

Pact of Princes 2: Siren Song

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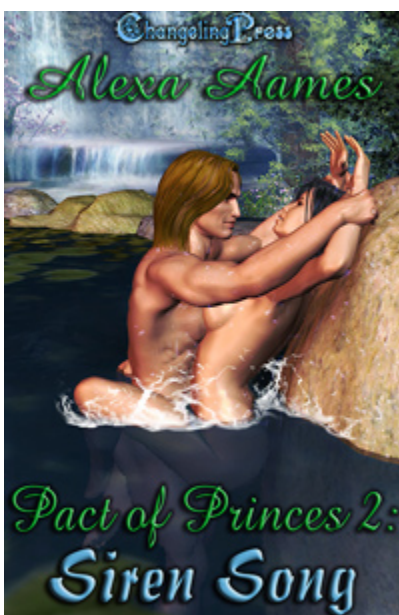
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Chapter 1

Thane smoothed down his clothes and ran his hands through his hair. He wanted to look presentable when he pled his and Veylin's case before the queen. Then again, how could things help but go well? She was his mother, after all. She would be inclined to show every mercy where he was concerned.

When Calem stepped into the outer jail chamber with Gatler, Thane stilled. Gatler was a war-hardened military leader who had never been in love with anyone. Thane didn't want to explain things to his dark older brother.

"Where is our mother?" Thane asked.

"She didn't want to see you here," Gatler said, motioning to the cell.

"He just means that she wants to see you after your release," Calem said to reassure him.

Thane studied the pair. Gatler was the same height as Calem, but Gatler looked like a darker-haired version of Thane himself. Calem's features were much less rough than his and Gatler's. He was beautiful and almost androgynous except for the strong jaw. Women seemed to love the perfection of Calem's face.

Gatler, on the other hand, was just as handsome as either of his younger brothers, but there was a darkness behind his eyes that made women, and men, hesitate. He was not approachable, though he could be charming when it suited him.

"Go ahead, Cale, let him out," Gatler said in the deep voice that was all his own.

Thane's heart burst with relief. "We're free," Thane said, suddenly beaming. This was incredible. Just what he'd hoped for, and without even having to suffer an interrogation. Even as a prince he hadn't expected such preferential treatment.

"*You're* free," Gatler corrected.

Calem flipped the switch and the wall slid back far enough into its pocket for Thane to step out.

"Where she came from, she was abused, Gatler," Thane said. "She was in hiding, fearing for her life. Just wait until you talk to her to pass judgment --"

"I have talked to her."

Thane stopped. "And?"

"And she still tries to conceal her identity from us. She will not tell us where she's from or who sent her."

"No one sent her!" Thane snapped. Just like Gatler to assume the worst.

"Calm yourself," Calem said, putting a hand on Thane's shoulder. "I'm sure she'll be more forthcoming with the queen."

"I should talk to Veylin first before she meets our mother."

"No," Gatler said.

"Why not?" Thane demanded.

"She'll get no coaching from you or anyone, little brother. Let her tell us the truth."

"She might be too afraid to tell you the truth if you scowl at her like that," Thane said.

"You'd best worry about yourself, Thane, not her. You committed some serious crimes. You were aware that she could communicate and pointed it out to no one. Did you not understand that she could be a spy?"

Thane was silent.

"Don't hesitate. The answer to that question when the next person asks it is 'No. No, I did not understand. I believed the story she told me and never considered that she might be a spy'."

"So you would advise me then before I go before the queen? You would have me coached in the correct answers so that I get them right, but you will not afford her the same," he accused.

"I coach you, Thane, because I believe you are innocent. I allow her no like privilege because I don't know if she is."

"Let me come with you. I'll be silent. Just let me be in the room so that she knows that I'm there."

"No," Gatler said firmly. "You go to set your own affairs in order. The mistress of the frolic awaits you."

"Why?" Thane asked suspiciously.

"One can only assume to banish you from it. You did take a girl to your bed outside it. Everyone knows the punishment for that is banishment from the frolic."

Thane shrugged. He didn't care about the frolic anymore. Even if he could have gone back, he wouldn't have. There was only one woman now. And she was about to have a stare-down with his frequently ruthless brother and his sometimes dangerous mother.

Gatler waved him away. Thane frowned. He didn't want to leave Veylin in their hands, but he had no choice. Gatler nodded toward the open doorway of the outer chamber. Finally, Thane walked out with Calem. They headed toward Chenra's suite.

"He seems worse than before. Harder," Thane said.

Calem nodded. "He was worried about you. We all were. Until she took an oath and used that communication board to prove she wasn't feeble, you were headed for execution. That had all your family distraught, including Gatler. He just expresses his concern in a different way than the rest of us."

"I don't care for his way."

"Don't trouble yourself about it. Your lady will no doubt handle him. I expect after a kiss, she'll have him kneeling at her feet."

Thane stopped. "What makes you think she'll kiss him?"

"She's clever. It's an effective weapon. She should use it if she gets the chance."

"Did she get the chance to use it with you?" Thane asked suspiciously.

Calem smirked. "I don't kneel at the edge of her gown for nothing."

Thane's mouth dropped open in surprise. She could not have kissed his brother while he himself was lying in a cell thinking only of her. Anger brewed in his blood.

"Relax, Thane. It was only one kiss placed here," he said, touching the side of his face. "But she'll probably have to do better with Gatler. He's much more jaded than me." Calem's teasing didn't lighten Thane's mood.

"She'll do no better with him. She'll do nothing with him."

"Do you love her?" Calem asked.

"Yes," Thane said and started walking again.

"Then one day she'll do much more than kiss him. If she belongs to you, she belongs to all three of us."

"She has to consent with either of you, the same way she has to consent with me. She won't."

"If you say so." He paused. "I understand how you feel."

"No, you don't."

"Yes, I do. It was a better deal for us when you and I assumed Gatler would be bound first. He was older and had all those beautiful girls with their full-grown bodies. At the time, it seemed a very good arrangement."

"Shut up, Calem." Thane had been thinking the exact same thing ever since he'd fallen in love with Veylin. Sharing partners at the frolic was one thing. Sharing someone who was bound to him for a lifetime was another.

"So, tell me about Veylin," Calem said pleasantly, causing the hair on Thane's neck to stand on end with suspicion. "How *did* you manage to seduce her that first time?"

Thane gave Calem a hard shove, making him stumble, but his younger brother just laughed.

* * *

Veylin looked Gatler over through the glass of her cell. There was a certain resemblance to Thane that was comforting, but Gatler's hair -- and his manner -- was

much darker. Still there was something around the blue eyes and the strong nose that reminded her of the man she loved.

Gatler opened the cell door, but rather than beckoning her out, he stepped in. He leaned against the wall and stared into her eyes.

"My brother was released from his cell, his freedom rendered by the words you told the assembled group earlier today. The queen is very pleased and wishes to meet you now."

She nodded. She wasn't as unnerved by the fact that she would meet the queen as she was by the fact that she would meet Thane's mother.

"Then you and I will have our time."

She raised her eyebrows, thinking suddenly of what Thane had said about his brothers sharing her.

"When it comes to matters that include infiltration of the realm by outsiders, it falls to me," he said.

In other words, she was an interloper and she might as well immediately confess whatever plot she was trying to carry out. She took a slow breath and exhaled it silently. She understood that he was trying to intimidate her, but he couldn't. She had known men more evil than any who could have been raised in Melotin. She stood to convey her readiness to get on with things.

He led her from the incarceration chambers, and they eventually went down the corridor that led to the queen's suite. Veylin's eyes lingered on the library entrance as they passed it. Reflecting on the time she'd spent there with Thane made her feel that no matter what happened she would never regret it.

They passed much deeper into the palace until they came to a door that was two stories, stained a deep burgundy color, and carved with flowers and fruit vines. The handle was frosted gray stone and looked cool, but not unwelcoming.

Gatler pulled the door open, and they walked inside. The padded floor was thick and plush, soft under her slippers. The walls were covered with rich, dark purple fabric. Veylin ran a finger over the supple wall to her right.

She trailed behind Gatler into a large sitting room. There were sofas and chairs, benches, a divan, and plump pillows. The curtains had been drawn, giving the room the intimacy of a bedchamber during night sun.

"We are here," Gatler announced.

Veylin stood still at his side and looked around. Who had he spoken to?

Then she came from behind a shiny metallic panel in the corner. Ebony satin offset her golden blond hair. She wore a wreath of silvery twigs that were adorned with pale blue stones. As she got closer, Veylin's breath caught.

She had Thane's beautiful hair but Calem's perfect features. No queen could have been lovelier. She held out her hand demurely, and Gatler kissed it then offered it to Veylin.

Veylin pressed her lips to the delicate white hand and gazed up at her exquisite face. She had blue eyes, lighter than those of her sons. The queen's hand floated away and then returned to stroke Veylin's dark hair.

"It was told to me once," the queen said in a soft voice, "that no queen with a beautiful son can stand the sight of the woman who steals his love. I don't expect that to be true since I have so many beautiful sons."

The queen's frosted white fingernail trailed down Veylin's cheek and suddenly Veylin felt very cold inside. The woman's eyes were like ice freezing her heart. *She wants to find me guilty of something so that I can be killed or sent away from him.* Veylin shuddered at the feeling.

"What did you find when you searched her rooms, Gatler?" Queen Lemoar asked with an unreadable expression.

"An anti-detection frock."

"What else?"

"I think she's too clever to have left things in her unlocked room. I suspect she might have hidden anything incriminating elsewhere. Or perhaps on her person."

"I had a great-aunt who used to stuff rucky feathers into her gown to pad her hips," the queen murmured, setting a hand on her own hip. "I suppose we must check this one for the type of feathers of which you speak."

Gatler didn't respond. When Veylin looked over at him she didn't see coldness in his eyes now, only resolve.

"Your queen bids you to remove your clothing," Gatler said.

Veylin stood perfectly still. *I can't be expected to...* It had been hard to be mistreated in her own land, but there she had come to expect it. Melotin was supposed to be a better place than her home had been. It was why she'd come. The royal family of Melotin would not really humiliate her so cruelly, would they?

"She is nervous," Gatler said.

"She should be," Queen Lemoar said, eyeing her. "She's accused of treachery and of seducing a prince in the name of betraying a queendom."

Chapter 2

The queen backed up and sat on a bench across from Veylin. "If she needs help with it, then help her, Gatler, but let us commence. I would see if she conceals evidence of her treason."

Veylin felt her breath leaving her and almost fainted, but she bit the inside of her cheek to focus her mind.

Gatler walked closer. The idea of being stripped naked between the queen and her arrogant son was almost more than she could bear, but she refused to be humbled. Let them take off her clothes. She would hold her head high until it was cut from her shoulders if that was what they, in the end, intended.

"Swallow this," he whispered, pressing something small and soft into her hand. "It will make it all easier."

She looked up into his eyes... Thane's eyes. For the first time she saw a speck of mercy in them. She smiled at him gratefully and shook her head. If the nugget in her hand would strip her of her wits as well as her embarrassment, she couldn't risk swallowing it.

He squeezed her arm. "Then don't show any weakness of spirit. Don't make me break my brother's heart."

She almost hugged him. He didn't want her to be brought low. He wanted to do his duty without hurting Thane, which meant that she and Gatler shared the same purpose. It made things easier.

She turned her back so that he could unfasten her frock. She felt his fingers graze her skin, and nervousness bit at her like the cool air. She stepped forward and slid the gown off. The scarf over her breasts and the sex-covering were all that remained.

One of Gatler's warm hands rested on her shoulder, while the other reached for the knot that held the scarf. Before he could unfasten it, there was a noise and the burgundy door opened, causing a burst of light from the corridor. Calem entered and Veylin blinked as the door closed with a slow swish.

Calem moved into the room and his eyes seemed to take everything in. "What did I miss?" he asked, tone light.

She could only have been happier if Thane himself had strolled in. Or perhaps not; Thane would probably have been furious about the way they had her displayed and his helpless anger would have distressed her more.

She watched Calem go to his mother. "Hello, beautiful," he said, dropping to a knee and kissing the hand that was offered.

The queen stroked his hair. "Why are you here, Calem?" she asked with a slightly suspicious lilt in her voice.

"I'm here to see what the prisoner has to say for herself. She's been making a fool of me for many years. I'm quite vexed."

Veylin's blood ran cold. Had she misjudged his smoothness for kindness?

"Well then sit, my charming boy, and let us see what evidence we find. And then we will hear what she confesses."

"Evidence on her person? So that's what we're about," he said, nodding toward her nearly naked body. "And here I thought we were going to sample her and each other in one grand incestuous party."

The queen clucked her tongue at Calem and shook her head. "One day, my darling boy, I will call your bluff. What will you do then?"

"Die happily under my brother's jealous sword, no doubt."

The queen chuckled. "Wicked boy."

Veylin should have found the flirtation between prince and queen disturbing but something in their teasing manner made it not real. Instead, it was only the compliments and homage of a young man to a still beautiful, but aging mother.

"Go and help your brother, Calem. He seems to have lost his nerve."

Calem kissed his mother's hand again and turned to walk over to them. "I find it hard to fathom Gatler ever losing his nerve."

"As you should since I never do," Gatler said. He released the knot, and she realized he'd untied it without her feeling him do it. The fabric billowed downward until her breasts were bare. She covered them quickly with her hands. She didn't think that Gatler had seen the gold rims, but she wasn't sure about Calem. The room was dim, but Calem's eyes had been on her before her hands had come up.

Gatler and Calem stood on either side of her, and she faced the queen. Flanked on all sides by royalty. The nakedness was like an accent on how powerless she was. It was an entirely unsettling moment. The queen's gaze raked over her and then Lemoar stood.

"I trust the two of you can manage on your own," she said and swept back behind the panel in a whisper of fabric. Veylin heard a door, apparently concealed behind the panel, open and close.

"Now who's lost her nerve?" Calem murmured, causing Veylin to look at his face. He winked at her. "I meant my mother, not you."

She relaxed a little.

"Let's continue," Gatler said in a low voice that was a dangerous rumble. It sounded an awful lot like Thane's did when he was ready to fuck her.

Veylin felt her body tighten from nervousness and something more that she didn't want to recognize. She started to take a step back when she felt two hands, one from each brother, on her back. Gatler's was on the higher part of her low back. Calem's was almost on her bottom.

Each of the men had a free hand that moved simultaneously to the clips of her sex-covering. An instant later the fabric fell to the floor. Her heart pounded, and she trembled.

"Easy, sweetness, we're all family here," Calem said.

His use of Thane's pet name for her made her entire body clench with fear, but also with the traces of excitement that thoughts of Thane always stirred.

"Okay, Gatler, have a look, and we'll cover her back up."

She felt her cheeks and other places burn with embarrassment as the two brothers circled her, looking her over.

Calem didn't seem to be looking very hard. As he circled, he looked often into her eyes and kept a hand first on one shoulder then the other as if to show her that she could count on him for support.

"Your hands," Gatler said standing in front of her and glancing at her chest.

Calem's warm body was at her back, both hands on her shoulders now.

"My hands?" she mouthed.

Gatler nodded. "Drop them."

She didn't move. Then she felt Calem's hands sliding from her shoulders down her arms and finally coming to rest on top of her hands, and, as such, over her breasts. He was cupping her in his hands, through the buffer of hers. She was sure it made for a fully erotic image for the brother who stood in front of her. Heat simmered in Gatler's gaze.

Her heart pounded against her ribs. The handsome brothers could do whatever they wanted to her. There was nothing she could do to stop them. Gatler moved a fraction closer. The heat of their bodies insulated her from the cool air, and she felt a strange sensation, almost anticipation, almost arousal.

Calem's lips neared her left ear. She felt warm, restless and dizzy.

"Let's let him look, and he'll die a little death from wanting what he can't have," Calem said.

Her mind understood Calem's game. He wanted her to feel that he was Thane's surrogate, the strength at her back. Unveiling her nakedness would embarrass her, but Calem would absorb part of the discomfort with her.

She bit her lip, meeting Gatler's eyes, as she let Calem pull her hands away. If Gatler saw and understood the significance of the gold rims to her pink nipples, he never gave an indication. He looked at her chest and then back up to her face.

Calem's arms entwined with her own, wrapped around her chest, covering and warming her. He kissed the side of her face. "Well done," he whispered.

"We're not finished, Calem, and you know it," Gatler said. His voice, despite his troubled expression, was resolute.

"We aren't?" Calem asked.

Raw emotion bristled under her skin. Veylin was so very aware that her body was naked and trapped between two very hard, very strong male bodies. Heat coiled around her. She hated her body for its response. Her mind wanted to bolt like the small prey that she was to them, but her body found the nervous anticipation strangely erotic.

Gatler studied her face. "I'm going to explain something, but don't mistake my explanation for negotiation. It's not."

She nodded, swallowing hard.

"There are a couple of places that spies can hide things on their person that can't be seen from the outside even when they're naked."

Surely not!

"Gatler, Thane's been in there," Calem said.

"Not today he hasn't."

She blushed crimson.

"But --" Calem began.

Gatler's eyes flicked to Calem. "Enough, Calem, you know perfectly well what's going to be done. You're only protesting so that you can look better in her eyes for doing so." Gatler's tone softened when he looked back at her. "My brother is a great politician."

"Now who's trying to gain favor?" Calem asked.

Gatler ignored Calem and spoke to her instead. His voice was low and warm. "We would not subject you to this if it didn't have to be done, but it does. When I was young in my command I captured a spy and didn't check her as I ought to have. A truth was concealed in her body that could have saved many lives."

"Let Thane do it," she mouthed silently.

He shook his head. "Thane loves you. He would lie about anything to protect you today."

"Do you trust me not to lie?" Calem demanded.

Gatler looked at him and nodded almost imperceptibly.

"I'll do it," Calem said.

She shook her head, staring into Gatler's deep blue eyes. She didn't like what was going to happen, but she trusted that Gatler would do what was necessary and no more. Calem would try to seduce her first to make it easier and that would feel wrong.

Calem came around and studied her. "You don't trust me to do it?" He looked like she'd wounded him. She found it really ironic that she was the one having to reassure them when she was the one about to get splayed open and fingered.

"I need you... to hold my hand," she mouthed, holding out a hand.

Calem smiled as though he'd gotten the better end of the deal. "C'mon, sweetness, Gatler's been so long without a woman, he's bound to be nervous and quick as a virgin in this."

"I was seducing virgins while you were still wetting your bed," Gatler retorted.

Two sets of hands led her over to the divan, but they continued to make light with each other, and it put her at ease. If they acted like they weren't giving a thought to her, she could pretend they weren't.

A moment later she was lying on the soft plushness of the rich fabric, and Calem's face was close to hers. She stared into his green eyes and listened to the sound of his voice though she didn't hear the words.

She felt Gatler's hand on her belly, which was in knots. And then his long warm fingers were touching her cleft. Her breath caught in her throat, and she blushed because she knew he would find her wet and think this excited her. She closed her eyes as if to make herself invisible even as she felt his fingers going deeper. Her nipples hardened at the intimacy of the touch. She exhaled a ragged breath. This examination was about duty and treason, but to her it didn't feel so. Her body had only ever been explored for one purpose... pleasure. Hers, someone else's, or both. Her mind could not

separate the probing penetration of the moment from the memories of other times. Her lower lips sucked his fingers. They liked being invaded. She bit her lip and fought the urge to spread her legs.

Calem held both her hands above her head, the way Thane had pinned them when he'd drunk from her breasts. She felt heat suffusing her whole body as Gatler's fingers went deeper still. And then she felt lips, Calem's, kissing her. Calem's tongue invaded her mouth, just as Gatler invaded her lower.

She felt her hips thrust slightly in response to what Gatler was doing. Her hungry lower lips puckered around him. At first he'd been making a brisk sweep along her folds, but he went beyond that now.

She felt Calem take both of her wrists in one hand, freeing his other hand. His thumb brushed her nipple as Gatler's thumb brushed her clit. She gasped. The fingers inside her rubbed deliberately. Her body arched, reaching desperately, and she knew both men felt it. They were too experienced not to know what it meant.

It was all the invitation they needed. Calem kept kissing her, but their hands began to roam.

Both of her breasts were being cupped; one hand had rougher skin than the other. Another of Gatler's fingers was trying to find its way into her, but was having trouble getting around her swollen labia. A moment later, she felt Calem's hand trail down her belly slowly. His fingers reached her mound, dipped lower, and slipped between the lips. He spread her open and Gatler's other finger pushed into her, stretching her deliciously.

Oh. Oh. Cre destos!

Calem rubbed her throbbing clit. Gatler stretched and fucked her wet pulsing hole with his fingers. She writhed helplessly and felt Gatler's tongue join the frenzy of throbbing motion between her legs. She pulled her mouth free of Calem's and gasped before the series of spasms took her over.

She was shaking uncontrollably. They stroked her afterward for a few moments before she pulled away to try and sit up. They caught her body, not allowing her to

escape. Two sets of hands lifted her off the divan and settled her down on the floor... between them. Both of their bodies were touching hers, heightening the intimacy. Calem was again at her back with Gatler in front of her.

She tried to move, but they had her trapped.

"We want to talk to you for a few moments," Calem said low in her ear. His breath blew over her skin, causing her to tremble again.

Gatler stared into her eyes and brought his fingers to his mouth, licking the taste of her off them.

"Did you really think I was a spy?" She mouthed each word slowly and carefully.

"It was a possibility."

"What?" Calem asked from behind her.

"She wanted to know if we really thought she was a spy or if all this was artifice to get our hands into her."

"I never did get my hands into her," Calem lamented. And, as if to belatedly get involved in that, he slid a hand down to her butt. His fingertips gripped the edge of one cheek as it formed the crease. She sucked in air in surprise and, at the same moment, Gatler grabbed her top leg and slowly brought it to rest over his hip. It opened her lower body to Calem, and his hand moved down into the cleft of her buttocks. Her breath caught in her throat as his fingertip gently traced a path back and forth between both of her tight holes.

"Have you ever had two men inside you at once?" Calem whispered in her ear.

Her trembling worsened. She was very aware that being seduced by this pair once under false pretenses was one thing, but premeditating sex with them, especially when it involved their cocks in places even Thane hadn't been, was something completely different.

Aroused and overwhelmed, she moved her hand to push Gatler away from her, but he caught her wrist and slid it behind her back.

"Don't fight," Gatler said.

"Such soft skin," Calem whispered in her ear. "And such tight little holes." His finger pressed the small whorl of muscle. "Relax and let me in."

Gatler ran his tongue over her lips, stealing her breath, and rubbed his hard body against hers. "Just fingers. You can give us that much of yourself." He pinched her nipple, sending shock waves through her body, and then sucked the peak slowly, his rough tongue exploring her nipple.

"I bet you taste good," Calem said softly. He reached around to pinch her other nipple.

She writhed in their arms, which only served to make them rub against her more vigorously.

Gatler pulled his face back, jaw slack with lust. "You've got skin that tastes and smells like a ripe harvest." His hand dipped between her legs and he smiled. "Wet and warm, juicy as an *acadena*."

She flushed with shame at his reference to the men and women who were the sex slaves of soldiers. People who loved and craved rough sex with warriors wild with battle hormones.

Calem moved down, licked the skin between her shoulder blades, and Gatler's deep voice whispered in her ear.

"Calem and Thane are still young. Sex is all games to them. They don't know what it's like to return from battle, exploding with lust, to throw a round-bottomed girl over their lap and spank her 'til she cries and comes at the same time. To bury an insatiable cock in every hole, and pump and pump until the girl is so sore that she has to be bathed in herbs afterward. If you belong to the three of us, your education is just beginning. We'll all fuck you well, but you won't be able to hide anything from me. When I touch you, your legs will fall open and so will your soul."

Her body throbbed, tension building at his rough words. And Calem's persistent finger pushed up into her twitching bottom hole. She wiggled restlessly as Gatler slid several fingers into her creamy pussy, and she felt them both plunging into her. She tossed her head back, panting, struggling.

Gatler sucked on her throat, and Calem bit the fleshy part of her hip. And then she came in a shuddering rush, pulsing around their fingers, wanton and shameful.

She felt Calem's cock, slippery with pre-come against her anus, poised to enter as his finger slipped out.

"*Cre*, she's warm and tight. I'm going to enjoy this," he said.

Tears sprang into Veylin's eyes and she shook her head. She just couldn't let Calem do something that Thane hadn't. She felt herself tumbling into an abyss, and couldn't catch her breath.

Then she felt Gatler's hand blocking Calem's entrance into her body.

"What?" Calem rasped, trying to push Gatler's hand away.

"She's not ready yet."

"I can make her ready," Calem husked.

Gatler stared into her eyes. "Not yet."

Calem sighed heavily as if his favorite sweet had been wrongfully snatched from his fingertips just when he'd been about to pop it in his mouth. "All right. Back to business then."

She raised questioning eyebrows at that.

"What Calem means is that Thane says that someone abused you," Gatler said.

"Someone besides us," Calem said with mock helpfulness. His tone was so light and teasing. The same one she'd heard him use with Thane so many times over the years. It made her feel as if this had been some sort of strange erotic indoctrination into their private royal world.

"Thane's a very good person," Gatler said.

"The best," Calem chimed in.

"But he's very honorable."

"Unlike us, as you've already seen," Calem said with a chuckle.

"So, Veylin," Gatler said in a seductive voice. "Tell your new brothers the names of anyone who misused you."

"Or slighted you," Calem said.

"Or whom you wish ill for any reason... any reason at all."

Her eyes widened.

"Go ahead, sweetness. Tell Gatler. He's the thing the bad men fear," Calem said.

She considered that. Gatler did indeed seem quite scary at moments, but did she really have any right to involve him in righting the wrongs of her past? Involving him was to involve a nation, and she liked Melotin the peaceful way it was.

She shook her head slowly.

"You know, Veylin, Calem has noticed that lately Thane's been out of his mind in a way that's more than just love."

"And we noticed those pretty gold rings you have around your nipples," Calem added.

"And we were wondering how long you think it would take us to track down who lost a descendant of Cesta."

She bit her lip. They were entirely too clever.

Gatler smiled at her and to Calem, who couldn't see her bite her lip, said, "She's thinking it over."

Calem chuckled.

They were as diabolical in their own way as her cousin and brother, Likus and Equeid. It was a little scary... but deep down it also made her feel safer to know that, when it came to danger, Gatler and Calem were in front of her and also, well, behind her.

Suddenly, she heard the door behind the panel swing open, and she almost fainted at the possibility of being caught naked on the floor between the queen's two sons who were not supposed to be her lovers. But Queen Lemoar didn't emerge. From behind the panel, the queen's voice spoke quickly. "If my sons are interested in knowing that their brother is on his way, then they should know that he is." With that the door shut again.

The two men pulled her to her feet in an instant and before she could even move toward her clothes Calem had them. He and Gatler redressed her quickly. A moment later, the burgundy door flew open and Thane stalked in.

"Are you hurt?" he demanded when he saw her.

She shook her head, but flew into his arms. She knew it was a bit hypocritical to run to Thane after they had brought her to orgasm twice, but then they hadn't exactly given her a choice.

Thane, to his honorable credit, never gave her even a suspicious glance. He simply held her tight, and looked over her head at his brothers.

His voice was hard as stone and twice as cold. "If either of you ever takes her away from me again as a prisoner, I will challenge you on the champion's battlefield -- to the death."

"You know, Calem, I believe our brother loves this girl," Gatler said in that same mocking tone Calem often had.

"I think you may be right," the youngest returned.

"May nightmares claim your every slumber," Thane spat. He swung her up in his arms and carried her from the room. She could hear his brothers laughing. She might have begrudged them their teasing of him, but she knew that, in their way, they loved him as much as she did.

"We're leaving here," Thane said, causing her to jerk her head to look at him. "They mean to separate us. I won't let them."

"Who?" she mouthed. Certainly not Gatler and Calem. They seemed quite content to have her be Thane's plaything since that seemed to mean that they could also try to make her theirs.

He shrugged. "There are rules here. It means that when I grow too old for the frolic, I would have to leave you to it until you were too old for it as well. I'm never going to do that. If you love me and want me, I would have us bound together forever. And I would have it done immediately." He gave her a questioning look.

What did she care for the frolic when she could have Thane, whom she'd always wanted? She nodded in answer to his question.

"Then we leave, because anyone here who could perform the ceremony won't. We'll have to go to Neforwre. It's the closest."

When they got to his suite, she found that his clothes were packed and there was a satchel full of her things too. She pointed to her clothes and looked at him.

"Your friends. Bettis and the others packed them."

Her friends. Did she have friends? They didn't really know her. She thought of the thousands of smiles that had passed from them to her and all the times they had taken her with them to the pools or the kitchen. They had been friends to her. She had not really deserved it; the only thing she'd given in return had been deception. And yet, knowing of her deception, they still helped her. Melotin was a truly amazing nation. That raised a terrible question in her heart. How could she claim to love Thane and take him from his home?

She sat down on the bench that ran along the wall.

"What?" he asked. He pulled out a communication board and carried it over to her.

She put her hand on it. "I don't want you to leave here for me."

"I won't live without you. We can come back. Once we're bound together, we'll speak to my mother. She probably won't let us return to the queendom until you've had courses, perhaps private instruction."

She touched the board. "Until then?"

"We'll live outside."

She stared at him. Could he really be so naïve? He was so tall, so beautiful. There would be no way to conceal his identity. He'd be recognized and snatched for ransom on the outside. She touched the board and told him so. His face clouded. He hadn't considered that.

"Well, I'll ask for asylum and be a champion for whatever nation sponsors me."

“And you’ll fight against Melotin’s new champion if your sponsor nation demands it?”

He frowned and folded his arms across his chest. “Do you find excuses because you don’t want to be bound to me? Maybe one of my brothers convinced you that sampling other men wouldn’t be such a bad way to pass the time while you complete your education.”

She blushed, but smiled at his jealousy. “I don’t have to delay being bound to you to sample them, do I? You’ve already agreed to share me.”

“Maybe I’ve changed my mind about that.”

Her smile faded. “I am flattered by your possessiveness, but I don’t like what I see today. Tossing aside an oath made to brothers. Foreswearing your duty to your queendom. Leaving your home to break its rules. I would not have you destroy everything that you are for the love of me. I love what you are. I don’t want that much change.”

“Whether we stay or go doesn’t matter. I’m already changed by this love. And other than your will, I will let nothing separate you from me.”

“We have some time left until you have to leave the frolic. We can be together in body there until then, and we can be together in spirit the rest of the time. We can sit together at feast time and in common areas.”

He shook his head.

“What?”

“I’m banned from the frolic.”

“Ah. So then we would have to forgo the physical for awhile.”

He threw her an incredulous look.

“What? Do you find that the strongest part of your love for me has to do with the way your body feels when you’re inside me?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” he said.

“Well? We’ve barely talked. Perhaps the frolic and its subsequent waiting period required by all Melotiners makes more sense than you’re willing to admit. Maybe it helps to distinguish real love and affection from lust.”

He flung his hand out in dismissal and ground out, “Do you think I don’t know the difference? I’ve been inside hundreds. I’ve been pleased and given it for this whole span. I know what it is to have my body divided from my heart, and I know that what I have with you is a thing apart from that. There is no separation of body and heart. Your soul calls to mine. I feel you here,” he said, tapping his chest. “Do you think I didn’t examine my feelings while I was sitting in that cell before you came? I would have kept your secret unto death... because to betray you is to betray myself.”

She stared up at him, her heart weeping. There was no hesitation in his words. He loved her completely. It was more than she’d ever been able to hope for, and she wanted so much for her love to be a blessing rather than a curse.

His voice choked with emotion. “If you won’t leave here, I’ll stay. I’ll wait. Just don’t tell me what I feel. I know what I feel.”

She felt a tear drop from her lower lid, and she wiped it away. “Then let us be bound. Lead me where you will. I feel as you do. I will never willingly leave your side unless you ask me to go.”

He smiled and dropped to his knees, clasping her hands and kissing them. She leaned forward and kissed the top of his head.

He looked back up at her, still smiling. She pulled a hand away and touched the board.

“You shouldn’t look so grateful. In this, you’re the prize, not me. Clear your mind, Thane, and you’ll see that. I was prepared to have this half-life where I could share no friendship or love. You were the stuff of my dreams. In you, I gain the world. In me, you lose everything.”

He waved off her words.

“No,” she said firmly. “I would have you acknowledge this here and now. I couldn’t bear it if one day you looked at me and told me you hadn’t understood the choice you made and resented me because of it.”

He bent forward and kissed her. “I could never regret it. But if I did, I would never blame you.”

A few moments later, they snuck out of the palace through a tunnel that only the royal family knew about. Once on the grounds, they kept to the edges where there was cover from foliage to keep them from being seen by anyone in the towers. They were headed to the indigo woods. Veylin felt excitement spike her blood. She hadn’t been in the woods since the time she’d traversed them to gain entry to Melotin, but she remembered them fondly.

There were streams and ponds in the woods that would serve her in ways that the collected water of the palace could not. A slow satisfaction spread through her. She hadn’t even considered that possible added benefit of crossing the woods.

“If fortune smiles, they’ll think we’re hiding together in the palace. The search will last awhile, especially if my brothers lead it.”

She gave him a questioning look.

“They’ll try to give me as much time to enjoy your body as they can because I was warned not to be with you again. My next punishment will be to be moved to another palace.”

She frowned. She hadn’t considered that. She hadn’t realized that they might send him away. She moved more quickly toward the looming forest. She wanted to escape. Thane held her hand as they ran, reaching the edge in moments. She looked up.

There was a crystalline canopy that hung over the stunningly tall trees. The mesh was spun by the indigenous hard-shelled web bugs, and it solidified into a fine layer that fractured the light from above into tiny beams of blue and violet. Some people didn’t like the look of the forest because there were no warm tones, no yellow or gold or orange. But something about it always appealed to Veylin, and she rushed toward it like the salvation she hoped it would become for them.

Chapter 3

Thane shifted Veylin's weight on his shoulder. They'd walked until she couldn't anymore and then he'd convinced her they should sleep after having a small drink to toast their new life. She'd drunk the sleeping tonic without the slightest suspicion. When she'd kissed him and run her hands over his chest, he'd cursed fate for its sense of humor. He'd expected her to be too tired for sex or he'd have waited on the tonic until afterward.

When she'd fallen asleep, he'd packed everything up and rigged them onto a pull that he harnessed to his waist. Then he'd thrown a cloth over his shoulder and picked her up. He wanted to put as much distance between them and the palace as possible. The floor of the forest was too tangled to make quick passage easy, but the dim bluish light was too unsettling for horses so whoever followed would be on foot too. Thane smiled. When it came down to just the strength in a man's body, he had no doubt that he could outpace anyone.

After almost a full day and night of walking even he needed a rest. He unhooked the harness and rinsed his feet in the stream, enjoying the feel of the cold water. After a few moments, he carried Veylin into a nearby cave and set her down. Thane went back for the packs and carried them inside. He laid out a square of fabric and brought her onto it to sleep next to him.

Slumber didn't come immediately. He was considering something... something he'd been considering all day. There was a certain strength and almost irrepressible energy that overtook him when he drank from her. He wondered how much ground he could cover, if he were to do that. The only thing that bothered him was the lifeless way she slept afterward, and the second time she'd slept longer than the first. Her body had been so weak. The other problem was that his mind always became so focused on sex.

Would he be able to direct all that energy toward crossing the forest? Or would he just lie on the ground stroking her body until she was strong enough for him to make love to her again? He should have looked up some information on the nectar and the girls whose bodies made it. So much had happened so quickly that he hadn't had time. He wondered how much she knew about her own body.

He pulled her softness into him more tightly. No way to ask those questions now. He closed his eyes and drifted to sleep.

* * *

Veylin woke to the sound of Thane's heartbeat. She lifted her head from his chest and looked around. Her eyes adjusted from sleep but she was still blind. She nudged his body several times. She sat up, and the cool damp air surrounded her. Where were they?

"Hello, sweetness," his deep voice murmured, still heavy with sleep.

She poked him to communicate her uneasiness.

"I know it's dark here," he said. "It's night so the lesser sun is in the sky. We're in a cave though, so that low light's not enough to show us anything here."

She pulled his hand. She didn't like this kind of darkness. She wanted out.

"What? You're ready to go already?"

She yanked his hand.

He chuckled. "Okay. How about a kiss to help motivate me?"

She didn't give him one. She didn't want him distracted.

"No?" he complained. He caught her hand and slid it to his erection. "As usual, I've been dreaming about you."

She sighed, pulling her hand away.

"Seems you don't think the dark as sexy as I do." She heard him moving to sit up. "Dark wet caverns remind me of you, I guess," he mused seductively.

She smiled in spite of herself. Her poor tortured prince. She should really help him get his release before they were forced to start walking again.

She thought about their journey the day before. She didn't remember coming into the cave. She guessed she'd been so tired that she hadn't woken up when he'd moved them. It made sense hiding in the cave. If someone who was looking for them happened along, Thane and Veylin might not be found in such utter blackness. Of course, their pursuers probably carried lights.

She felt him standing near her, and then thought of what might be waiting for them out in that forest. If they were found, and he was sent away... or she was... would she regret spending all her time walking and not enough time touching him? Of course she would.

She reached over for him and found his thigh. He stopped moving instantly. Could he already feel her intention? Was it the lightness of her touch? She tugged softly, making him turn and come toward her. Her fingers unfastened the tie that kept the clothes on his hips.

She heard a loud thump as the pack he'd been holding fell from his hand. She freed his erection and felt the tension in his body coil tighter.

He blew his breath out hard as she licked the tip of him. She slid her fingers around him, liking, as always, the smooth soft feel of his skin stretched over the solidness beneath.

"Vey." Her name came out a groan as she slowly fed on him. She tongued him, loving his masculine scent, texture, and taste.

He groaned again and then spoke in a slow broken rhythm that told her he was having trouble speaking at all. "Vey, we can... lie down. You... don't have to... kneel."

She ignored the suggestion and sucked, drawing her mouth back and then letting him glide back into it.

"Or... we can stay... right here."

So very agreeable. If she were inclined to make demands, she would have made them during sex, but she didn't have demands. Everything she wanted in the world was contained within her embrace.

She liked the sound of tortured pleasure in his voice. She moved forward again, pressing him to the roof of her mouth with her tongue and then sucking hard.

She slid her hands down and cupped his balls, squeezing him gently, but firmly. His groans came faster from his throat.

She dragged her teeth very softly along the length of him and then licked the cream leaking from his tip. Some strangled curses fell from his lips somewhere above her head and he moaned long and low.

She drew him back toward her throat and felt him shudder. His fingers twisted in her hair, and he thrust into her mouth. It took a moment for her to catch his rhythm, and she had to concentrate to keep it.

She moved her hands behind him and gripped his muscled buttocks. She felt them contract under her fingers and had the sudden thought that at some point she was going to have to put a couple marks on them with her teeth.

Moments later she dug her fingernails into the tight flesh under her hands as she drank what he offered. His come was thick and salty and tasted good to her. She realized with the first swallow that she was hungry. She kept drinking until he was dry and melted.

She let her hands fall from his buttocks as he backed up and popped out of her mouth. She listened to him pant in the darkness and then she heard him laugh.

"I once told you that you could not enslave me. I stand corrected. Command me, my lady. I am at a loss to imagine what I would not do to please you."

She grinned. She had heard that men were easy to control. She'd doubted the veracity of such a sentiment, but perhaps... with certain attention turned their way, they could fall under a woman's spell. Of course, he only had to touch her to turn the tables. Before she let him though, she was getting out of this accursed black cave.

She stood and found his hand, pulling him.

"What, my love? Tell me what you want." He paused and then seemed to remember that she couldn't speak because he quickly supplied choices. She ignored the several offers of ways that he could pleasure her in return for her generous attention the

moments before. She finally squeezed his hand when he offered to take her out into the low light of the night.

A bit later, they had their bags, and he led her out of the cave. The eerie blue-blackness of the cold night surrounded them, but she could at least see the shadows of him and the trees.

"Veylin, I've been thinking."

She looked over at him expectantly.

"When I drink from you, I could run for days. I know you'll sleep, but I could carry you."

She shook her head. One of these times, if they didn't gain some control of it, she might not wake, and his heart might race so fast it stopped. It was definitely becoming too dangerous to let him drink while she couldn't talk to him. The nectar had come in such volumes and more quickly than she'd ever imagined it could. He'd only drank twice and yet she'd felt death circling them the second time.

"Is it dangerous for you?" he asked.

She nodded and pointed at him.

"What? And me?"

She nodded again.

"No. Who said that? I feel amazing afterward."

She waved him off and looked around. Nothing was familiar. Where were they? She'd expected to see the spot where they'd stopped. How far had he carried her while she'd slept?

She felt her breasts suspiciously. No, he hadn't drunk from them recently. It made no sense. She looked over at him and made a circling motion with her finger. "Where are we?" she mouthed.

"Time to go," he said quickly, grabbing her hand and leading her away from the cave.

She frowned. What had happened that he wasn't telling her about?

* * *

Thane woke to the sharpest pain he'd ever felt in his ears, like a hot spike being driven through each canal into his brain. He clapped his hands over his ears, pressing hard. Small animals scurried past him in flight. There was a noise, higher than any he'd ever heard, and it sliced across the distance from the north.

The pain intensified, and he fell over, curling his body against it. He yanked up the fabric he'd been lying on and stuffed some sections of it into his ears, pushing his fingers in behind it. The sound pierced his skull for a few moments and then stopped.

The pain in his head eased away, and he sat up. He wiped the sweat from his forehead and stood. He realized Veylin was missing. Had she been wandering around when the sound had started? And what had it been? Some sort of alarm from Neforwre? Impossible... that kind of sound would have split the townspeople's minds in half.

He shook his head and started walking. He was a little concerned that the sound might start again, but he was more worried that Veylin had wandered in its direction before it started. She might have passed out in pain. He needed to retrieve her and get them on their way. He'd veer south for a time after he found her, just to avoid that awful noise.

He discovered her tracks easily and followed them; they did head north. In fact, they led further and further away from where he'd slept. What could she have been thinking by walking so far? There were no other prints to suggest that someone was with her... that someone had forced her away from him. He hadn't noticed whether her pack had been near where he'd slept. Had she decided to leave him of her own accord for some reason? No, he wouldn't believe that, but neither did this incredible distance she'd passed make sense.

He stopped to stretch and then started to sprint. No matter how quickly she'd been moving when she'd left, he'd overcome her.

The spears of light broke across his arms as the forest streaked by. He was a truly fast runner. On his own, he'd have made the six-day journey across the forest in two. Of

course, there was no point in crossing the forest without her. There was no point in anything without her.

As if fate had heard his thoughts, he stumbled into a clearing and saw her swimming below him. He stood at the edge of a cliff where water fell down into a large pool that was also fed by several small streams running down the opposing hills.

He didn't have a chance to call to her before he was struck dumb. She pulled herself up onto a large rock that was poking up from the water. She lay naked across the rock, arched so that her calves and forearms dangled below the surface.

His mouth watered and all the blood in his body turned toward his groin. She looked so erotic poised on that rock, naked body stretched out under the blue-violet light, nipples crowning her breasts, reaching up for the sky.

And then she opened her mouth. He'd expected some wanton moan. He'd expected it because all his thoughts could not help but run to sex as he watched her. But she didn't moan.

The sound was so beautiful. It was singing, he realized. He didn't understand any of the words, but he could feel their meaning. She loved something... or someone... maybe it was about him. He hoped it was.

He tore his clothes off. All he could think about was getting to her. He ran to the spot where the cliff reached out over the water. Without hesitating he dove over the edge. As he fell, he realized two things. The singing had stopped. He also realized that the pool might be too shallow. He flipped in the air, and then crashed into the water, plummeting down. His feet hit the bottom hard, sending shock waves up his spine, but the water and bending his knees had absorbed much of the impact. He pushed off and shot up off the bottom.

Veylin sat up on the rock, looking pensive. The water was to his nipples, and he leaned forward, springing off the balls of his feet, and swam to her.

"Hello, sweetness," he said with a smile. He propped his elbows on the rock next to her ankles. She'd bent her knees and planted her small feet on the edge. He'd rather

liked seeing her sprawled, but she looked pretty as a wood nymph sitting as she was now.

She smiled at him, touching his jaw. "Hello, beautiful," she said softly. Her voice was clear as a bell and melodic like no voice he'd ever heard. It chimed and then dissipated into nothing. The sound of the water and the wind were suddenly coarse in comparison, and he waited for her to speak again. "Shall I sing for you, my prince?" she asked with a knowing smile.

He nodded speechlessly.

And when she opened her mouth again, she put to shame every bird, every instrument, and every other sound that had ever been heard.

His very heart seemed to change its rhythm to match that of her voice. He still didn't know the words she sang, yet he knew she was singing about loss.

He rested his chin on his arms and thought about his father. He had never known all the details about what had transpired between his father and uncle. He had only been a small boy when they had died. He usually didn't feel sadness when he thought about it. The memories were more like having a history lesson. The people in the story had shaped the course of a nation and a family, but he hadn't really known them. At the moment, he felt as if something were missing from his life. It was terrible not to have a father now that he needed advice about how to find his own way in the world. It was awful to have lost a parent at such a young age. His heart was breaking at the thought.

Her voice vanished. And just as quickly as it had begun, he felt the melancholy lift. He rubbed his stinging eyes. That voice of hers wasn't just pretty, it was dark and manipulative. He opened his mouth to tell her not to sing again when she started a new song, and the words died in his throat.

The hauntingly sensuous lyric gripped him. He looked at her face. Her pale lips. Her long dark lashes swayed over her eyes, the velvety dark windows into her soul. His eyes dropped to her collarbones, which he followed in to the hollow at the base of her throat. The music of her body seemed to rise from that spot to her lips. His gaze fell to

her breasts with their hypnotic gold-rimmed nipples. He studied them. Firm globes of creamy white flesh topped with jewel caps that under the attention of his mouth would open. He moistened his lips with a tongue that tried to recall the taste of her nectar. Sweet. Delicious.

His erection swayed in the water, bumping his belly as he moved. He caught her ankles in his hands, separating them. Her voice didn't waver as she leaned back so that she was resting on her elbows.

She looked at him and then tipped her head back, singing to the crystalline canopy overhead. With her head tipped back, she conjured to his memory so many other times he'd seen her head tilted that way when she was in the grips of orgasm. Her body though, at the moment, was still, except for the slight effort that went into creating her voice. He was looking at her through the frame of her knees, which meant the tight curls over her soft sex could be followed directly up to her breasts and throat.

He stretched to lick the water off her smooth calf. She slid her foot over his shoulder and beckoned him forward. It was all the invitation he needed. He put his hands on the stone and in a fluid motion, pressed himself out of the water. Knelling between her ankles, he leaned forward, putting his palms on either side of her shoulders.

She stared into his eyes, still singing. Their connection was so intimate that he hesitated to move despite how much he wanted her. She leaned back further, lying on her back and stretching her arms overhead again. He watched her breasts rise.

He licked his lips, wanting so badly to suck them, but he knew it would just drive him to madness. He chose instead to drop his lower body down and to work himself into her very slowly. Such velvet softness. She enveloped him in the tight cocoon that his body loved so dearly.

He came forward, feeling her nipples graze his muscles, which contracted involuntarily at the sensation of being touched. He bowed his head and put his mouth over her throat. He felt the vibrations from her voice against his lips, while he rocked into her.

And then her song ended and he licked her throat, wanting her to sing some more for him. Instead she breathed his name, and his whole body reacted. His hips drove forward, bringing him deep inside her.

"Kiss my lips," she said with a voice that danced down his spine.

He raised his mouth to hers and kissed her. She wrapped her arms around his neck, squashing her breasts against him.

He drove into her harder. She broke the kiss, but clung to him so that her back was off the rock. She moved her mouth to his ear, sucking on his earlobe, and wrapped her legs around him so they were pressed together tightly. His thrusts rocked both their bodies in unison.

"Yes, Thane. Oh, yes," she said in his ear.

Her voice, her body, his pounding heart and passion all felt like one.

"I love you," that irresistible voice said and triggered his cock to shoot great torrents of seed.

He felt her spasms around him as he cried out. Her body seemed intent on milking him dry.

When he had spent himself inside her, she started to loosen her grip. He pushed up onto his knees and snaked his arms around her, pressing her to him.

"Not yet. I don't want to let you go yet."

She was wrapped around him with all her limbs. He liked the way that felt.

"Take me in the water," she said.

He wasn't sure whether she meant she just wanted to be in the water or if she wanted him to *take her* in the water, but either way was fine with him. Actually, he preferred the latter as soon as his cock could be revived.

He used a hand to steady them and backed off the rock. The water was colder than he remembered, but with his scrotum pressed against her and his cock still bathed in warm fluids inside her, it felt very good.

She rested her head against the side of his neck, humming.

"Talk to me, Vey."

She kissed his shoulder and then lifted her head to look at him. A slow smile curved her lips. "You are the prince of my heart."

It cut right into his body, and he felt himself start to stiffen inside her. She arched an eyebrow. She'd felt it too.

"Should I tell you about how much I love you?" she asked with a teasing note in that voice.

He was getting harder with every passing moment. "Depends," he said with a smile.

"On what does it depend?"

Suddenly, he was fully erect with the walls of her sex hugging him. A breath escaped him as a soft sigh of pleasure. She kissed along his jaw.

"It... depends." He paused. "On whether... it will make me finish too fast."

"I'll talk when I'm closer then. Do something to make me closer, Thane."

He was already sliding her up and down on his erection. The cold water added to the symphony of sensations, but he didn't want the cold. He moved forward so that her back was against a smooth side of the rock. He stayed fully embedded in her, holding her hips, and rocked them both forward and back.

She moved her body too so that her pelvis, and more specifically her clit, ground from side to side in tiny fractions. He liked the feel of her riding him that way. It made the connection more pressured. Pressure was a good thing. A very good thing. Like the pressure she was creating by tightening her ridged folds around him.

He pumped harder.

"Yes," she gasped. "Show me how strong you are. I want... to feel it everywhere."

He put his arms around her so that when he started slamming into her, her back would be protected. Then he trapped her body between a rock and his hard place and worked her with all his strength.

"Yes. Oh, yes. Oh... oh, yes."

She throbbed around him, and he gushed again.

* * *

Veylin knew that Thane would have been content to have spent the whole day inside her with her voice coaxing him to get hard almost immediately after he'd just come. She wouldn't have minded that herself, but he'd fucked her nice and hard the last time... almost as hard as when he drank from her. And she wanted to enjoy that ache as she swam.

Her golden boy was stretched lazily out on the soft black-violet moss next to the pool. She liked seeing his body while she swam. It was decadent, feeling the stretch of the muscles that he'd made sore as she glided through the silky water and looked at his body. The long lean legs, his gorgeous muscular chest, his lovely thick shoulders, and back down to the pretty tuft of dark blond hair from which that majestic cock rose. If there was a part of him that she wouldn't find beautiful, she had yet to discover it.

"Veylin," he called, rolling onto his side.

"Yes?"

"Come talk to me."

So that you can fuck me again? That would be nice, but she wanted to draw out the anticipation a little longer. "What do you want to talk about?"

"Anything. Come here," he said firmly, sitting up.

She swam to the edge of the pool and climbed out. She walked over to stand next to him. Then she smiled and sang a few notes of a happy little song she knew. She twirled, shaking her head and her hips. Water drops rained down from her hair onto her shoulders and onto him.

She felt so delighted and free. She finished her little dance and turned to find him staring up at her in amazement. Her gaze flickered to between his legs. Hard again. She decided that young men were totally insatiable. *To the joy of their lucky lovers*, she thought.

Thane glanced down and then fell onto his back and let out a self-deprecating laugh. He flung an arm across his eyes. "This does not bode well, sweetness."

"I don't agree," she said, leaning over his groin to examine his erection. She trailed a finger over his thigh lightly.

He knocked her hand away from him gently. "What is going to happen once we've been bound together? How will I ever manage to train or work or even leave our bed, for that matter, when listening to your voice or looking at your face?"

"Well, when you have to go out, I'll be silent and cover up."

He moved the arm off his eyes and looked at her. "Your voice... did you know it would do this to me? Does it do this to every man you meet?"

She smiled and nodded. "And women."

He closed his eyes as if that image were almost too much temptation for him. With the perfect grace that was always his to command, he rolled and came to his knees, grabbing her and pulling her to him.

He swept an arm against her knees, making her fall onto his arms and then, in an instant, she was on her back and he was above her. He knocked her legs apart and buried himself inside her.

"So that's why you didn't speak," he said as he rocked back and forth.

"No. I would have spoken to you. I wanted to bring you to this need for me from the first instant I saw you."

He groaned.

She sang a few words quickly, which instantly increased his tempo. She smiled. "Faster. I love all your beautiful muscles. I like to feel them working for me."

He drove into her hard, making her arch. When she looked up again, his eyes were locked on her chest.

"No, Thane."

"Let me have a taste."

They both knew he wouldn't stop at a taste. She shook her head.

He withdrew, making her cry out. She reached for him, but he caught her arm and used it to flip her body over. The force knocked the wind from her and she dazedly took a deep breath, just as she felt him raising her hips.

He plunged into her from behind. She gripped the mossy ground to brace herself against the force of his thrusts. One of his hands pressed on her back, keeping her butt achingly high and her forehead low.

The thrusts were deep and punishing. She moaned and cried out, feeling the juice of her excitement lubricate him and drip out of her every time he withdrew for another stroke.

He slowed for a moment and reached down, catching her arm. He drew it back and shoved it against her throbbing clit. "Rub there," he commanded.

"Can't. I have to brace myself."

"No you don't." He bent forward, grabbing a handful of her hair gently. He lifted her head and slid her free arm so that her forearm was directly below her face. He lowered her head so that her forehead rested on her arm. Positioning her like a doll... or a sex slave. It made her impossibly wetter.

He straightened back up, putting his hand back over the hand he'd left against her sex. He moved so that his hand was forcing hers to grind into the exact spot that was throbbing most. She gasped. It was so erotic.

Then his hand was gone, and he held both her hips. "Rub yourself," he said, rocking back and forth. "Do it and I'll take you hard."

She jerked the little bud back and forth until it was screaming under her finger. And he drove into her with thrusts that raised her legs off the ground. It was a deep fucking and when the feeling in her pussy connected with where her hand was rubbing she exploded.

Her body went limp from the release, but he held her up with his strong hands and he kept working her cunt, making her come twice more. When it was over, she crawled away from him to catch her breath. Her body felt so achingly good and tired.

She curled so that she could look at him. He was still on his knees, hands resting on his head, twitching muscles stretched tantalizingly across his chest. There was a fierce look in his eyes. Sweat ran down his body and come dripped from his spent cock

onto the moss. He looked dangerous, primal, powerful. He looked as incredible as she felt.

She rolled onto her back and stretched. Even as she did, she could feel his eyes on her.

"There has to be some way."

"For what?" she asked.

"For me to drink from you without killing us both."

So he still wanted that. She smiled weakly. If she said yes, he would be on her in a moment. There was such a thing, she decided, as having a body that was too powerful. In their own ways, they each had one of those.

"There is a way," she whispered to the sky.

"What is it?"

"Not today."

"Why?"

She looked back at him. "Because it's for me to try and control you with my voice. And I can hardly control my voice when I'm not exhausted, let alone when I am. When you drink from me I'm as lost as you are. I couldn't even try to control you right now." The last word had stretched higher than she'd meant, and she saw him wince at the sound.

Understanding dawned. "This morning. That ear-splitting sound. That was you?"

She nodded.

"Why? Why do you make that sound?"

She shrugged helplessly.

"But you've had orgasms with me. You lose control then. You never make any sound..."

She took a deep breath, concentrating hard to keep her voice in a normal range. "Practice."

"What do you mean 'practice'?"

"I can make myself have an orgasm. I can be silent. But no one's ever drawn the nectar from my body before you. It's a more powerful orgasm. Too powerful. I almost can't keep my silence. It drives me to unconsciousness trying. Please... I can't use my voice any more today... it's too hard." She could feel tears of frustration welling up in her eyes. She covered her face.

A moment later, she felt him gather her up as the crying started.

"Easy, Vey. Easy." He sat down with her on his lap, cradling her against his chest. "Why are you crying?" He stroked her hair and back soothingly. "Don't you know you're amazing? A thing of magic. Don't cry."

She couldn't stop the silent sobs, and he held her tighter. For so long, she'd felt freakish and alone, terrified that if she spoke, even once, her true identity would be discovered. Now the fear and grief and longing poured out of her, and he held her through all of it.

Finally her crying slowed, and he tilted her face up, kissing her salty cheeks. He ran a thumb over her lip. "Give me that mouth I love." She lifted her chin a bit, letting him claim her mouth with his. The kiss was sweet and deep at the same time.

He drew back and studied her face. "Feel better?"

She nodded.

"We've been here a long time. It'd be good for us to cross a little distance."

She nodded again and, with that, they were on their feet, dressing.

They walked silently through the forest back to where they'd left their things. When they arrived, they froze at the sound of a branch cracking in the distance. There were voices. She looked expectantly at Thane. Collecting their bags, he waved for her to come with him.

They walked for quite a while. Finally, she slowed. She was so tired. She felt wretched now, sore and exhausted. He could obviously keep going, but she just couldn't.

"Come to me, Veylin, I'll carry you."

She looked at him skeptically. He had to be kidding. He'd fucked her six times. Even his incredible body had to be tired.

"Come," he said.

When she didn't move, he strode over and swept her up. She hung limply over his shoulder, looking at the bags hanging from his other shoulder. It should have bothered her to be carted along like the rest of his property, but she didn't care. She was far too tired to care about anything.

* * *

When Veylin woke, she was lying on top of Thane. He stirred when she moved, and she cursed herself for waking him.

"I'm sorry," she mouthed.

"Can't you talk to me today?" he asked, rubbing his eyes.

She shook her head.

"Why?"

She gave him a sad look.

"The ear-piercing sound has to be first?"

She nodded.

"When we're bound, I'll build you a chamber with walls that no sound can pass and in the morning you can make all the noise you want testing out your voice."

She smiled at him.

"And then you can talk to me all day. Or sing." He looked at her face. "The way you sing," he said with a shake of his head. "I hope that's the last sound I hear before I die."

"That can be arranged," a male voice said.

Chapter 4

Veylin froze, seeing first the sword at Thane's throat and then following it up to the person holding it.

Her cousin, Likus, smiled at her. He had made his hair totally black with some kind of mineral dye and it hung in dead strands to his shoulders. His skin had also been stained with something. It looked gray... the color of ashes. Fitting, considering the way death had always seemed to linger around him.

"So, little Veylin, not dead. I didn't think so. When we heard rumors of a silent girl who had bewitched a prince of Melotin... a silent girl who'd arrived with no past during the last orange harvest, I told your brother it was you."

"Who are you?" Thane asked calmly. The blade at his throat apparently couldn't rattle his voice.

Likus pressed the sword down harder. "Come here, Veylin, or I'll cut his head off."

Dread swung its heavy club, knocking her to her feet. Thane grabbed her hand to stop her, but she shook her head at him furiously.

"Yes, come to me, little cousin. Come."

She pulled her hand free of Thane's and moved to Likus who, in one motion, sheathed his sword and drew his dagger. He yanked her to him and put it to her throat. Thane, so agile and fast, was already on his feet and had a hand on her arm, but he stopped pulling the instant he saw the dagger poised to slice her neck.

"Who are you and why are you so anxious to die?" Thane demanded.

Likus chuckled. "Arrogance. Such is the way with royalty. Even me."

"Royalty?" Thane asked. "Then I challenge you. Champions on the battlefield."

"Very generous of you. But I have no intention of facing the champion who does not lose. Besides I don't have to accept the challenge. You *had* what belongs to my kingdom, but you have given her back."

"What belongs... she's free."

"She's not free," Likus said, laughing. "Did she tell you she was free? She's the heir to Kenart, and I'm her oldest living relative. I haven't given her to you or to anyone. She's not free. Not for a long time yet. She can't choose until her sun sacrifices are fulfilled."

"That law is archaic. No nation still holds to that."

"Kenart does."

Veylin read the anguish on Thane's face and felt her heart break.

"Why didn't you tell me?" he whispered.

Tears dripped from her eyes. "I couldn't," she mouthed.

"Is he the one who hurt you?" Thane asked.

Her eyes fell to the ground.

"Hurt her? Has she been telling tales? Very unlike you, Veylin. You were so good at keeping silent. No matter what was done... always silent."

"Your name," Thane said to Likus.

"What?"

"I would know your name."

"Likus."

He nodded. "Tell me, Likus, what would you take to give your cousin to me?"

"You have nothing to offer. You don't control your queendom's armies or its treaties. Unless you want to give yourself as champion. That could be interesting. You could both live in our fair realm then."

"No," Thane said.

"Then you have nothing to offer."

"Currency? We're a rich queendom. Kenart is in need --"

"You must keep up with the news of the day, prince of Melotin. Zilner has fallen to Kenart. We have all the riches we need. What's more we have a weapon that has made the ferocious nation of No'oro sign a treaty with us. Soon we'll control half the world just as easily as we control one willful girl who is long overdue at home."

"What are you going to do? March her out of the forest with a knife at her throat? As soon as you fall asleep, she'll escape."

"I don't have to sleep again before we're out of this forest. My entourage awaits."

"Why didn't you bring them?" Thane asked, looking around curiously.

"No witnesses in case I have to kill her. Now, what you're going to do is jump off that cliff right over there," Likus said with a nod of his head.

"Why?"

"Because I want to slow you down. There's water. You'll be swept over the falls. It won't kill you, but I'll be out of the forest by the time you make it back to this spot."

"There's no knife at my throat, and you want Veylin. You went through all this trouble to retrieve her. I don't believe you'd kill her. So why should I do what you say?"

"You don't know me. I'd rather she were dead than someone else's sex doll. Isn't that so, Veylin?"

She felt the sting of the dagger nicking her skin, but she shook her head. She knew Likus would kill her if it suited him, but she did not want Thane jumping to his death to prevent it.

"Don't!" Thane said sharply. She knew he was watching the trickle of her blood.

"Then go over the cliff."

"No," Veylin mouthed.

"Your word that you won't hurt her."

"Of course," Likus agreed.

"No! No!" she shrieked silently.

Thane walked over to the cliff and looked down. He shook his head. "Some choice you've left me with. Watch you hurt her or kill myself?"

"Some have survived it."

"Name one."

"Well, it's been said. And surely a great champion such as yourself," he said with a shrug.

Thane smiled and turned. He backed away from the cliff and then ran forward and leapt out.

"Well, that was easy," Likus said, dragging her over to the cliff so that they could look down. "There," he said, pointing. "His body's washing down. If he is not already dead, he will wash up on shore where some of my men are waiting to capture and kill him. My hands will be clean of it. Now, for you."

She felt a sharp pain in the back of her head, and the world spun.

* * *

Thane called out Gatler's name. He knew his brother's camp was close. He'd seen the tracks. He staggered to his knees, holding the wound in his side. He needed to rest. A moment later, against his will, he was lying on his back. He wanted to reach Veylin, but he needed to recover his strength. Light swirled before his eyes. It was hard to see.

After a while, he looked up to find his brother's face.

"Get him up," Gatler said.

Thane felt himself being lifted. He had gone over the falls and lived. He had fought a dozen men and lived. He had swum and run all night with bleeding wounds and lived. He had done it so that he or his brother could intercept Veylin and her cousin before they left the forest.

"He needs blood. Bring me the shell!" Gatler shouted.

He wanted to explain everything to Gatler, but he couldn't bring the words. He was as silent as Veylin. And then he passed out.

When he woke up, he was warm and dry, bandaged and being carried through the forest. "Stop!" Thane shouted.

Gatler rushed over. "It's about time you woke."

"He took her. Her cousin took her."

Gatler frowned. "I know. He's her guardian, Thane."

Thane rolled off the makeshift stretcher. He looked around to get his bearings.

"They're not far," Gatler said. "We're following in their tracks, but it would be wrong for us to intercept them. He's her guardian. Or so my tracker tells me he's fond of reminding her."

"She's unhurt?"

"She's unconscious."

"Why? Why is she unconscious?" Thane had a horrible image of that deathly-gray bastard leaning over Veylin's lifeless body.

"Tonic, I think. He made her drink it, but he makes very slow progress carrying her. Still, he is her guardian," Gatler said again, holding out a dagger to Thane.

Thane took the dagger, glancing at the sword that Gatler didn't offer. In an instant a look passed between them. The clanking of swords was loud. If there were more of Likus' men in the woods, they might come at the sound of it.

"Why doesn't he have his men travel with him, Gatler?" Thane asked in a fierce whisper as he and Gatler walked away from the company of Gatler's men.

"Why do you suppose he doesn't want them with him, Thane?" Gatler returned in a low voice.

Rape. "Has he done it yet?"

Gatler shook his head.

"Would you have let him rape her while I slept?" he asked softly.

"What do you think?" Gatler returned equally softly.

"Then why haven't you killed him yet?"

"I thought you might want to do it."

Thane had always hated contests that were to the death, and he'd never tried to kill anyone. Sometimes other champions died from internal wounds after a vicious fight, but Thane had always rationalized that the battles of champions saved the lives of thousands because the armies of nations did not have to fight if champions did. Still, he always hated knowing that someone had died after fighting with him. He couldn't

imagine purposely taking a life. Still, Likus had Veylin. How could he retrieve and keep her? Thane frowned, torn by warring emotions. "I'm not happy about killing any man," Thane whispered gravely.

"Then give me back my dagger, brother, and I'll do it for you."

It would have been easy to hand the dagger back, but it wouldn't have been right. Thane frowned. "No, she was taken from me, and she'll be returned to me."

Gatler looked him over thoughtfully. "Be close when you kill him. Leave the body and move west with Veylin. My trusted man will dispose of the body. My company will find you after you're bound to her in Neforwre."

Thane raised his eyebrows, startled for a moment. Then he reminded himself of his brother's military prowess. Of course Gatler had guessed where Thane had been going. "How many times did you circle us in the forest?"

"A few."

"How did you catch us?"

"We rode horses to get in front of you and then cut back across toward you."

"I'm glad it wasn't you that took her from me. I would not relish crossing blades with you."

"I don't have to take her from you, Thane. She's mine as well as yours, remember?" Gatler said lightly with a smirk and a wink.

Thane frowned. "About that. We're going to have to discuss that later."

"Yes, later. First, see if you can manage to rescue her."

"If he kills me, technically she'll be nothing to you." Thane was thinking about Veylin's fear of returning to her home. She'd been abused badly enough to prefer complete isolation from the friendship of others to living where she'd come from.

"Your point?"

"She still has to be rescued even if I can't manage it."

"And?"

"And I want your promise that if he kills me, you'll see him dead," Thane said.

"If he kills you, I'll see him dead... slowly."

Thane nodded. Gatler's sense of duty ran toward the old ways. "I'm going," Thane said as Gatler pointed the way.

Thane ran swiftly and silently through the dark woods. He couldn't hear Gatler behind him, but knew he was there. A deadly shadow.

He found the camp and froze at the edge of it. Veylin was naked, bound, and gagged. Likus, the oblivious bastard, was undressing.

Thane hardly felt the ground beneath his feet. He did feel the whisper of wind against his face as he ran. He passed them in an instant, pulling Likus with him as he went. His hand moved as if it had a will of its own. He watched the body fall. It seemed to take forever for it to strike the ground.

Thane saw the ground turn red near his feet, and he stepped over Likus.

He moved to Veylin and knelt next to her. She looked up at his face. He cut her hands and feet loose.

"Are you hurt?"

She shook her head, starting to look past him.

"No," he said, covering her eyes with his hand. "Keep your eyes closed. I'll bring you your clothes. Can you dress yourself?"

She nodded.

He uncovered her eyes, finding them closed. He kissed her cheek. "I love you."

"I know," she mouthed.

He helped her to her feet and brought her clothes to where she was. He faced her away from the body to dress and stood behind her in case she turned. His body would block her view of her fallen cousin.

Chapter 5

Veylin woke in a Neforwre inn and opened her eyes. Thane was asleep in a chair facing her. He had been worried that she'd been traumatized by being stripped by her cousin. He'd been afraid to touch her. That, of course, would not do.

Now she slid from under the coverlet, naked except for the sex-covering. She moved slowly to one of the two windows to look down. There were pretty mechanized carts zipping by on the slide built for them. She knew that the slide circled the city in interconnecting rings. The serpentine designs on the curved sides of the carts held the collective panels that absorbed the energy of the suns, which was what made them glide so fast. She knew that they were sleek and quick... not so unlike the horses. She'd read about the carts in books, but she'd never been in one. Kenart hadn't had the currency to build a slide system when she'd been there. Maybe it did now.

She turned and moved to the other window. There were a dozen horses in the field below. Their coats were glossy and dark, having just been brushed for the day. There were gilded drapes with the Melotin crest hanging around some of their necks. She smiled, watching the horses move gracefully. She knew Melotin could afford slide systems in all the parts of the realm, but the queen liked having some places where the new was not mixed with the old. The palace where Melotiner young people were educated and raised was one place where there would never be a slide system.

And horses were nice to have for a lot of reasons. She'd ridden her own horse, Neros, from Kenart to this very city when she'd fled. The slide system had been smaller then, but still amazing. She'd let her horse go, knowing that a simple mute girl would not be riding on the back of a fierce, beautiful stallion. He was really a warrior's mount. She'd still regretted leaving him behind, but she hadn't worried about him. Any animal that handsome would be rescued and sold to someone deserving. Still, she sometimes

liked to think that Neros had escaped the outreaches of the city and found his way to the open plains where he might still be running free.

“Good morning,” Thane said from behind her.

She looked over her shoulder at him and smiled. He stood up from the chair and stretched his tall frame, fingertips grazing the room’s ceiling.

“Want to bind yourself to me forever today?” he asked lightly.

She nodded.

“I chose this place because it’s pretty humble,” he said, glancing around. “I thought we could hide here more easily, but we don’t need to have humble trappings for the ceremony.”

She shrugged. She didn’t care what they wore.

“I know you should have a sister or friend with you to get the clothes and mark, but...” His voice trailed off, eyes traveling over her.

She raised questioning eyebrows at him.

“I never noticed how beautiful your back is before. There are some gowns that the women at court wear that don’t have fabric covering the spine. You would make a gown-maker’s career in one of those.”

On any other morning he would have been running his fingers down her spine by now, but he was waiting. She could tell that he was still worried about how she was feeling. The truth was that she’d felt as if she’d had a weight lifted off her that had been pressing down her whole life. Likus was dead. She had not seen the body, but she knew it with certainty. He would never be coming for her. Equeid was still alive and dangerous, but he hadn’t been as fascinated with her as Likus had been. Maybe he would just leave her alone.

She held her hand behind her, beckoning Thane to come. He walked over slowly, catching her hand, entwining their fingers and bringing her hand up to his lips. He kissed it, and she turned and offered her mouth.

He kissed her and a moment later she was lying naked on the floor in his arms. He rolled away to strip and then rolled back to her. She spread her legs, and he bent his

head, his tongue finding the moisture there. He teased her clit with his teeth until she was raising her hips from the floor, begging him. He eased himself into her, staring down into her eyes.

“For me, *you* are home,” he whispered.

It was a slow joining, the tension building until it didn’t seem like it could get any worse, and then it built some more. She began thrashing impatiently at the end, gripping his shoulders, digging her nails into his flesh.

He slid his arms around her and lifted her as he moved onto his knees and then stood, never separating them. He moved to the wall, putting her back to it. His hands were under her bottom, her legs wrapped around his waist. She clutched the muscles of his arms, feeling them contract as he slid her up and down on his cock. When he let her ride all way down, the penetration was deep and delicious, and she gasped happily. Then the door opened, and she froze, muscles everywhere contracting. Thane, unaware of the intrusion, groaned in pleasure, fucking her harder as Calem strolled silently in, carrying packages. He grinned at the sight of them.

She closed her eyes, pretending not to have seen him, though she was blushing furiously. He would, no doubt, turn and leave discreetly, but she couldn’t help but think about what he’d seen. Her legs wrapped around Thane’s naked thrusting body. Thane’s muscled buttocks contracting as he penetrated her. Beautiful, carnal.

She tipped her head back panting. It shouldn’t have made her hotter to have been seen, but it had. Images of her body trapped between Thane and Calem flashed in her head. She came very hard, wet sex sucking on Thane’s fevered cock. She opened her eyes and found Calem leaning against the doorway still watching them. He winked at her with a wicked smile and ran a hand over the noticeable bulge of his groin.

The way he clutched himself, drawing her eyes to him, said everything. It said: *This is hard because I’m watching you get fucked. Given the opportunity, I’ll fuck you just as hard as he is.*

She bit her lip guiltily. She shouldn't have liked seeing the raw desire she stirred in him, but it was heady. After such a long time of being sexually invisible, to have breath-taking men turn their lust on her was overwhelming.

Calem slipped back out the door just as she started to come again. Thane gushed into her, warming her insides. She bit his arm just above where her hand squeezed. He groaned loudly, finishing strong.

"I love you, sweetness," he said, staying pressed to her for several moments before he lifted her off his spent cock and set her on her feet.

Her legs wobbled, and she felt the warmth inside her running down her thighs. She looked up at his handsome face and rubbed her knuckles along his jaw. "I love you too," she mouthed.

He smiled, bending to kiss her forehead. "Go take a bath," he said, walking to the window that overlooked the horses. "Calem's horse is down there. Since he hasn't burst in with a dozen palace guards to drag us back, one can only assume he's here secretly. I'll go find him."

She felt a sudden need to confess. She grabbed the communication board and tapped the medallion. "He's here. He came in while we were..."

She blushed guiltily, and Thane arched an eyebrow.

"He left when he found we were busy," she said.

"I'll bet," Thane said wryly.

"He did leave," she said, gesturing around the room.

"I know, but not because we were busy. He left because he didn't have the view he wanted."

She drew her brows together in confusion.

Thane smiled and shook his head. "If he bothered to get a key and come in without knocking, it's safe to say he hoped to find us busy when he arrived. And he left without being thrown out because he didn't have the view he wanted... namely one of you. Had I been lying on my back with you on top of me, I'm sure he'd still be here

with one of those looks on his face like: 'Don't mind me. I live to be entertained. Put on a show. I am the prince after all'."

She chuckled silently at Thane's impression of Calem. She touched the board. "He *is* too bold."

"Much too bold," Thane agreed. "He's been very wild at the frolic lately. Too many lovers begging for his attention all the time. You know, I wouldn't have put it past him to have strolled over and tried to seduce you into extending an invitation to him to join us right while we were in the act of it. He uses every moment of abandon to his advantage. One day he'll catch me half asleep after I've just been with you and talk me out of my share of the queendom."

"I don't think he would do that."

Thane's eyes ran over her body. "He might if you were part of the spoils."

She shook her head. "No one could ever take me from you." It was the truth. Calem might fan her lust, but she had always loved Thane, and she always would.

He nodded his golden head thoughtfully.

"And isn't that why you have the pact? So that nothing so small as a woman can come between you?"

"Nothing so small?" Thane echoed with a mirthless laugh. "You are petite, Vey, but you are not small. The prize of you would turn brother against brother. We are very competitive, and this kind of contest strikes at the very heart of what makes us male."

She felt a sharp pain in her heart. He *was* afraid of losing her. And loyalty suddenly made her furious at Calem and at herself. "You will never lose me, Thane, and I can reassure you easily. I could turn my eyes from him and never acknowledge him again."

"He's not that easy to ignore."

"Watch me."

He smiled at her.

* * *

When the brother in question returned, Veylin had bathed and dressed. They sat down to breakfast, and she never looked at him. When he spoke to her she looked around or at Thane.

"So," Calem tried again. "I've been reading about the descendants of Cesta. The stories say water running in nature helps soothe them and that they always trained their voices while swimming and bathing. The books I've consulted say the sounds of an untrained voice can split the eardrums of ordinary people, so the training is obviously important. With time the highest pitches can be suppressed for strings of days at a time."

Veylin was listening of course, and she'd tilted her head slightly but did not turn it.

From the corner of her eye, she saw Calem look again at Thane. "So," he continued. "I was thinking that we need to find a place for Veylin to practice so that we can finally hear her speak one day."

"I have heard her speak," Thane said.

Veylin almost chuckled at the sound of Calem's surprise.

"Well, if you have it taken care of, then I'll turn my research to other things," Calem said.

Altogether too clever, she thought. She smiled when Thane ignored his remark and went on.

"She sings too. More beautifully than anything you've ever heard."

"Yes, the book mentioned the singing."

"If you ever wanted to seduce someone who did not want to be seduced, you could petition Veylin to sing in the background. I assure you the girl would yield."

"What must it be like then when one is easily seduced *and* she sings? You're easily seduced by her without her voice, Thane. How was it then when you heard it?"

"It can make taking things slow impossible," Thane said with a smirk.

Calem was looking at her again now. "I wonder if when she has her voice controlled, she will allow me to hear it. I would very much like to hear her sing." A couple of Calem's fingers reached out and touched her hair.

She sat rigidly still, not allowing the slightest reaction. Thane did react though. He grabbed his brother's arm and yanked it back.

"She did not give you permission."

"You're right. I beg her pardon then," Calem said, folding his hands on the table in front of him.

"What about me? Do you beg my pardon?"

Calem looked at him. "I didn't know I needed to," he said seriously.

"Why? Because we made some foolish pact as children? By the coercion of an older brother whom we idolized?"

Calem leaned forward and frowned.

"You see. This is the reason that the pact was not foolish," Calem said. "Your love turns you from me. We, who have been best friends and shared every adventure and confidence, should never be divided. Gatler envisioned the three of us ruling as one. It's never been done that way. Your generosity, strength, and mercy. My shrewdness and slick tongue. Gatler's fearlessness and ruthless resolve. We could be the greatest realm there ever was. Our queen and Gatler have been bringing us to this all along. He's oldest and commands the army. He could take the realm for himself. He does not because this is his dream. The shared dream of all three of us. It's why we defy everything to help you bind yourself to this girl. You love her, and so we have done everything to help you keep her. Gatler could have brought you back from the woods, and you know it. I could have told everyone that she is escaped from Kenart and had her taken swiftly back, but we do not try to pry her from you."

Calem shook his head and continued. "You are newly in love. I know it makes all men possessive and jealous. We three should know that better than any others considering our father. And that is why the pact is not foolish. Yesterday, in the queen's sitting room, your love stood between Gatler and me, and we were closer to each other

than we have been since childhood. Men who don't desire other men sexually cannot draw themselves together that close unless a woman is between them. Understand what you have, Thane, in this woman. She can be the spike that drives us apart or the tie that binds us together."

"Very persuasive, Calem, as you always are. Tell me then, what exactly do you expect the love of my life to be to you and Gatler? A sex slave who wanders from bed to bed?"

"No. Never that."

"Then what?"

"Just let her pay attention to us and tease and play the way women can do so easily with no cost to themselves."

Thane sighed heavily. "You would not have it stop there. Don't pretend you would."

"Then give us your terms, brother. Maybe we should never touch her, with her permission of course, unless you are present. Or maybe the opposite is true."

Thane frowned. "Can't you see that this can never work? I will not want to see you touch her nor will I want to know that you do so when I'm not around. Any of it will breed bad blood between us."

"Not if she loves you most."

"It's very easy for you to play this game. You don't love her. You have nothing to lose."

"I have everything to lose. A brother. A best friend. An ally. A champion for the nation. It's true that I will never love her as you do, but you should want us to love her in some measure. There are many types of love and love can be shared. Just as three men can share a mother. Though each desperately wants all the attention for himself, they learn to co-exist in her sphere until one day they discover that they are bound together because they all love her. There is nothing to say that we cannot do the impossible thing when it comes to the women we bind to us."

"She has been through things, Calem. Even if I wanted to try this, I would not ask her to do it. She has always been an obsession for someone. I cannot have her passed around and used. It would hurt her. I love her and can't ask that."

Calem shook his head. "And I wouldn't test your anger, believe me. I have wielded a dagger. It makes a nice clean cut in my hands, but not deep. Gatler says that with only a dagger in hand you severed the head of her cousin nearly clean off. I know nothing of that kind of anger or that kind of strength. Believe me when I say that I would never hurt her. Partly because none of us have a taste for hurting women and you know it. But also because I have no doubt that one who seriously wounds the woman you love will die by your very efficient hand."

Thane held out a hand. "Don't speak of death any more. It's unsettling to me to think of us fighting that way."

"I have to say one last thing on this matter before we move on to other things."

"What?"

"I have been too bold where she is concerned. She punishes me for it now by not giving me even the slightest acknowledgment. I admit it and apologize with you as my witness."

"She doesn't seek to punish you," Thane said.

"She does. You haven't noticed --"

"I have noticed. She doesn't acknowledge you because she would prove to me that she can resist you."

"Because you thought she couldn't? I'm most flattered, Thane," Calem said with a smirk.

Thane rolled his eyes.

"So will you ask her to allow me to return from exile into her good graces?"

"She has proven her point quite well. She can acknowledge you when she chooses."

"Good, because I would speak to her about a group of deserted hot springs outside town. I think that she could try them for some training of her voice."

Veylin studied her hands which were sitting in her lap. She was feeling very strange. They'd allowed her to listen to a conversation the likes of which she'd never heard before. She'd listened to Calem talk about the three of them ruling as one and she'd felt an aching loss for her own sister and a type of family she'd never had. Then she remembered what it had been like to lie between Gatler and Calem as they offered her their protection. *Tell your new brothers.* It was oddly pleasing to find herself in the center of the three of them. She wanted to be part of a family. They offered it to her. Of course, they offered it with some very interesting and potentially dangerous conditions.

"Veylin," Calem said, touching her arm.

Thane grabbed his brother's arm and pulled it back.

She looked at where Thane held his brother and then to their faces.

"Calem," Thane said with annoyance in his voice. "You forget yourself... again. Stop trying to touch her. This is not the frolic, and you will not use your hands to convince her if your words cannot."

Veylin smiled at the two of them, and they both stared at her. Rapt attention. She liked it. She hoped she wouldn't get spoiled and find that she couldn't live without the attention of several men when Calem inevitably found his own woman to love. She got up and kissed Calem on the cheek and then walked around the table and kissed Thane on the lips.

They both watched her walk back to her spot at the table and touch the communicator board. "Hot springs. Then the binding ceremony."

Chapter 6

After the hot springs, she found that she had very good control over her voice, but didn't use it too often for fear of fatigue. She wanted to be able to use it at the binding ceremony.

Calem led her into a little temple where women went for the first part of a binding ritual. She was nervous and had expected to be alone, but he'd offered to go with her since her intended couldn't, according to ceremony.

Thane had been quick to encourage her to take Calem, which meant, she supposed, that he worried she might be too fearful to go through with it otherwise.

"It won't hurt, Veylin," Calem reassured her. "All those stories about the pain are from before. I have friends who have had it done recently. It's not painful. They use a cream that freezes the skin. You won't even feel the brand when it happens. And afterward, you drink a tonic that takes away the pain until the salve heals it. It's nothing. Sex with Thane leaves you sorer than this will, I promise."

She smiled. Calem was being very nice to her and was being careful not to touch her, but she knew perfectly well which way his thoughts ran. They'd only been alone for a short time, and he'd already made several references to sex.

She went into the cool green room. Calem waited outside until she changed into a strapless smock and waved him in. An old woman with kind eyes came in with a book.

"Veylin?" she asked.

Veylin nodded.

"We had a message from your match. He prefers this," she said, pointing to the page. It was a perfect circle of golden bronze. The woman laid down an overlay with the intertwined scripted letters V and T.

"Too plain," Calem complained. "What about the Melotin crest? There are some that have it on the sides," he said, flipping pages.

"No," Veylin said carefully.

He looked up, clearly startled to hear her voice.

She flipped back and tapped on the one Thane had liked. Simple. Elegant. It suited them.

"It's your mark," Calem said with a shrug, but still looked unimpressed.

Veylin lay down on the soft bed. Calem knelt down next to her and took her hands. She blushed, remembering the last time they'd been in such a position.

He smiled at her. "If you get nervous and need a distraction, remember that my lips are available," he whispered discreetly.

She felt the cold cream being smeared under her left collarbone. She bit her lip.

Calem's teasing expression disappeared, and he looked at her mouth. "Don't do that or I really will kiss you. If you want me to stop trying to seduce you then don't play to my weaknesses."

Her teeth let go of her lip. She squeezed his hands hard instead.

"Better. Though most of the times when women dig their nails into me it's because I'm inside --"

She clucked her tongue at him and started to yank her hands free.

"Don't move, child," the woman said.

Calem instantly held her hands immobile. "She's ready."

She opened her mouth to protest that she was not ready, but the white-hot metal was already touching her skin. She wrinkled her nose at the awful smell of burning. Calem had been right though; it did not hurt.

It was over so quickly. Then Calem gave her the pain tonic, and the woman put salve and a bandage over the brand.

"Not bad, right?"

She shook her head with a smile.

"Now for the fun part. Home to get you dressed. Thane's going to prepare himself in my room, and we'll meet him at The Path."

"We have to shop first," she said carefully.

"No, you have a gown. I bought it for you."

She arched an eyebrow.

"As a present. And Gatler paid for what you wear under it... but he didn't pick them out. He doesn't have a lot of use for shops. I'll wait out here while you change."

She quickly donned her clothes, and they went back to the inn. There was time to spare.

"Why did Thane leave so early? Clothes?"

He paused before answering. "Your voice is so enchanting... sorry... uh, no. Not clothes. We bought him some too. He said he had something to get for you. A present I guess for after the ceremony. I know I shouldn't, but I have to ask... will you sing something?"

She smiled at him.

"It doesn't have to be a love song."

She walked over to the communicator and tapped it. "Not today, but some time, I promise."

"Why not today?"

"I want to save my voice for Thane."

"Right. Well, I guess I can understand that. It's the day of your binding after all."

They passed the time in conversation. Calem told stories of childhood adventures where he and Thane were always together. He also told of some of Gatler's first adventures as a man. They were filled with intrigue, and she found them fascinating.

Finally it was time to get ready. She bathed again and studied herself in the mirror. Having pulled off the bandage she saw the intertwined letters inside the ring. Tonight they would be joined in a way that no person could dissolve... not even a sovereign. She wondered if Queen Lemoar would snub her for the rest of her life. She

was, after all, a girl in exile who had stolen the heart of a prince. A strangely flawed girl who could not even speak most of the time. In the queen's place, she might not have warmed to such a girl easily.

She wrapped herself in fabric and stepped out into the main room.

"Why are you still here?" she asked Calem slowly.

He smiled. "To help you dress. You're supposed to have an attendant."

She frowned and strode over to the board. She tapped it sharply. "What did Thane say about this?"

"He said that you would probably need help dressing and that if you agreed to it, I could do it."

"He really said that?"

"Would I lie over this? I'm telling you, he nearly cut Likus' head clean off."

She grimaced.

"Sorry. It's just still amazing to me. Thane is not a warrior. He's a champion. There's a difference. Except when it comes to you apparently."

She took a deep breath.

"All right, let me show you what I brought," he said, turning to the packages. He opened a case and took out the most beautiful silver-ivory latticed silk scarf she'd ever seen. Interconnecting loops. Perfectly symbolic for a binding ceremony. It would also be very provocative. Then he held up a matching sex-covering that had no back to it other than a corded rope of matching material.

Her mouth dropped open. He grinned.

She tapped the board. "Where did you get such a thing? From a prostitute?"

He laughed. "The ladies at court are all wearing these types of backless sex-coverings... or so I'm told. Shows off their backsides. They don't wear lattice in the front though. Not exactly practical if the lady gets excited. Not enough fabric to soak up the juice."

She was sure she was blushing from her scalp to her toes. The memory of her plain sex-covering hanging from the panel in Thane's loft sprung to mind. It was

followed quickly by the memory of him taking her from behind. She put a hand to her head and tried to slow her breathing. She was feeling decidedly hot and somewhat dizzy.

She gripped the table and held out a hand of protest when Calem started to stroll over. He'd left the undergarments behind.

"You know what I think?" he asked, catching the hand she held out to ward him off. He kissed her palm.

She pulled her hand away from him.

"I think you might have the same problems those ladies at court would have with the lattice... unless we take care of it before we leave."

"I just took a bath," she said. She grimaced. Her voice had been too sensual.

Calem instantly moved closer upon hearing it. He looked down at her. "I'm not talking about a bath. You need an orgasm to sate you for a few hours so your body doesn't keep you marinating in your own juices."

Calem's hands slid from her hips down to her ass, pulling her forward against him. "And I just happen to be exceedingly thirsty at the moment."

Her heart hammered in her chest. She shook her head at him... and herself. Today of all days she needed to resist.

"He won't be upset. There are plenty of things he wouldn't want me to do, but using my tongue won't trouble him."

She shook her head dazedly. Calem's perfect features swam before her eyes. He was too handsome.

"Come, sweetness," he whispered in her ear. "Let me feast on your delicious mound."

His hands worked the fabric up her body. She knew if he got his fingers on her bare skin it was over.

She jerked back from him, not escaping. His strength was just as unmanageable as Thane's, but he sighed and then let her go. He took a step back. Running a hand through his hair, he shook his head and laughed sardonically.

"Maybe Thane is right. Maybe any man who touches you will want to own you."

She tapped the mark below her collarbone.

"I know. I see it. I acknowledge that you are his... but I just can't help but feel that that makes you mine too." He shook his head as if to clear it and then grabbed the undergarments.

She snatched them from his hands and took them back into the bath and stood looking at them. They were gorgeous. Thane would probably love them. She took a deep breath and lifted the sex-covering. There were no clasps, only delicate little ties. She positioned it between her legs and tied it at each hip. Her dark curls peeked through the ivory-colored mesh. It was erotic, decadent. Exactly what a princess should wear to bind a prince.

She lifted the breast-covering and drew it across her. She wouldn't be able to tie the little laces herself. She took a deep breath and walked out into the main room.

Calem exhaled low and slow upon seeing her. "You are a goddess," he murmured.

She walked over and turned, presenting her back to him.

"You know what I really love?" he asked conversationally as he tied the laces. "Women's asses. My favorites are the ones that are high and really round. Heart-shaped. Like yours."

She felt her muscles twitch. Her buttocks were totally exposed. Only the cord in her crease kept her from total nakedness there. It wasn't enough. She was blushing again... and soaking the mesh.

He finished with the laces and put a hand on each of her cheeks, squeezing firmly. She exhaled in a whoosh and stepped forward. The flesh of her bottom was stretched for a moment between her body and his hands and then her body reclaimed it.

She turned to face him. "The gown," she said firmly.

His green eyes roved over her with a dark desire in them. He ignored her request for the gown and just stood in front of her. Fine tremors had started to claim her body.

He inclined his head. "One day... in the not too distant future," he said softly, moving his mouth closer to her ear as if someone might overhear. "Not long from now, we're all going to share a bed. And I'm going to take you from behind in a way that Thane never has."

She shuddered and he kissed the side of her neck and then backed up slowly.

He turned and went to a hanging bag. He unwrapped it, taking his time. She didn't care. She wasn't even thinking about the gown anymore.

She was still breathless when he turned with it and came back to her.

"Arms overhead," he said in a voice still husky with sex.

She put her arms up, half wishing he would bind them there and fuck her a thousand ways before they left.

The gown skimmed down her body and was softness defined. It hung off the left shoulder so that her collarbone and the mark were revealed, plus the top of one plump breast, very provocative. She felt warm and ready for sex.

He brought the slippers to her in silence and slid them on her feet. Then he held out his hand. "Come. Let me deliver you to my brother and bind you to us all."

She set her trembling hand in his, and he grasped it firmly, leading her out the door.

When they got to The Path house, she had regained some of her composure. They stood at the closed doors, and Calem looked her over again.

"You look beautiful," he said. "But you should know that no woman I've ever wanted has rejected me before. This is, make no mistake, a war between us."

She frowned at him. He shouldn't have been telling her things that would distract her from one of the most important moments of her life.

She kissed his cheek and whispered in his ear. "You may have me one day, but make no mistake... it will only ever be what is left over by Thane."

She leaned back and saw his comprehension dawn. It had been a little slow coming, which was probably from the sound of her voice distracting him. He looked suitably annoyed by her words now, which was good. It eased the intimacy between

them. The desire and its lull were gone, and he was sober enough now to leave her to Thane... at least for the night.

She turned and saw Gatler come in with a lady on his arm. The woman was completely covered in a glossy black cloak and gloves. Gatler had a box under his arm.

"I'm glad I'm not late," Gatler said as though the woman on his arm wasn't there at all.

The woman glided over to them and took Calem's arm with her dark glove.

"I'm going in," Calem said as though he too were escorting an apparition not to be acknowledged. The apparition never looked up to show her face. Calem opened the door a fraction, and they slipped in, closing it.

Gatler smiled at her. It was pure warmth. "The gown is just as Calem said it would be. I trust you got the other things as well."

She nodded.

"I regret that I didn't get to see you put them on," he teased.

Would there be no end to the flirtations, she wondered irritably. She wanted to get to the man on the other side of the door. Even Thane might not wait forever.

"I didn't have time to come before, but I wanted to give you this too."

She opened the box and stared down. It was the silver wreath with blue gems that the queen had worn in her chamber on the night they'd met. She had suspected that the black-cloaked figure was Lemoar, but had assumed the queen was only there to see her son bound. Veylin had taken her refusal to greet her as a sign of her disapproval with the chosen match. Veylin didn't know what to say to this gift.

Veylin turned her head to the door in confusion.

"It looks like something you've seen before?" he asked. "But, of course, it isn't. I bought it in a shop. The one you've seen couldn't have been given to you. This is an unsanctioned binding ceremony. In fact, I myself am not here so the queen couldn't possibly be."

So that was it. She and Thane were breaking the law so the queen and the princes would pretend they hadn't attended the ceremony. The lack of greeting was a reminder of the clandestine nature of the union.

Veylin nodded as Gatler set the wreath on her head. It was just like a crown. She smoothed a few curls and looked at him.

"Your prince awaits," he said, nodding at the door.

She swallowed hard and inclined her head. He pulled the door open and went in, leaving her alone. She could see a fountain, water pouring from the vessels held by naked maidens. Forest animals sitting at their feet. Water. How she loved it.

She took a step in and opened her mouth. Her voice floated up and out of her. No words. Only the sound of it wafting upward, trumpeting that something greater was to come.

She walked in very slowly, not looking anywhere in particular, just following the cobbled stones that would lead to the binding square. She followed The Path's curve and saw him.

He had on very elegant black pants with ivory piping, but his chest was bare. Her pace slowed even further remembering that in the ancient ceremonies warriors had been shirtless... to show their arms.

She reached him, looking not at his face or the mark on his chest, but at his left arm. It was there. In times almost before record, there had been a part of the binding ceremony where men took a second mark. It was done with needles dipped in molten color. The skin was pierced thousands of times to make a symbol. A perfect braid circling the arm around the muscle where it was largest. It was called a symbol of devotion. Nothing was given for pain during its creation for that was symbolic of the pain the warrior would feel if he lost his love and of the pain he would endure silently to try to get her back.

She realized her song had changed to one of lost love and she fell silent, looking down at the ground. Tears slid down her cheeks, and she wiped them away slowly. No

one ever took the symbol of devotion anymore. Too painful and barbaric for modern times. He'd endured that pain as a gift to her. She quite simply did not deserve him.

She stepped forward, hands taking his forearm into her grip. She raised her lips and kissed the thick gold braid. His skin was burning from the injury of the needles. She turned her head, touching her cool cheek to the skin and then looking at the stunned old couple who would act as masters of ceremony.

"Begin," Thane said, voice thick with emotion.

"Perhaps the lady would like to sing for us once more," the old man said.

She shook her head with a soft smile.

"Yes, then we begin."

She listened to the words, but she didn't hear them all. Her mind drifted to all the times she'd watched Thane. From the first moment she'd seen him as a boy. To the moment he'd leapt over the ledge to spare her skin any more nicks from Likus' blade.

"... twine that secures the boards which... for love is steadfast... mortar that seals the stone... these two lovers will be bound together forever... my lady, I ask you now, do you bind yourself to this man?"

"I do."

"My lord, I ask you now, do you bind yourself to this woman?"

"I do."

"Then drink of this cup, my lady, and let your lord taste it on your lips, and seal this binding."

She took the cup and drank, being sure to let the spicy liquor coat her lips. She turned her head and stared up at him. So handsome and so serious.

"From the lips of my love I drink and bind her to me for eternity." He inclined his head and sucked the drink from her lips. Then he kissed her.

* * *

Afterward, the queen who was not there had drawn them into a corner and from under her hood had pressed her cool lips to Thane's and then Veylin's. Then the queen, flanked by two princes who were not there, swept out of The Path house.

Then the lovers slipped out as well. Veylin thought they might go back to the little inn, but there was a bay stallion waiting for them.

"I would not take you back to a bed."

She raised her eyebrows.

"This night I would know only the comfort of your arms. The horse will take us to the edge of the forest. Will you walk with me back inside?"

She nodded.

He lifted her onto the horse and climbed on behind her. The horse galloped into the night at Thane's beckoning. They arrived at the forest, and she found herself very anxious.

"Is where we go very far?"

"A little way in, yes."

"The horse will take us inside if I sing to calm him."

He nodded and urged the horse forward. The horse hesitated until it heard her voice and then it flew forward.

It was only a few moments later by the time they reached the rolling white water. Thane slid off the horse and pulled her down into his arms. As soon as she stopped singing the horse turned and fled the blue light.

They were completely alone.

"I love you, and I'm so overwhelmed by this night that I find that I don't know where to begin touching you," he said.

"You will know when you see me without this gown," she said seductively.

He gave her a fierce kiss and she pulled away, laughing. She climbed up onto the trunk of a fallen tree so that she was taller and stood where there were several beams of light. She took off her wreath gently and then pulled the gown off. She draped the gown carefully over a branch and put the wreath back on her head.

"Your body is like your voice. Not of the world I know," he murmured.

She smiled, doing a little turn so that he could admire the lack of covering over her bottom. Then she faced him again.

"This body is familiar to you, Thane. This body is yours." She ran a fingertip over the mesh where her dark curls were trying to break free. "You claimed this part of me some nights ago. I remember it vividly."

He strode forward quickly, grabbing her exposed cheeks and lifting her. He buried his face in curls and mesh.

She gasped, arching her back. With quick motions he positioned her legs over his shoulders and sucked her juices through the loose lattice. She moaned loudly. She'd been anxious to have that done to her.

He carried her to the bank of the water and laid her down. She flung her legs open. Wet tongue met wet mound. He lapped at her, pushing his tongue through the loose loops and stretching them with his effort. The pressure also made the cord in her crease taut, stimulating her there and making her writhe.

She wanted his tongue deep inside her, but the covering prevented it. Finally, she could not bear it. "Thane, please. Take it off me."

His fingers fumbled with the ties for a few moments, and then he snapped them with his fingers. He discarded the fabric and plunged his fingers inside her. Her spine bowed.

He rubbed her folds as his body moved up. His tongue found her beaded nipples poking through the loops. Licking turned to kissing. Kissing turned to soft suckling. She could feel his mouth getting hungrier.

She pushed back on his shoulders, and he rolled away panting.

"I want it so much. I just need a moment to get control of myself, and I'll leave them alone," Thane said.

"Naked. Now." She moved his hands to the ties at her back. He snapped them en masse. It squeezed her swollen breasts and then freed them.

"You now," she said, running a hand over his erection through his pants.

He stripped instantly.

"It's better if I put you on your knees when I feel like this," he said. "And take you from behind, so I don't see them."

He wanted a drink from her very badly. Secretions were pooling inside her. She wanted him too.

She lay on her back.

“Vey, between your voice and those nipples...”

“Come.”

He didn’t hesitate. He crawled to her, stopping to lap between her legs again for several moments before moving up, tongue trailing over her belly up to her ribs. He tried to just kiss her, but after a few moments, his mouth left hers, venturing down.

The burning started almost immediately. He sucked harder. She writhed.

“Please, Thane. Please, come inside me.”

He slid into her in one hard thrust. She was fully impaled and feeling the familiar pleasant pangs.

She guided his mouth back to her breast.

* * *

Thane fought to keep control, every muscle tight. Rocking into her slowly. Sucking her slowly. It was so hard. He was so hard.

Her body was pinned beneath his, soft and slick with sweat. She danced against him. He went in and out. Long deep thrusts. Her moans echoing in his ears.

He tasted the first drop and his mouth latched onto the nipple even tighter. He drew it up into his mouth, slamming into her body. And he heard her voice. Sharp, melodic cries. It sliced through him, setting the pace by which he joined them. Hard, relentless.

Thick and sweet on his tongue. He swallowed hard. She arched. The cry spiraled, coiling around them like a snake, crushing them together. He found the other full breast with his teeth and bit down. She shrieked. White light blinded him.

He sucked. Nectar spurted. He swallowed. Her voice, erotic, tantalizing. Further, harder, deeper... ecstasy.

Afterward, Thane could not feel where his body ended and hers began. He could feel two heartbeats. He could feel where she was sore from his abuse and where his own muscles ached. He felt them as if they were of the same body.

His power and her weakness braided together. He felt water pummeling him and he realized he was under the waterfall. He didn't remember having moved from the bank.

She was clinging to him, kissing his neck, her voice in his ear. He realized he was fucking her still. Her body was slippery. He held tight. He didn't want her to slide away. He licked her breasts. Not for nectar, but because he could feel it driving her mad.

He felt her spasms and gushed some himself, but the erection only softened for moments. And then again.

And again.

Until she was shaking and crying. He carried her to the bank, still joined with her.

He knew she wasn't hurt, but he asked anyway, stroking her body softly. She crawled away, and he groaned when he was out of her body and in the cool air. He hated the separation and reached for her.

"Wait. Please," she gasped.

"Somewhere else inside you then." He could hear himself saying the words, but wondered where they came from.

"Yes. Anywhere else. Just for a few moments."

How could she agree? She should have just said no, but maybe she was out of her mind too. He struggled with himself. *Let her rest. No, get inside.*

He reached to stroke himself, but his hands found his own body too hard. He wanted nothing to do with himself. His hands craved softer flesh. So did his cock. He rolled toward her.

She lay on her stomach, and he considered her beautiful ass, which he'd admired so many times. His dripping cock edged toward it, but he stopped himself. He'd rip her apart. That kind of sex needed control. At the moment, he had none.

He flipped her over, crawling up.

"Veylin. It's cold out." He ran the tip of his cock over her lips.

She licked him slowly. He tossed his head back and groaned at the feel of it.

"Lie on your back," she said.

He was already starting to feed himself to her. She turned her head, letting it pop out. She crawled backward and moved so that she was up on her knees, facing him.

"Thane." Her voice was soft, soothing him. "Thane, lie down."

The voice of goddesses, cajoling him. He rolled backward onto the ground.

His hands were restless. With her between his legs, he couldn't reach her body. When he tried to change positions, to put her on his body, she stopped and begged him to lie back.

Part of his mind was frustrated. If she lay on top of him he could lick her and put his fingers inside her. On the other hand, his cock was content to be nestled in her mouth. She sucked harder, milking his balls with her hands.

He stretched his arms above his head and moaned.

Finally, he came again, and this time his cock stayed down.

She crawled up along his body to lie next to him. His arms slid around her. This was what he wanted. This was what he loved.

"Thane."

"Yes?"

"I love you."

Hearing that voice saying that she loved him... he had to concentrate not to get hard again.

This was torture and bliss. He hoped it would never end.

Chapter 7

Veylin and Thane spent two night-falls in the woods. She'd trained her voice several times a day in the river. They'd spent a lot of time talking, but also a lot of time taking advantage of being naked.

Finally, the weather had turned cold, and they'd returned to the inn, finding a note for Thane. After a hot bath and food, they waited.

Veylin wrapped a warm heavy knit frock around her body.

Thane, who was rereading the note, was still shirtless. He set it down and shrugged. "Hard to interpret."

"We'll know soon enough."

He nodded. She stepped forward to examine his arm, checking to be sure the redness was fading around the braid. She kissed it.

He grinned at her. "You know you should be careful."

She raised questioning eyebrows.

"If you keep kissing it to ease my pain, I will likely still be claiming it hurts next yellow harvest."

She smiled at him. "It's still a lot warmer than the other skin. Does it hurt much?"

He shook his head.

She studied his face, waiting for the truth. She was happy to feel more confident about the control of her voice after two days of training in the river, but she still hesitated to use it too often. She would wait for the truth rather than ask him for it. She knew his arm was still hurting him. Whenever he'd rolled onto that arm while they were lying in the woods, he'd quickly rolled back off it.

"From the moment you walked down The Path, I ceased feeling pain." He brushed her lips with his. "I love you."

There was a knock at the door. Thane grabbed a tunic and pulled it over his head before walking over to open it. Gatler nodded a greeting and walked in.

Gatler closed the door and pointed for them to sit at the table, as he joined them.

"You have choices," he said. "You can't stay at Galinea anymore, but our queen has announced that Veylin will have private coursework to make up for her time away from her education. No one is to know that you're already bound. You can each come to Frascelyn and --"

"And live in different suites? No," Thane said.

"Wait," Gatler said.

"No."

Veylin put a hand on Thane's.

"All right, so you can live on your own together," Gatler said. "No protection. No currency. You'll do physical labor. Veylin can hire out her voice. The problem is that her brother is looking for her cousin. And soon he will be looking for her."

Gatler narrowed his eyes before continuing. "Now I ask you, Thane, is that just a stripe on your arm?" Gatler flicked his finger hard against Thane's left arm, striking at the concealed devotional braid.

Thane didn't wince, but frowned and folded his arms against his chest.

Gatler turned to Veylin. "At Frascelyn, you will have a suite in the same hall as my brother's suite of rooms. There won't be anyone in that corridor except Calem or myself when we visit, but the other members of court won't be far. You can't occupy the same suite during the match-making period."

She glanced at Thane's face. She could feel his aggravation. He'd bound them together so that they couldn't be separated. And now they would be in separate suites for some time, hiding their attachment. Of course he was angry, but it was better than the alternative. And they could be together discreetly. Besides, Gatler was right. Her

brother would look. And he would not care if he killed a prince who was in her company when he found her, particularly to avenge their cousin.

"I am very grateful for the queen's invitation," she said, keeping a note in her voice that was soothing. "Could you give us a few moments to talk?"

"Does she need to convince you?" Gatler asked Thane sharply.

At first Thane was silent as Gatler's gaze bored into him, but finally Thane shook his head. "For appearances, I suppose the queen expects us to travel separately to Galinea to say our goodbyes."

"Yes," Gatler confirmed. "There are two companies ready to escort you."

"You'll lead one of them?" Thane asked.

Gatler nodded.

"Then Veylin will go with you."

"I can travel with you for part of the way," she said. She slid her arms around Thane's right arm.

He nodded.

"You have something else to tell us," Thane said, looking closely at his older brother. "What is it?"

"Nothing to worry over."

"Gatler," Thane said impatiently.

"Kenart has become dangerous. At some point we may need information or other help from Veylin. She has special knowledge of that place and its defenses."

Veylin's heart sped up. She wondered suddenly if part of the reason that they'd accepted Thane's plan to be bound to her was because they had intended all along to use her as a spy... or worse, bait.

"Wherever she goes, I go as well," Thane said.

"Well, you are the middle son and, as such, expendable," Gatler said mildly.

Veylin gasped, but Thane laughed out loud.

"Cheer up," Gatler said. "If things get bad enough for there to be a war, we may reclaim Veylin's kingdom for her. And that will make you a king."

"I have no such ambitions. I already struggle under the weight of a queendom, trying to maintain an alliance with treacherous brothers who try to seduce my love when my back is turned."

Gatler raised his eyebrows.

"Oh yes, we've had plenty of time to talk over the past two days. As she is finding her voice, so she is telling me stories. Like being taught the art of a spy's concealment by an older brother I would have expected more loyalty from," Thane said, narrowing his eyes in accusation.

Gatler only smiled and shrugged. "Don't worry, brother. One day Calem and I will fall in love, and you can exact your revenge."

"What I will have the right to do and what I will do are two very different things. There is only one woman I will ever want."

"Your prerogative," Gatler said.

"Calem suggested that I set some terms. Terms for the pact we three sealed long ago. Since I am the first to fall in love, I will set some. No one will seduce Veylin into a bed that is not mine, and I'll always be present when she has sex, for that is the true nature of sharing, isn't it?"

Gatler arched an eyebrow.

"So, if you can convince her to let you join us, so be it. I won't bar the door against you. But if either of you seduces her outside my bed, I don't envy you my retribution."

"In your bed it is then," Gatler said with a casual shrug.

Thane stood. "We'll be ready to leave in the morning."

Gatler nodded. "Veylin, may I expect an invitation to spend the night with the two of you?"

Her eyes widened in surprise. Was he teasing her or serious?

Thane walked over and threw the door open. "Get out."

Gatler chuckled. "I'll see you both later."

Gatler walked out, and Thane rolled his eyes as he closed the door. "There are moments when I wish I were my mother's only son."

Veylin smiled and walked over to him. She slid her hands up his chest. "I think we'll all learn to love each other," she said. "I'll just never love them the way I love you."

"I will hold you to that promise." He ran his finger over the concealed brand on her chest that marked them as bound. "I will hold you to that promise," he repeated. "And to all the others you've made to me."

"I hope you will," she whispered and slid a hand around the back of his neck. She pulled down his head, and they kissed.

Read on for a sneak peek at Pact of Princes 3

Veylin spent the next few wonderful days at Galinea, finally getting to laugh and communicate with the other girls and to flirt and play innocent games with Thane, Calem and the other young men. The only person she didn't see much was Gatler, who confined himself to a remote section of the castle with several of his soldiers. The other young women took to the towers to watch the soldiers train and Gatler command and instruct them.

Then Gatler announced an end to the visit, and Veylin packed her satchel again. Veylin marveled that though she had very few possessions, she felt very content. She traveled with Gatler and his soldiers, while Thane stayed behind for another two nights. As the queen intended, Veylin and Thane would arrive separately to court, seemingly unattached.

The ride had been long, but Veylin enjoyed the open countryside. She had never been able to explore the queendom before and it was nice. At the end of their first long day's ride, the soldiers set up camp. She was installed in a very large tent, much more extravagant than she needed.

After settling down into a chair, Veylin began a note to Bettis, to whom she'd promised to write. Only a few words had been committed to the correspondence when the tarp door swept open and Gatler strolled in.

She looked at him expectantly, but he only nodded a greeting. She watched as he laid his sword and dagger on a small trunk, then froze when he pulled off his shirt. His chest, heavily muscled, narrowed to a tight waist. Her eyes darted around the tent, realizing that, of course, it was his. She glanced at the cushioned bed on the floor, covered with soft linens. Did he always travel in such high style or had these things been brought for her comfort, so that she would be inclined to share a bed with him?

She rapped her fingers on a nearby trunk to get his attention and then touched the communication board.

"Thane set the terms of our relationship in Neforwre. That is not his bed, and he's not here, so I assume that you're not intending to try to seduce me."

Gatler unhooked his weapons belt and tossed it aside. "Thane can't set the terms of my relationship with you."

"But in Neforwre you agreed to the terms."

Gatler shrugged. "I didn't swear an oath."

"But you let him think that you accepted the agreement."

"Yes, to avoid an unnecessary fight."

"You deceived him."

"So did you... for years," he said. "He forgave you, and, if you tell him about this, I suppose he'll forgive me too. Though I would not recommend telling him. If he hears the details, he might be inclined to challenge me, and that's a battle he can't win. If he were to kill me, he'd never get over it. If he were to lose to me, he'd be shamed as a champion in the eyes of the nation, and he'd never get over the loss of his position."

"So to spare his feelings and avoid a fight between the two of you, I'm expected to surrender my body to you?"

He looked her over as he reached for a water bottle sitting on a chest. "You have it partially right." He lifted the bottle and tipped it back to drink. She waited, watching his throat muscles contract, seeing his enormous chest expand when he took a deep breath between swallows.

He tossed the bottle aside. "You took part in treachery --"

She banged her finger on the board. "No!"

He strode over and yanked the board away from her. "You came into our queendom knowing it could cause a war. You could have approached Thane or Calem at any time to ask for sanctuary, but you did not. By your secrecy, you drew me away from my duties. I'm engaged now in escorting you from one castle to the next when I've got more important things to do."

She waved him away. "Go do them," she mouthed.

“You’re bound to me. Don’t shake your head. You belong to me as much as to Thane or Calem for that matter. And you’re going to learn what that means.”

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... Check out Alexa's website at <http://www.alexaaames.com/>