stretched out on the floor, asleep. She knelt beside him. In slumber, he looked ethereal. Normally, despite his blonde hair and blue eyes he looked very hard and masculine.

As he slept, it was as if his true nature came to the surface. There was nothing beyond his sweetness and honor. She bent forward over his face and pressed her lips to his gently.

"Veylin," he murmured, still unconscious.

She smiled. *I'm here, beautiful one. What dreams of me do you have?* She glanced down the length of his body and then back up, settling on his groin. *Perhaps semi-erect.* She wondered wickedly if she could wake parts of him before others. Surely Ashan had never been alone with him while he slept. In this sort of seduction, Veylin could be the first.

She ran a tongue over his lower lip very, very gently. He turned his head ever so slightly, and moved a hand to his mouth as if to dispense with a breeze that was disturbing the placid surface of his skin.

She leaned down and untied the cinch of his pants. She tugged gently so that they were loose on his hips then looked back at his face. There was no furrowing of his brow. No struggle to suppress conscious thoughts. He was still fully asleep.

She studied his face as she slipped her small hand under the fabric. She touched his thighs gently, all the while watching his face. When he didn't stir, she got bolder. She cupped his balls, squeezing gently. He shifted slightly and she noticed new tenting of his pants. She moved her hand to his cock. Thoughts of how she'd felt with him inside her on the night of the frolic came back. A rush of heat suffused her. The silky feel of his skin directly contrasted with the steel hardness underneath as she ran her fingertips over him.

His gorgeous mouth fell open, and he sighed. Still his lids did not flutter open. She moved her hand out of his clothes and stood up. She unclipped the sex-covering and let it drop to the ground from under the wrapper skirt she wore. The skirt was long and made of very soft fabric, but too narrow to allow her to do what she was contemplating.

She slid the skirt up high on her thigh and stepped over him so that she had a foot on either side of his hips. *This is wrong*, she mused. *This is rape if I don't wake him first*. She hesitated. *But he did say my name. He did ask for me*.

Her emotions warred, until she heard again in her mind... *Ashan is excited to think Thane is in love with her*. Darkness rose inside her. She could not compete with Ashan in height or athletic prowess, but there were some areas where she could compete. And Thane was in the library waiting for her not Ashan. It might be that he'd only wanted to talk with her. But here he was, laid out and beautiful. Who could blame her? *You were too much of a temptation*, she would tell him if he complained.

She stared down at him. Amber-colored and fair. And she wanted him to be hers. Completely. She had always wanted him.

She floated downward to straddle his body without touching it. *If you would stop me, Thane, now is the time to wake up*.

She put her hands under her, the left easing down the fabric of his covering, the right taking him in her hand. She glided the tip between her lower lips, letting her moisture coat the end of him.

His breathing came quicker, but his eyelids never creased. She wondered for a moment if he was only pretending to sleep, but his face was so untroubled. His desire didn't seem to touch him there. The other times she'd seen him gripped with lust it had shown in his face.

His hips moved a fraction of an inch. His tip probed against her flesh.

What, my love? What do you want? Why not open your eyes and take me?

Her own sex had begun to throb with wanting him. It remembered him. The way he'd stretched her with his thrusting on the night of the frolic. The way he'd tongued her to madness against the wall before that night.

Ride him, her body seemed to urge. As though he were your own beautiful stallion lost long ago.

She pushed her buttocks back so that he slid forward along her cleft and pressed the little bulb of tissue that remembered him so fondly. Pressure there felt so good.

You are a first-born princess. But for lack of a coronation, you are a queen. It's your right to have what you desire. Take him.

She was amazed at the way her wantonness allowed her to rationalize. Thoughts of claiming her status had died long ago only to resurface now to serve her desire.

His hips moved so that his slit almost engulfed her throbbing little bud. Her fingertips found him and squeezed, causing her to gasp and him to moan. The most sensitive part of each of them was trapped between her finger and thumb. It was an exquisite sensation.

She panted as the throbbing pressure built within her. Finally she could feel her moisture seeping down to dampen her curls. *He'll glide in so easily,* was her last thought before she moved his cock back and slid down onto him.

She was impaled to the hilt. The position made the penetration incredibly deep, causing her belly to clench and unclench in a constant fluttering cramp of pleasure and

pain at the same time. She moved forward and back, controlling the small movements of him inside her. It was likely to make her insane, and yet she didn't know if the opportunity to be joined in such a way with him would ever come again and she wanted to savor it.

She glanced down to the place where her dark hair tangled with his lighter ones. His hair was darker below the waist and coarser than that on his head. She ran a finger through the combination of their hair and twisted on his cock ever so slowly.

She heard him gasp and looked up from below her lashes. His eyes were open and wide. She waited for a reaction, for his hands to toss her off him or to grab her hips and force her up and down his length, but his hands only clenched into fists. The muscles of his stomach were suddenly clenched tight. She leaned forward slightly and pressed her fingertips on his abdomen as if to play a finely tuned instrument. His breath came out in ragged gasps, the sound thrusting through the air the way she bet his cock wanted to thrust into her folds.

She placed her palms flat on his taut belly for leverage and then raised her bottom, sliding her tunnel of flesh up along him. Then she rode him back down. He threw his head back and moaned. She looked at his huge fists and the tense corded muscles of his arms. They wanted to grab her. Of that much, she was sure.

He didn't reach for her. She had stolen his unsuspecting body at first, but now he was giving it to her. An offering of pleasure. She bit her lip and started to move. Up and down. Quicker. Harder. The ride had begun as a canter. Now it was a gallop.

His hips had begun to move, but not hard enough to buck her off or break her rhythm. Just enough to add to the pounding in the most exhilarating way. Without warning, she came fast and furious.

A series of spasms rocked her body. Then in the span of a breath, she was on her back and he was thrusting into her, reaching. Reaching. And his explosion came, drowning her insides.

He collapsed on top of her, sliding down so his face was near hers. She stroked his hair as his breath rushed in and out of his lungs, the weight of his chest squeezing down on hers when he gulped in air. He was so big to be so heartbreakingly beautiful.

"I love you," he breathed in her ear. "I love you," he said again and again. It came and went with his breath like a mantra. As if the repetition would burn it into her soul forever.

Finally when he had recovered, he moved above her, easing his weight off her. Suddenly she could fully inhale again.

Blue eyes stared down into hers. "Kiss me, Vey."

She pulled his head down and kissed him to tell him that she loved him too. And to tell him that she was sorry she preferred the pleasure of his body to anything that might prevent their downfall.

They kissed endlessly. He seemed to want nothing more than to join their mouths, their breath, their souls. Finally she pushed him away and went to get the board.

When she came back he was carefully putting away the erection that their kissing had caused. He cinched the pants and crawled over to her on his knees then sat down next to her.

Her first question was: "Ashan?"

He shook his head.

Her words appeared. "You'll never touch her again?"

"Never," he swore.

"I've heard about nothing but how well you used her body at the frolic."

"I didn't use it. I pleased her. She didn't pleasure me. I used my hand. The only time I spilled my seed that night was with you."

"To how many women have you said the words 'I love you'?"

"One."

She smiled. "What about your mother?"

He sighed. "All right, two."

Her eyes glanced to the floor where he'd been sleeping and then back to his face. "I'm sorry I raped you," she lied.

"I'm not." He smiled, running a long finger along her bottom lip. "My heart is yours. The rest of the body comes with it."

She arched an eyebrow. She'd never had a man's body at her disposal. She wasn't sure what ways she might want to use it to experiment with, but it excited her to think he would let her. "And I can do anything I want to your body?"

"Anything we both enjoy."

Clever boy. "What do you enjoy?"

"Looking at you," he said, running his left hand over her hair.

"I meant during sex."

"Looking at you," he repeated.

"What else?"

"There will be plenty of time for me to show you later."

"Why not now?"

"Right now, I want to talk to you. We need to talk about us."

She moved her hand away from the board, feeling suddenly forlorn. This time was carved from reality; there was no good way for them to be together other than secretly.

He caught her hand as she drew it to her body. He pulled it back to the board.

"Tell me everything." He paused. "You must."

She shook her head.

"Please."

She bit her lip and tears stung her eyes.

"Not knowing you is killing me, Vey. I need to hear everything about you. Your past. And also what you'd want if you could have anything."

She touched the board with her hand. "If I could have anything that I wanted?"

He nodded.

"Just you."

"That's done."

"No, I mean if I could have what I wanted I would truly have you to myself. No more frolic for you. No more sleeping and dressing and washing alone for you. I would have you as mine. I would be selfish, like a child with a favorite toy. I would keep you so close to me that you'd long to be free. Love should be about freedom. My love would make you a slave."

His expression turned uneasy. His lashes hooded his eyes for a moment. Then he looked up again. "Your love can't make me a slave, Veylin. Only my love for you can do that. And it already has. You have no cause to feel guilt or remorse. Love is given and accepted, that's all. This love is new. It can be any way that we wish it to be."

He's so good. He's too good to even understand how complicated things can get. Her eyes blurred with unshed tears. "You don't even begin to understand what a woman can do to a man or the reverse."

"Yes, I do. I've made an unorthodox pact precisely because I do understand."

"What? What pact?"

"If we're ever bound, I'll have to share you with my brothers."

Her mouth fell open and her hand froze on the board. "What?"

"I'd forgotten about it until we started this discussion. The three of us made a pact that would involve us and the women we bound to us."

He would make her into a royal concubine? "What are you talking about?"

He frowned, shaking his head. "I was young when I agreed to it... but maybe not so young that I shouldn't have known better. Then again, maybe Calem and Gatler are right. Maybe it is the only way."

"What do you mean?"

"You weren't born here. You didn't have parents to tell you my mother's story."

"You tell me."

"She was caught between two brothers who loved her. Two princes. She was bound to one, but apparently secretly loved the other more. Their jealousy and their battle for her cost them both their lives. All the time we were growing up she told us to

never let a woman come between us. Always protect your brothers, she said. She whispered it to Gatler the most since he was the oldest. And one day Calem and I were competing. Sports, but we were trying to impress a girl. Gatler stood watching us and then drew us into the palace. In the princes' suite, we swore an oath." He held up his right arm, showing her a small scar. "We each have one in the same spot."

"So you'll just give me to them?"

He hesitated. "Well --"

He would just hand her over like a tunic shirt or frock? To be used for their pleasure regardless of her own will... like in Kenart? Before she realized that her hand was moving, she'd slapped him across the face.

Chapter 8

Thane's eyebrows shot up in surprise, causing her to immediately regret what she'd done; it had been an uncontrollable reaction. Her body had been taken at times when she wouldn't have given it. The thought of it happening again chilled her blood to slush. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have struck you."

He stared at her. Recognition dawned in his eyes. "I wasn't talking about forcing you, Veylin. We're not... we're from here. Melotiner men don't force women to have sex. When I said I'd share you with my brothers, I meant with your permission. I meant that if they tried to seduce you and it worked, I'd let them into our bed. Like at the frolic when there are threesomes or foursomes. No one is ever forced."

She saw that he was telling her the truth. She wouldn't be forced. *I'm a fool*, she thought. She'd slapped him so hard that she'd left her small handprint on his beautiful face. Worse was that she'd doubted him. Tears welled and leaked out of her eyes.

"Please don't," he said with a hoarse voice, capturing her head in his hands. He kissed the tears off her cheeks. "This is so new to me. I didn't explain myself well. Please don't cry. It's like a knife cutting out my heart. Slap me again if you need to, but don't do this," he whispered.

A garbled laugh escaped her throat. And she pulled her head away, leaning back and wiping the tears from her face. Who could have known that there existed men with such strong bodies who could be overwhelmed by the sight of a woman crying? She'd seen too many unmerciful men who weren't half as strong as Thane. But perhaps his strength was what allowed him to show tenderness. He had nothing to prove. He knew his own power.

"Are you better now?" he asked, seemingly confused by her smile.

She nodded.

"Someone hurt you. I would know his name," he said gravely. He paused. "Or their names, if there were more than one."

"There is no one but you." She tried to kiss him, but he turned his head and then shook it for emphasis.

"I hurt you earlier by my poor explanation because I wasn't cautious. It's because I don't know what you've been through. Tell me so I can know you and so that I never hurt you again with what I don't know."

"It would hurt me to tell you."

He frowned, putting his head in his hands. The weight of the dilemma seemed to prey on him. She bent forward, kissing his bowed forehead.

He lifted his head. "When you trust me more, I hope you'll tell me."

"I'll trust you with myself. Bit by bit." *And if you surmise the rest, so be it.*

She stood up and undressed. She moved closer to where he was kneeling so that he could inspect her body. His eyes went immediately to her breasts. He'd never seen them in the light. He ran a fingertip over her nipple absently. She shivered.

"Gold-rimmed nipples," he said softly, never taking his eyes off them. "I heard something once in a lesson. I was young, but even young boys pay close attention to any lessons that have to do with breasts or nipples."

He stroked her peaks with his thumbs, watching them harden. "The color was the first thing," he murmured. He seemed to be talking to himself more than her. His left hand slid down so that the half circle formed by his thumb and curved index finger propped the breast forward. "I wonder how hard I need to suck to make it change."

Her hands started to tremble as he laved the nipple with his tongue. He licked slowly and then kissed, then leaned back to examine it. He smiled to himself. "This is an extremely good game." He leaned forward, teasing her with his teeth and then drawing her breast into his mouth. He sucked hard and her spine bowed with the pleasure. His arm shot around her, catching her as she sank. Her legs were bent and slack, but he held her up, and his mouth never lost her breast.

She gasped at the sensation, her heart fluttering. He eased her down to the padded floor and let her go for a moment. He examined her.

"A little duskier, but not what I heard was supposed to happen. More sucking, I think." He bent his head again, pulling on the nipple, making her whole body writhe. He sucked on her then, working her hard with his mouth until it turned almost painful. Then she felt it -- the nipple tingled and then burned. And the breast mounds began to engorge. Suddenly she was frightened. She'd known it could happen, but it never had before.

She tangled her hands in his hair and pulled his head back. He stared down at her chest and she knew what he saw. Luscious, bright red nipples with dark crimson rims.

She saw his smile, and he looked so pleased that it almost made her want to weep again. He bent his head to the other breast, his thumb and finger pinching the one he'd abandoned. The burning began instantly. It was too much. She twisted desperately, trying to escape, but his mouth was relentless, and she was trapped under him. She almost used her voice, but she had trained herself so well that she couldn't.

Then she felt it... pain swirling with pleasure. She grasped at his hair to pull him away before he tasted it, but it was too late. Even as his mouth came free she saw him swallow and there was a blue-violet drop on his lower lip. His eyes rolled back as his lids closed, and he licked the nectar from his lip slowly. She watched his throat muscles contract as he swallowed again.

"Better than anything I've ever tasted," he whispered. "Sweet as fruit pulp. Sweeter." He looked down then. Not at her face, but at her breasts. "They're full," he said in a tone that terrified her. "They're mine," he whispered before he bent his head again.

He grabbed her hands in his and pinned them to the floor above her head. His strength was so complete that he probably couldn't even feel her arms struggling to get free. And suddenly, she felt it. The sensations pulling her under as he drank.

The world spun, and she was floating. All her strength draining from her swollen breasts as he gorged himself. And then she felt him between her legs, slamming inside her. For her, it wasn't just an orgasm; it was a cataclysm.

* * *

Veylin regained consciousness slowly, her body tingling. Wrapped in Thane's arms, she heard him whispering.

"Please wake up."

She was so weak, but felt aglow, as if her skin could illuminate a world in eclipse. His skin against hers felt feverish. Her body was limp, but she could turn her head and did. His face swam before her eyes. She smiled at him wearily.

"I thought... are you hurt?"

Her eyes drifted closed and then she forced them back open.

"You passed out. I didn't realize at first. I was so... I don't know what I was."

She smiled. She knew what words he didn't use, but should have. *I was so caught up. I couldn't stop myself.*

She felt her strength coming back, and the ache was there. Deep in her muscles. And deep between her legs. He'd branded her with his body's power, just as she had corrupted him with hers.

His fingers drifted to one of her nipples. He squeezed and she gasped at the pain.

"I'm sorry," he said, kissing her neck. "It's hard to keep my hands off you." He cupped her breast without squeezing. That soreness was just bearable. "Squeezing with my hand won't make it come. Only drinking brings it out."

She nodded.

"It was like nothing I've ever felt before."

She leaned her tired head back against his chest.

"I feel stronger, more alive. It's like I can feel every muscle in my body down to the smallest one, and every thought in my head is like thunder."

His hand had fallen down to her battered sex. He stroked her there absently, cupping her with warm fingers.. She was too spent to be aroused, but it still felt nice.

"I claim this," he whispered fiercely, squeezing her mound.

Her heart pounded with fear and anticipation. She knew he was still under the nectar's influence. His tongue licked her neck slowly as if the faintly salty taste of her sweat appealed to him now after the intense sweetness he'd drunk from her earlier.

"Veylin," he said.

She turned her head slightly as if to hear him better.

He gripped tighter between her legs. "It belongs to me."

She winced, wondering why the pain felt good, and nodded an acknowledgement. He released his grip, caressing her lower curls very gently.

She let her head fall back against his shoulder. She could feel his strength radiating against her back, and she knew she would never be free of him again. The knowledge worried a part of her, but another part of her was glad.

Thane felt it rumbling through his body, strength and lust, curling up like smoke from a blaze deep inside him.

Veylin lay against him, cool against his skin, soothing the surging heat. He wouldn't fuck her again so soon using his cock, though it was rigid and throbbing. He wasn't sure if she'd survive another coupling like the last one. He'd thought for a moment that he'd killed her. She'd looked so pale. Her skin had felt so chilled against his. For a few moments the sensations had been so intense, so pleasurable, he hadn't cared. But then he'd been rocked by a dread so fierce it had terrified him. To lose her... it would be like losing himself. He'd gathered her to him and waited until she'd woken up.

He'd tried to explain, but he couldn't really find the right words. Also, she seemed to understand. He could feel that she was tired, but he couldn't stop stroking her. He wanted to dip his fingers in and feel her come again, but he knew she wasn't ready. He was prepared to wait all night, leaning up against the wall.

He talked to her for a while. He told her about tournaments he'd fought in and games he'd played. He told her about machines he'd designed and who, of the young

ones, he thought were going to make good champions. He talked about washing the towers and how it felt to hang in the air so far above the ground.

Then when he felt her strength returning and her body becoming more alert, he told her about the first time he'd realized how to make an erection go away. He told her also about the time he and Calem had hidden in the queen's garden to spy on Gatler who had arranged to meet a visiting princess.

"I was pre-frolic," he whispered in her ear. "My brother was near transition, and I remember thinking: I want an erection as big as his."

Thane dipped his fingertips into her. Veylin's lids fell and she bit her lip.

"The girl had big swollen breasts, but they weren't as beautiful as yours," he said, cupping a breast with his free hand.

She arched into his palm. He squeezed her very gently, and dipped a little more of his fingers into her.

Thane found her earlobe and sucked on it. "Spread your legs, Vey."

She whimpered, which he found endearing, but it didn't make him want to leave her alone. And he knew she didn't want him to do that anyway. His seed had leaked out long ago and the moisture he could feel now was what her body was making to entice him.

He pulled his hand away from her pussy and up to his mouth. He sucked the taste of her off his fingers. She wiggled her bottom restlessly, causing her back to brush against his stiff cock.

"Spread yourself open for me," he said. Her thighs fell apart. "Good girl," he said, kissing her neck. "Now put my hand where you want it." He laid his hand on her knee, watching it wait there. Her bottom moved again. The pressure of her back felt good against him.

Her hand rose and she pinched the skin on the back of his. He smiled. He guessed that was supposed to tell him she was frustrated.

"If you're so impatient, put it where you want it." He found her hesitation amusing. During the frolic... no, even before then, girls and boys in Melotin learned to

work together and teach each other what gave them pleasure. In the beginning it was all simple things like put my hand where you want me to touch you. Tell me what you like. She should have learned it long ago, but she wasn't from Melotin and she'd been living as if she had no desire for sex. So he needed to cajole her into asking for what she wanted. Not that he needed her help. He knew exactly where to touch. He just wanted her to lead him to it so they both understood that she wanted it and was ready.

Finally she pulled his hand down to her lower lips. "That's it, sweetness. Show my hand what you want."

The instant her fingers pressed his inside, he took control. The grip and stroke combined with the grinding of his palm against her clit soon had her arching and gasping.

He moved his own body so that she was pressed against him, and as she came, so did he, her juices gushing into his hand, his spurting over her back.

After their breathing returned to normal, he mumbled, "We need a good washing. We're covered in sex."

She twisted around and kissed him and then pulled free of his arms, getting up.

"When?" he asked. She looked at him curiously. "When will we meet here again? Tomorrow night?"

She shook her head.

"When?"

She tapped her thumb to her index finger twice.

"Two days from now?"

She nodded.

"I wish it were already then."

She smiled as she dressed.

"Will I ever get to hear your voice?"

Her eyes turned to him first and then her head. Her smile was mysterious.

"Yes?" he asked.

She nodded slowly.

“When?”

She shrugged, teasing him. He had the urge to get up and grab her, but she was fully recovered and bolted out the door.

Chapter 9

Veylin sat in the tower, watching the others at sport and play. Even from the great height her eyes followed Thane without difficulty. His easy grace and iron strength were greater today. In the hand-to-hand, he fought tirelessly. His opponents landed on their backs over and over.

She noticed that one person had stepped back from the contest to watch him. Calem's head followed Thane's movements. She couldn't see the younger brother's expression, but knew it must be contemplative. Calem, it was said, missed very little. She knew the girls confirmed all their gossip by testing it on him. He was a man of surpassing information and when he confirmed or denied a rumor, he was always found to be right.

Veylin felt a shadow of uneasiness stretch over her. Her skin chilled, and she leaned back. She hoped that Thane had noticed Calem's scrutiny, that he was concealing his satisfaction at having conquered her the night before.

She shook her head at herself. It wouldn't occur to Thane to hide anything. He was too open, too honest. She stood slowly. They weren't to meet today, but she must find a way to warn him.

There would be no opportunity to do it discreetly while he was on the field of play. Perhaps she could get his attention at the feast. She would have no trouble getting him to meet her alone in the queen's library, but what if Calem were watching and followed them? She needed to see him while Calem was otherwise engaged.

Of course she couldn't simply ask someone about Calem's scheduled courses for the rest of the day. She thought of the suite of the master of the courses. He maintained the lists. She stole quietly down the stairs of the tower and to her room. She put on the anti-detection frock and went on her way.

* * *

Veylin tapped tentatively on the door of the princes' suite. She looked around. The hall was completely still and empty. She wondered if Thane had decided not to go to his rooms after his courses.

Waiting breathlessly, she tapped again with a bit more force. *Destos*, she silently swore. He should be along soon, but if he didn't hurry, she would have to leave to avoid Calem's return. Not that he would be able to see her, but she worried that he would somehow know she was there.

She tapped again absently and was startled when the door opened. Thane was gorgeous and... wet, a semi-sheer wrapper fastened about his waist. She put a hand to his sculpted chest, compressing the water beads under her palm.

He grabbed her invisible arm and pulled her into the suite, closing the door. He pushed the hood off and stared down at her face before kissing her. Breathlessness overcame her as his hands roamed over her body.

She drew back from him, causing him to frown.

"Erections have plagued me all day. I'm not able to stop thinking about you."

That's the trouble with nectar, she thought.

"I've been in the shower for almost an hour. I had just started to feel better," he complained, dragging her hand to his solid cock. "And then you arrive and I'm full circle, back to needing your body to find my release."

"No time," she mouthed. She struggled with the frock and found the note she'd made him. She thrust it toward him.

He took it, not looking at it. He was studying her face while she studied his. Droplets of water fell from his hair onto his shoulders. The planes of his face seemed sharper and more stunning with the strands of hair slicked back from it.

"So beautiful," he whispered.

That was exactly what she'd been thinking. She dragged her eyes from his face and tapped the partially-crumpled note in his hand.

"Do you want me to read this?" he asked, holding it up between them.

She nodded.

He smiled sweetly. "Good, because there's something I want from you. Maybe we can strike a bargain."

She arched a skeptical eyebrow.

He ran a finger over her raised brow. "There is not a thing about your face that I don't love."

She frowned and took a step back. This was not going to go well if one of them didn't stay strong. She'd been hoping it would be him so that she could bask in the glow of his sensuality without getting them into trouble. Unfortunately he was fully under the influence of his hormones and probably a bit of the nectar as well.

He caught her hand in his as she took another retreating step. "Where do you intend to go?" he asked.

She tried to pull her hand free, but his tightened, holding her prisoner. She turned her head and gestured meaningfully to the door with her free hand.

"Worried about my brother?"

She nodded vigorously.

"As well we should be. He'll probably restrain me in a cell if he finds you with me. Of course he might wonder how a simpleton went through the palace in an anti-detection frock and snuck into my suite."

She gave him a horrified look.

"He could be along any time. It really would be better for us to go up to my loft. If he arrives, he won't come up there."

She tried to pull out of his grasp, but he wasn't having it. In a quick move he swept her up in his arms. She struggled furiously as he carried her over to a spiral set of stairs. Her fists landed several blows to his hard chest. The muscles twitched delectably, but showed no sign of vulnerability.

His laughter infuriated her. It was one thing to be bigger and stronger. It was another to use that power over someone smaller and weaker. Where was her honorable Thane now?

Reaching the loft he dropped her on the bed, letting the note fall from his fingers to the floor. She looked up at him with wide eyes as he whipped off the covering and stood before her, aroused in full male glory.

As her gaze traveled up and down the length of him, her mouth went dry, and other things went wet. She watched his hand slowly stroke his cock. "I believe this belongs to you," he said in a low voice.

She licked her lips and looked from his phallus back up to his face.

"The only question is where in your body you want me to bury it."

What did he mean where?

"Veylin, I don't trust myself to undress you right now. Better that you do it."

She couldn't move. Her mind was filled with so many erotic images of them together. She blushed in spite of her enthusiasm.

A brief tremor rocked his body. "Would you have me lose control again?" he demanded in a deep growl. "When your skin heats up, it's like someone has glazed you with a thin sheen of fruit pulp." He dropped down to his knees at the end of the bed and stared at her. "It makes me want to devour you."

Crouched low with the slight rasp in his voice, he did look primal, like he might spring forward at any moment and consume her. The golden-boy prince was lost to the blue-eyed beast.

Thane reached a long arm out and caught a handful of her hair, pulling her gently forward until she was sitting up and then rolling forward. She swung her legs back so that she was lying on her stomach, her face at the edge of the bed. Their lips were only inches apart.

Fingers still tangled in her hair, he gripped the curls a little tighter as if to prevent her from moving and then his mouth opened and he brought it to hers. The kiss was deep, erotic. They ate at each other's lips and tongues... and time.

The sound of the door drew her back from the surreal vortex. She leapt up and off the bed, but he was faster and grabbed her in his arms, holding her completely still

against his body, her back to his torso. He moved them over to stand at a large ornately carved wooden panel that blocked the view of the common area below.

She studied the warriors that were carved in the relief of the wood.

"Thane?" Calem's voice rose.

"Yes," Thane answered.

She stood very still, breathlessly waiting for some sign of their discovery or of Calem's intention to come up the stairs to speak to Thane.

"I had word from our mother," Calem said.

"What word?" Thane asked.

She felt him moving back a bit and bending. Startled, she realized what he was about to do and tried to stop him, but the fabric was already raised to her hips. The cool air of the suite stroked her naked thighs, and she trembled. This was too much.

"I'm to join her at the main palace. Gatler will come. We're going to discuss military and diplomatic strategies," Calem said.

Thane stepped forward, pressing himself against her bottom so that the fabric he'd lifted would not fall. He held her in place with a firm hand on her belly. His free hand took hold of her hand and placed it on the horse of a warrior coming out of the panel. He squeezed it and she knew with a thrill that he wanted her to hold on. She simply could not believe what he was thinking of doing.

"She asks for you too. There's no good reason for you to come, but she wants you there nonetheless," Calem said.

Thane switched hands, the free one taking over at her belly and the other capturing her hand that dangled at her side. He placed it on a protruding warrior's shield. Her fingers gripped tightly as she felt his fingers at the clips of her sex-covering.

"It's just as Gatler always jokes. You're the favorite."

Thane leaned his mouth close to her ear. "Am I your favorite?" he whispered.

She bit her lip, trying to maintain her composure.

To Calem, he called down, "I am at the lady's command as always."

With his foot he knocked her feet apart. She might have stumbled if not for his arm around her. The sex-covering had come loose and, at first, she'd assumed it had fallen to the floor. Then she saw it and she blushed as his hand reached out and hung it from a warrior embracing a pretty girl. The fabric looked so shocking and lewd as it hung from the expensive carving in front of them.

"It was damp. We'll let it dry there," he whispered and kissed the side of her neck.

She trembled, feeling his stiff member tucked between her thighs, like a bar that she was almost resting on.

"Of course when you put the covering back on, it'll have even more to soak up than before."

She shuddered. He meant that her wetness and his would be inside her in just a few moments. She knew this was part of his seduction, making it all seem very inevitable and her powerless to stop it. Even the position as he pulled her hips back and bent her forward was one of submission for her. He would take her, and there could be no resistance... not only because she was wildly aroused, but also because his brother was just below them. She could hear Calem's footfalls. She didn't know what he was doing since she couldn't see him, but his presence weighed the air down, making it heavier. It was difficult to breathe.

She felt the invasion. He eased into her slowly, sighing in her ear. She pushed back against him because she couldn't help it. He thrust slowly in and out.

"Your warmth," he murmured breathlessly in her ear. "I need it surrounding me. I could *live* inside you."

Her heart pounded madly, and she clung to the panel to keep from falling to her hands and knees. She thrashed silently as he took her that way. Her head moved from side to side, then she caught sight of a tapestry that made her freeze. It was on the wall above the loft to their left. The three princes of the tapestry stared at her, smiling. Gatler, Thane, and Calem in their best finery. Her face burned. It was as if they watched the spectacle of Thane fucking her from behind for their entertainment.

The heat of her irrational embarrassment gripped her and she wished she could look away, but she just couldn't. They were twelve feet tall on the wall and all gorgeous. She remembered Thane's story and thought of the young Thane and Calem watching their older brother seduce another princess. Had Gatler taken her from behind? Had the young boys gotten excited watching him do it, planning the day they would do the same to other weak and wet princesses?

Thane thrust deeper. She felt a drumbeat in her belly and lower, where they were joined. The pounding did not ask her to reach ecstasy, it forced her to. She was at the mercy of the long hard rod that took her so completely. She rode her orgasm as he poured himself inside her.

When he finished, he released her hips and reached out to hold on to the panel. His arms stretched over her like an archway as she sank down to the ground. She rested on her hands and knees, staring at the criss-crossing fabric of the padded floor. Her breath shuddered out of her quietly, and she pulled it back in just as forcefully.

She sat back onto her heels, hands falling onto her lap. The dark wood filled her view, but she didn't see the details of it for several moments. She finally looked up. Thane was leaning his head against his left arm, staring down at her.

"I love you," he whispered sincerely. He didn't look predatory anymore.

She smiled up at him. She decided that she liked both aspects of him, the golden-boy and the rutting beast. The golden boy was for her to love. The other for her to be fucked by. It was an excellent combination rolled into one flawless body.

Every princess should have one of these, she thought idly, holding his calf for purchase as she stood up.

"Lie down with me for awhile," he whispered.

It wasn't a good idea, but she couldn't refuse him. He pulled her clothes off and drew her to his bed. He positioned her so that she was lying in front of him with her back to his chest; they were nestled together under the coverlet.

"That's Gatler's loft," he said, nodding toward the loft in front of her where the tapestry hung on the far wall. "Calem's is behind us. Even if he decides to come up to

his loft before feast time, he won't see you. All he'll be able to see is my body lying on its side. One of the many advantages of you being so much smaller than me."

He snuggled her in closer to him, and she felt safe and warm. She studied the three boys of the tapestry smiling down at her. Co-conspirators. Then she drifted off to sleep.

* * *

When Veylin woke it was dark in the suite, and she felt a dangerous throbbing in her breasts. She gasped as her eyes gained focus, and she realized exactly what was happening. The fluffy coverlet was halfway up across her face and below it, Thane's hungry mouth was attached to her breast. She grabbed his hair, trying to pull his head back, but he ignored her even as she yanked.

Disaster, she thought, her breath catching with fear and desire. There was no way they could be silent during this sort of coupling... not if he drank from her.

She tugged at his hair and dug her fingernails into his shoulder, trying desperately to get him to look at her. She felt his suckling slow, but it was still rhythmic. His hands moved lazily to her arms and then up to her wrists. He squeezed and his vice grip caused a sharp pain that made her hands open. His hands moved hers. Instantly, her arms were pinned over her head and his grip was not tight, but neither could she escape it.

She had to do something. *My voice. If only I could use it.* She grimaced as the sensations got more intense. In another moment she wouldn't care about stopping him. His hands moved her wrists together and he clasped both in his right hand. His left slid down her naked skin, to her mound. He squeezed possessively and then the back of his hand bumped persuasively against her inner thigh. Open, he commanded by his movement. And she did because, with him sucking, the pressure inside her was too much.

His fingers found her wetness and plunged inside. She lost herself. Suddenly, she was arching into his mouth and pressing her hips up to deepen his touch.

She felt it then, the terrible burning giving way to the plunder of his mouth. The nectar was thicker this time and she felt as though her nipples were ripping open as he drew it from her breast.

She gasped desperately and felt his fingers leave her as he dragged her body down onto his thrusting cock.

“More,” he growled as he switched to the other breast. It burst like a berry in his mouth just as the other had.

The feeling of his thrusting into her core, spilling warmth into her as his mouth drank her own warmth was disturbing and erotic and intense. All at once she wanted to escape and not to escape at the same time. And then the explosion shook her violently, and the last thing she heard was him roaring.

Chapter 10

Thane climbed from the bed, blood bursting in his veins. He stumbled to the edge of the loft and looked down. He put his hands on the half wall and pushed off the balls of his feet. A moment later he was inverted, standing on his palms. And then he was sailing outward from the ledge. Falling gracefully in a perfect arc, he landed on his feet.

He stood naked in the middle of the room. He turned to the cushioned bench that ran the length of one wall. It was wood and metal and had been brought in sections with two men carrying each one. He crawled under it, catching it across his shoulders, and braced himself, standing up. It objected to being lifted by pressing down heavily, biting into the flesh of his shoulders, but he did not yield. It groaned too, bowing as if to snap. For several moments he waited, proving that he had control of his own otherworldly strength. Finally he sunk back to his knees and unloaded it.

His muscles groaned as he stood again. He turned and climbed up a bookshelf and sprung out to the middle of the room, grabbing onto the ancient metal chandelier. Then he swung his body back and forth, gaining momentum, and let go. He flew to the half wall containing his loft, just catching it with his fingertips. He pulled himself up and over it. He stretched, feeling invincible. He wanted to run. He wanted to smash things. More than that though, he wanted her. He strode back over to the bed.

Veylin's naked body was lying there, impossibly small and vulnerable. He bent over her, kissing her shoulder. Her skin was cool. Too cool, perhaps.

He gathered her up into his arms and carried her down the stairs and into his bath cavern. He laid her body gently on the polished stone and directed hot water down onto her. He would warm her, wake her, and then fuck her again. He sat down

and positioned her head on his lap so that the pummeling water didn't strike her face. He stroked her hair softly away from her eyes.

His body hummed with power, and thoughts were hard to organize. All he knew was that drinking from her was dangerous, but that he would never stop. He also knew he loved her, though that was further inside him, insulated from the raging energy pulsing through him.

* * *

When Veylin awoke, she couldn't understand why there wasn't mayhem. Calem must have heard Thane. But there was no sound except Thane's breathing in her ear. They were in his bed. His hands were caressing her body, and the heat from him was prickling her skin.

It took her a long time to find her strength. When she did, he was awake beside her. He took her body again with his hands, his mouth, and his cock making her come over and over until she felt she had no bones left in her, but was just a lovely hide of soft flesh and hot skin.

She tried to rise before the sun rose, but he held her to him.

"You don't have to go," he murmured sleepily.

"I do," she mouthed.

"Calem was at feast when I drank from you, but he came back while I had you in the bath cavern. You were passed out, and I was touching your naked body. He thinks I'm a monster. It's ripping his heart out, but he won't report it. I am his brother, and he will not betray me."

She tried to sit up and look over at Calem's loft.

"He's not here. He couldn't stay in the suite. I think he could tell by my eyes that I would have you again before dawn. He knew if he heard or saw it, he'd have to try to stop me so he left. Cale's very strong. Very skilled. But he's no match for me. His choice is to have me locked up or to pretend he doesn't know."

No. Oh, no.

"When everyone is at their courses, you can sneak back to your room."

She lay in his arms, wondering where poor Calem was. *He must be torturing himself.* She wondered if it would be better to take him into her confidence as well. If he knew she wasn't simple then he wouldn't have to be in pain and if he truly wouldn't betray Thane then perhaps he would keep her secret as well so they could continue to be together.

* * *

Veylin waited until the morning courses were underway before venturing back to her suite. She took a bath and changed into fresh clothes, hiding the anti-detection frock as she always did under the bottom of a drawer that was accommodating in its disrepair.

She smoothed down her lavender frock, wondering how she could discreetly take Calem aside. Perhaps it would be best to meet him in the princes' suite. No, that wouldn't do because that would put her directly into Thane's hands and she needed some time for her body to recover from all they'd done during the night. When she felt confident enough in her voice she would use it to help control things, but, until then, she must not let him drink again.

Suddenly there was noise in the common room. She looked up just as Bettis burst through her door with several other girls behind her.

Veylin jumped and her eyes darted from face to face. They all stared at her. For once the confusion on her face was real.

"Is it true?" Chubin demanded. "About the prince?"

Veylin's heart clenched in fear and dread.

Bettis shoved Chubin back. "Stop. You'll scare her."

Veylin looked down at the ground. *So Calem's conscience has trumped his loyalty, after all.*

"It's okay, Veylin," Bettis said, putting an arm around her shoulder. "Come with us. We're going to take you to Chenra. She's just going to have a look at you."

Veylin ignored their gentle tugging. They wanted to take her to Chenra so that she could be examined. Maybe, if she didn't go, the allegations against Thane would not stand.

They pulled, and she pulled back stubbornly. Keeping her eyes vacant wasn't easy.

A moment later, there was heavy knocking on the common room door and then a male voice. The girls all froze.

Bettis turned to Chubin and snapped, "Go see who it is."

Chubin hurried out and then returned with a small bottle of etched glass. All the other girls in the room stared at her.

"Well?" Bettis demanded.

"There doesn't need to be an exam. Prince Thane confessed to raping her."

Veylin closed her eyes with a grimace.

"He can't have! He wouldn't! He admitted that what Ashan said was true?" Bettis snapped.

"He... I guess he did," Chubin said, sitting down hard on the floor. The other girls all sank to the floor too. The most beloved prince in the queendom had fallen from grace and all their hopes and expectations had fallen with him. "It was Calem at the door. He brought a tonic for her. To help ease soreness and her memory in case she remembers things that will haunt her. The prince... Calem... looked..." Chubin's voice trailed off and her hand covered her mouth. The other girls looked at her. "His eyes were red," she croaked. "I think he'd been crying."

Suddenly all the girls in the room were sobbing. Except one.

Veylin rubbed her forehead slowly. There would be plenty of time for crying later. Like when she was separated from Thane forever and being hauled off to Kenart to be killed... or worse... by her cousin and brother.

She stood and the girls looked up at her. She patted their heads in comfort and their sobs tapered off as they gaped at her with startled expressions. They saw it, the intelligence in her eyes.

She stepped over their tangled limbs and marched out of the suite. When she found Calem, he was in the last place she'd expected to find him.

The chamber was very cool, but very bright. The first cell within it had walls of solid glass with several slim slits to allow for the passage of air. Thane sat on a bench with silver fabric cushions. He looked as tall and beautiful as ever and not exactly melancholy, but close.

Calem was sitting on the floor of the outer chamber even though there were several more comfortable places to sit. When she walked in, Calem was doing what he did best. He was giving advice.

"Ashan only saw you in the library, Thane. You were using your fingers. It's a lesser offense. You don't have to confess everything."

She stood very still. So it *was* Ashan, the jilted lover, who had made the accusation against Thane. That gave her a little comfort at least. Veylin had been cursing herself for not having gotten to Calem earlier. Now she realized it wouldn't have mattered.

Thane saw her immediately, and their eyes locked.

"Confessing spares the girl," Thane said to Calem with his eyes still on her. "If I confess everything that can be confessed, it seals my fate. Then there will be no reason for them to try to get information from her." He meant to sacrifice himself completely. If she'd ever doubted his love, she no longer did.

She stepped forward, putting her hands to the glass and leaning very close to it. She wished that she might pass through it to get to him.

Upon seeing her, Calem climbed to his feet. "Well, if it isn't the beautiful instrument of your destruction," Calem said softly, the sadness echoing in his voice.

Thane walked over to the glass just across from her. She imagined she could feel his heat through it. "Hello, sweetness," Thane said with a soft smile.

Calem spun to look at his brother. "Do not do that! Don't look at her or talk to her like you still lust after her! Beside the fact that it's disgusting, it may well get you beaten before they kill you."

Thane put his palms up to where hers were, looking into her eyes. "Go away, Calem."

Veylin smiled at Thane and then looked to his brother.

"Thane, you need to listen to --" Calem's words had been tumbling out and then just crashed to a halt.

Veylin had been staring at Calem and had raised an eyebrow. She'd said nothing, but she'd communicated everything.

"What is this?" Calem mumbled.

Veylin smirked and shrugged her eyebrows at him.

Calem's mouth dropped open in surprise for a second. "What?"

"Yes, Cale," Thane said. "For once in your life you were outsmarted, and your much less clever brother figured it out before you did."

"You should have told me." Calem turned his head and looked Thane over. "I would be furious right now if this didn't save your life."

"It only saves me if the lady confesses the ruse."

Calem's gaze snapped back to Veylin. "Of course she will." He waited for her confirmation.

She nodded and pointed to the switch that would let Thane out.

"This complicates things, you know," Calem said, looking back to Thane. "They'll want to know why she did all this."

"There's a good reason."

"I hope so," Calem said skeptically.

"Well, let me out, and we'll explain everything."

"I can't let you out, Thane. The queen is on the way. As is Gatler."

"Great," Thane said, folding his arms across his chest.

Calem looked at Veylin. "I'm very sorry," he said sincerely as he caught her arm in his hand.

"What are you doing?" Thane demanded.

"I have to place her in a cell, Thane."

Thane raised his eyebrows in question, glancing around his cell and then back at Calem.

"No, Brother, not with you."

"Then take your hand off her."

"Sorry."

"Calem," Thane said, shaking his head urgently. Veylin's heart pounded.

"Sorry," he said, pulling her down the chamber's sole passageway.

"Calem!" Thane shouted from behind them.

Veylin shuffled along with Calem, not resisting, too stunned to protest. They entered another large area with a second glass cell. He opened it. She hesitated, breathless with fear, then crept inside.

"You know he loves you," Calem said solemnly.

She looked at Calem and nodded.

"He would have died to protect you." He paused. "Remember that when they question you. It may not be easy."

She understood what he was asking her to do, to protect Thane as he would have protected her... unto death.

"If you save him, I'll do everything I can to save you," he said.

She sat down, trembling. She'd always known it might come to this, but she couldn't stop shaking. Was she ready to die? No, but she might not have a choice.

To Be Continued In
Pact of Princes 2: Siren Song

Pact of Princes 2: Siren's Song

In this continuing installment of Pact of Princes, Thane and Veylin are lovers on the run, and Thane discovers the secret of Veylin's voice. As they traverse an indigo forest, they wonder: will they avoid their pursuers long enough to reach a safe haven or will the dangers of Veylin's past catch up with her and destroy their love forever?

Alexa Aames

Formerly from the Midwest, Alexa Aames was forced south by snow and slush. She now lives in a place where the only things frozen are the margaritas. Her first stories were written on loose-leaf and passed secretly to her best friend in their grade school's hallway. The early tales featured characters who could hold down multiple jobs at the same time: Dallas Cowboy quarterback on game nights, president of the United States the rest of the time. That same character was also an alien (a space cowboy) and a scientist. He had affairs with supermodels and was married and divorced about eight times. This early freedom in storytelling prepared her to write... well, just about anything. It also made her love writing more than chocolate, more than rain, more than boys. Well, maybe not more than boys.