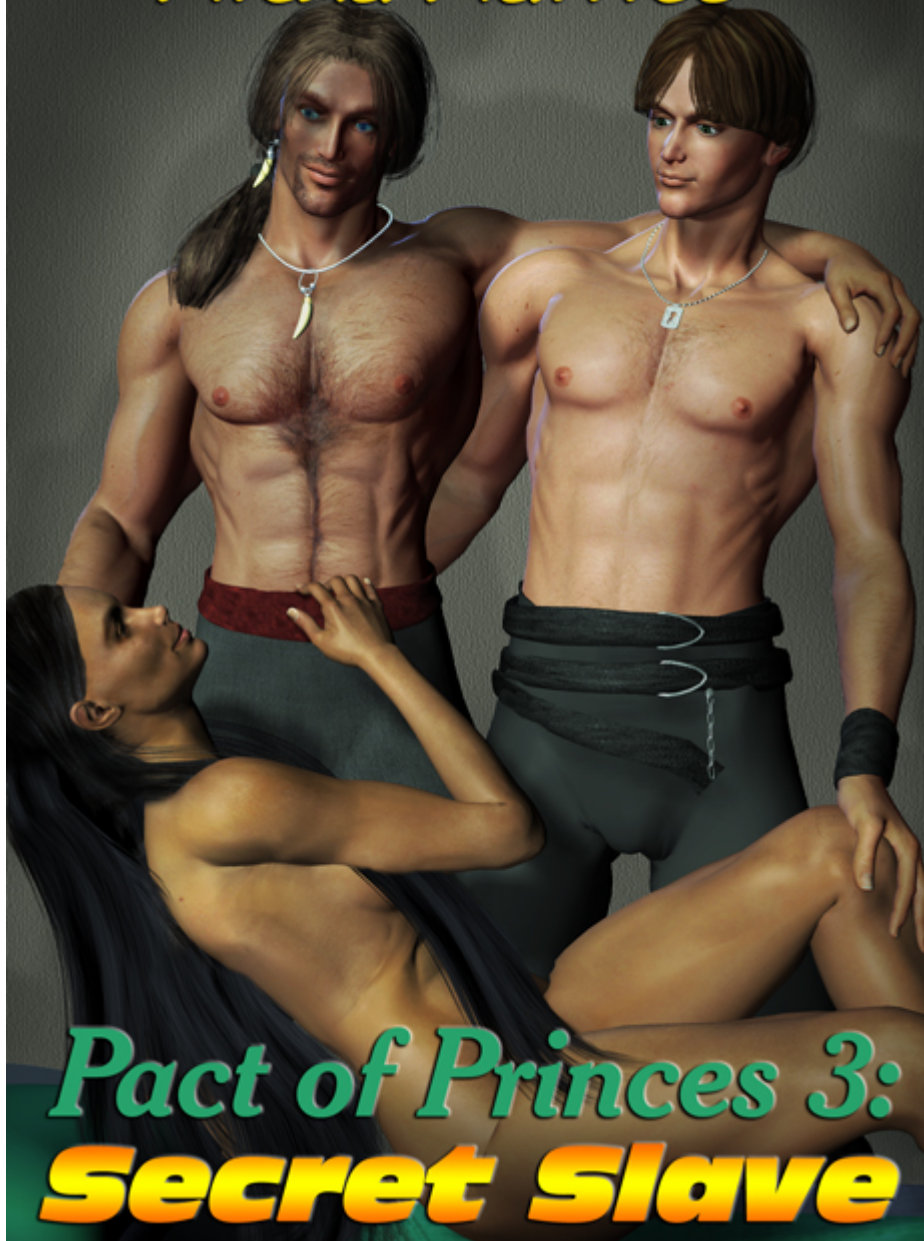


Changeling Press

Alexa Aames



Pact of Princes 3: Secret Slave

Alexa Aames

All rights reserved.
Copyright ©2007 Alexa Aames

Warning: The unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this copyrighted work is illegal. Criminal copyright infringement, including infringement without monetary gain, is investigated by the FBI and is punishable by up to 5 years in federal prison and a fine of \$250,000.

ISBN: 978-1-59596-789-3
Formats Available:
HTML, Adobe PDF,
MobiPocket, Microsoft Reader

Publisher:
Changeling Press LLC
PO Box 1046
Martinsburg, WV 25402-1046
www.ChangelingPress.com

Editor: Vikky Bertling
Cover Artist: Karen Fox

This e-book file contains sexually explicit scenes and adult language which some may find offensive and which is not appropriate for a young audience. Changeling Press E-Books are for sale to adults, only, as defined by the laws of the country in which you made your purchase. Please store your files wisely, where they cannot be accessed by under-aged readers.

Pact of Princes 3: Secret Slave

Alexa Aames

For the first time since they made their unorthodox pact, Princes Gatler, Thane, and Calem share partners and engage in illicit seductions. With the introduction of Lalanc, a female warrior in hiding as a sex slave, ambitions run high and they all risk everything to recapture a lost queendom. Don't miss the spicy conclusion of Alexa Aames' Pact of Princes series.

Prologue

Lalanc sucked in a breath, frustrated by the tight combat suit's strangling grip on her chest. Her breasts always strained the confines of any pre-made garment that was meant to be form fitting.

She stretched her neck and spotted him again. The young warrior was about her age. She'd seen him around the center and she'd admired him during training exercises. She liked watching him from behind. He had beautiful broad shoulders and taut buttocks. She would have liked to see them naked, to squeeze them with her hands and explore them with her fingers. She wasn't free to do so, but it was a pleasant dream that she often played out in her mind when she was alone.

His dark blue eyes locked hers and the left corner of his mouth curved. He nodded a greeting. She would have responded, but was brought back to focus when the instructor, Pliso, barked an order. The two boys on the mats cleared the center.

"You," Pliso said, pointing at Lalanc. "Restless to fight?"

Restless to get back into her own frock, more like, but she gave a sharp nod. Pliso then motioned to her muscular warrior.

Lalanc frowned. She didn't want to fight with him. If she lost, she'd be angry and if she won, he'd be angry. She liked the way things were now, where they were aware of each other in a non-adversarial way.

"Come," Pliso said, curling his fingers toward the center.

The young warrior waited for her. She strode toward him, narrowing her eyes. She wouldn't shame her instructors by letting an attraction distract her. She would prove she was battle ready.

Pliso backed away from them as they sized each other up.

"Any injuries?" the warrior asked.

Though in a real war they would fight without mercy, at the combat training center, control was admired and being able to defeat an opponent while avoiding any areas injured in prior bouts was considered the height of prowess.

"No. You?" she asked.

He shook his head. He lowered his chin and his voice so that only she would hear. "Unless you count the handicap between my legs."

She smiled. "Men have their disadvantages, women have theirs."

"Begin!" Pliso called.

They each dropped immediately into fighting stance. He waited for her to come to him. Whether that was from chivalry or because he wasn't anxious to move in his stiffened condition, she couldn't be sure.

She feigned a direct attack then ducked under his brawny arm, slipping around him. She caught her arm over his throat and fell backward using her weight to drag him with her.

She'd used the move before to startle and claim early victories over big, overconfident opponents, but he must have watched her fight because his resistance immediately vanished and he used the momentum to roll over his body over hers and to keep going. He landed on his hands and knees, his face directly over hers. She spun away, but he caught her arm.

The real battle began, each trying to get the proper hold and lock to subdue the other, but they were both so agile it was impossible. He was too strong, and she was too smooth. It turned to blows. He had the advantage there and after a protracted series of tumbling falls he began to use it. They wore each other down, panting and bruised.

She slammed the heel of her hand into his temple and her foot into his knee. He crumpled, but not before his fist pounded into her just below the ribs. Her breath whooshed from her lungs as she fell back.

She'd moved into the blow, a mistake, and the dizzying pain slowed her recovery. She rolled onto hands and knees wanting to finish him. She'd seen him go

down from the clip to his knee and the head blow. If she could put him in a lock, it would be over.

She wheezed as she staggered up, but then she felt him. An arm across the throat and her feet left the ground. She was strong, heavy for a woman, and he was tired, but he held fast as she clawed his arm and swung her legs trying to tip them. She felt his body quake with the effort to stay upright.

She didn't have enough air left. The room spun.

"Victor," Pliso called.

Things were gray as the warrior dropped her to the mats. Lalanc heard a thump and realized he'd let his legs go from under him too.

"Both combatants, excellent!"

Her vision cleared, and she heard the stomping of feet as the warriors in the training arena saluted them for an excellent fight.

Pliso stood looking at them. "Combatants, are you injured?"

"No," she heard the other warrior say, and she shook her head.

"Good. One day and night of rest for the last combatants. The remainder to the courses!" Pliso moved away and the light-footed future soldiers went with him.

Moments later, they were alone on the mats.

"You're... the way you move," he said in a bemused tone.

She glanced briefly at his handsome face. "You won." It didn't bother her as much as it might have. They'd each fought well.

"Today." He shrugged, acknowledging that it might have gone differently. She liked him for that. He was an amazing fighter. He could have been arrogant as so many with his talent were, but he gave her due respect.

She yanked the straps and pulled the top of her suit open. She took a deep breath. He let out a slow whistle.

"I'm sorry. I have to have more air." She slid her hand inside the gaping suit to support her torso where the last blow had caught her.

"That suit was too tight," he said in a low rough voice.

"I know." She glanced down at the grooves on her large breasts where the seams had marked her.

"They should outfit you properly. You might have won if your movement had been less restricted."

"Did my movement seem restricted?" she countered.

He grinned. "Actually, no."

"The suit was too small, but I need something tight to keep these things from bouncing."

"Do they hurt?" He ran a fingertip along the faint red groove of her right breast. Her skin tingled under the light touch.

"No."

At first his attention seemed that of one warrior's curiosity about another's body. It was commonplace to admire musculature, to discuss training and eating plans, and the advantages of different stances and locks. But now he'd slid his hand in to cup her, his large palm kneading her flesh, his thumb grazing her nipple roughly.

Her nipples peaked, and she could smell his sweat and his hunger for her. She dampened between her legs.

He squeezed her breast and lifted the heavy globe to his open mouth. He suckled the tip, groaning low in his throat.

She slid a hand up and unfastened his shoulder-length hair, running her fingers along his scalp, massaging his head where her blows had landed earlier. He drew more of her soft flesh into his mouth, chewing and sucking until she began to writhe.

He stopped and panted. His eyes glazed with predatory fascination.

"I want you more than life," he rasped.

She understood. It was just how she wanted him. "Have me then," she whispered.

He dragged her suit off, then paused as if thunderstruck by the sight of her.

"Undress," she said, spreading her legs to encourage him.

He snapped the strap on his pants and shoved them down, making her smile at his haste. "Are you ready for me? I can lick between your legs, make you come before I begin."

"For a warrior, you're very considerate of a woman's desire."

"My home --"

"No," she said, cutting him off. She shook her head. "Just this for now. No names or sharing stories yet. I'm more than ready for you," she said, slipping a finger between her lower lips and then painting the moisture from there across his lower lip. He sucked the taste off, moaning softly.

Then he positioned himself and thrust deep.

She arched her back. He was thick and hard, everything she'd hoped for. Their coupling was wet and wild despite how sore their muscles were. She came in a body-pounding rush.

He slowed his thrusts several times to keep himself from coming, even squeezing the base of his cock once to stop. He brought her off twice more, making her scream and beg for him to finish at the end. Then his cock jetted the warm salty fluid her womb craved.

His muscles twitched and the weight his body squeezed down on her, smashing her breasts against his hard chest. She loved the feel of him pressed to her.

"I've been hard for you for days," he said. "I wanted this so much. Then after that battle I had such a cockstand. I was afraid I'd come in my pants at the sight of you when you opened that suit."

"You held yourself in check admirably," she observed.

"Until the end," he said with a laugh. "I feel like I gushed an army's worth of seed. *Cre!* Your body is so warm and tight and strong. The way your walls grip me. Being inside you is amazing."

She stared into the vibrant blue of his eyes and couldn't help but want more of him. "Are you rooming alone?" she asked.

"Yes."

She hesitated. "I'd be pleased if you'd invite me to your quarters for the night."

"Of course, you're invited."

She stared at the ceiling for a moment, wondering if she dared say more.

"What is it?" he asked. "You can tell me."

"It's only that I haven't had all I want of you yet, and male warriors have a tendency to want all the control... I want to use my fingers and my mouth on you. I want to explore your body until I've had my fill."

He grinned. "Where I'm from that's encouraged in both sexes. Even if it weren't, I'd concede that to you. As a great warrior, you're entitled to take a body the way a warrior does, with power and for his own pleasure. It doesn't threaten anything in me to let you use me that way. We'll alternate taking control."

She smiled. "Somehow I knew you would understand."

He shook his head, seeming bemused. "I didn't expect to feel this, but the way we moved while fighting and then while making love... It's like you're the other half of my soul that I didn't know I was missing."

Lalanc nodded but glanced away from him. She felt the same way, but knew she wasn't free to be with him openly until she settled things at home. She'd have to undo the promise she'd made. Then they could be together as much as they pleased. Until she fixed things though, they'd just take each other for the night.

Chapter 1

After the beautiful binding ceremony, Veylin felt happier than she ever had, content and completely unconcerned about the possible complications of being bound to three brothers rather than just Thane, her love. She 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 of was Gatler, who confined himself to a remote section of the castle with his soldiers. The other young women took to the towers to watch the soldiers train and to watch Gatler command and instruct them. Veylin wanted to as well. Gatler was a source of fascination for her, dark and powerful. Something in his manner always left her breathless.

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. As their mother the queen intended, Veylin and Thane would arrive separately at 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 delightful. At the end of their 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 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, and 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.

“What are you doing? Thane set the terms of our relationship in Neforwre.”

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

Her mouth went dry at the determined set of his jaw. “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 a much longer time,” he said. “He forgave you, and if you tell him about this, I suppose he’ll forgive me too. Though I would not recommend it. 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 recover from the grief. If he were to lose to me, he’d be shamed as a champion in the eyes of the nation, and he’d never recover from 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. Her body tightened. He was so big and so self-assured. Everything about him spoke to some primal part of her that she wanted to deny.

He tossed the bottle aside. "We're bound to each other. You belong to me as much as to Thane, and you're going to learn what that means."

"You said that you'd only have me in Thane's bed."

"Thane has no right to expect that. He's not sending you to me as his. That was never the nature of the agreement. You are one princess bound to three princes. If Calem chooses to only see you with Thane, that's his choice."

She touched the board. "You should have warned me."

"I know. But you might have refused to bind yourself to us."

"Why should you care if I did?"

"You wanted him, and you're the right match for us. Heir to a nation, smart and beautiful. Thane loves you. I didn't want to be the reason you left him." His blue eyes darkened, and he smiled. "Besides, I wanted you too."

"But surely you can see that it's not fair to put me in this position."

"Life's not always about what's fair. You're bound to me. You have a duty to fulfill."

He was unbelievable. Her trembling fingers hesitated above the board for several moments and then she touched it. "And if I refuse?"

"You won't refuse."

Her heart hammered. She was very afraid that he was right. "I can refuse. I can refuse even Thane if I decide to. Melotin has laws."

Gatler unhooked the clasp on his pants and shoved them off. He kicked them away and stood before her, massive and erect.

Her pulse raced, ringing in her ears. He was more calculating than she'd imagined. She'd ridden all day with him away from Thane, and all the while Gatler had known he would have her alone by nightfall to fuck her at will.

Gatler leaned forward. "My cock likes the look and smell and taste of you. And I don't even care where in that pretty body you milk it. You can take me between those juicy lips partway down your throat. Or tucked in that creamy pussy or tunneled up your tightly clenching ass. Or maybe we'll get to all three by the end of the night."

Her heart pounded at his rough talk. It excited her, making her tighten in all the right places. "But Thane's rules," she murmured.

"I can't share you with Thane in his bed. It's this way or nothing, and I don't intend for it to be nothing."

"Why not in his bed?"

"Because I'd only be a guest."

"You'll have to renegotiate with Thane. If... if Thane wants me to be with you --"

"No." He shook his head and laughed. "Thane doesn't own you. It's not for him to give you to me or not. He's got no voice here. You either want me or you don't. That's the only thing that factors into what happens."

"You haven't even asked me if I want you."

"I don't have to ask. I know you want me."

Her mouth dropped open in surprise. She closed it and shook her head. She tapped the board. "You are incredibly arrogant."

"True enough, but it doesn't change the facts. You want me almost as much as I want you." He leaned closer to her mouth. "Do you deny it?" His tongue slid across her bottom lip.

She stared into his eyes.

"I've seduced you once under worse circumstances than this. I've had you wet and willing, had my fingers inside you. We both know if I tore your clothes off right now, I'd find your sex dewy and ready. I want to dominate you, and you want to submit," he said, nodding to his erection. "Tell me that my thick cock doesn't make your pussy cream."

She was dizzy with wanting him. "We should wait though to talk things over with Thane, the three of us can..."

"Thane only set the rules for you being fucked by us in his bed so that he could be there to control things, to protect you. But you don't need him to protect you from me."

She trembled. "I think maybe I do."

He smiled then and followed it with a short laugh. "Veylin, my love, if I wanted to rape you, we would not still be talking. I could have had you seven ways from sunrise on the day of the interrogation. I could have taken you in a room alone and done my worst without anyone to stop me. You don't need Thane for protection."

She set her hands on her lap, thoughtfully.

"Does your body want mine?" He waited, studying her.

She gave a small nod.

"Don't trouble yourself with worry. You'll have three princes worshipping your body in different ways. You'll enjoy it."

Gatler reached down and picked her up. He walked to the bed, yanked the cover back and set her onto it. He sat down and pulled the coverlet over them as he lay back. There was a strange feeling of inevitability and anticipation. And her body wanted a dangerous encounter that, for once, held the promise of satisfaction for her.

She didn't resist as he undressed her. Her heart beat anxiously, nervously. She might regret not having resisted later, but she wasn't afraid. He bent his head and nipped her breast with his teeth. She sucked air in, her sex flooding with wet heat. He parted her thighs and shoved them well apart, opening her wide and then grabbed her wrists and stretched them over her head with one hand. She was tight as a cord pulled taut. He didn't hurt her, the stretch was just shy of that, uncomfortable in a way she knew would add to what would happen next.

His mouth descended on hers, forcing his tongue inside, tasting and caressing. She tugged at her arms, but he slowly stretched them further. Her body arched, and she could feel the knob of his cock nestled at the opening of her vagina. He kissed and teased and stretched. He pinched her nipples with his free hand hard enough to make them burn. She arched harder, but she couldn't move. Her hips were pinned by his weight and her wrists were held tight. She struggled.

"Go ahead," he said, voice hoarse. His teeth bit and pulled at her earlobe. "Fight, if you want to."

Her head thrashed, pulling her ear free, and she struggled against him. He stretched her body further, making her longer, spreading her legs wider until it made her wince and then he slid in, piercing her in one hard thrust.

"Feel me there, Veylin." He withdrew and thrust again.

Her muscles ached and burned as he rode his rhythm in and out of her. The thrusts were rough, ruthless, grinding her senseless. He stopped for a moment, staring down at her, his sweat glistening on his powerful shoulders. He brought his free hand to his lips and sucked his finger, wetting it. Then he slid it under her bottom. She opened her mouth in shock as, against her clenched muscles, he forced it to the ring.

"You know the only real way to tell if a woman's coming is to put your finger up her ass. Orgasm makes the pelvic muscles shudder and the back hole spasms in kind. I'm going to make you come, and when I do, I'm going to feel it. There's no pretending in my bed, ever."

She bit her lip, struggling again to get him to release his hold on her wrists. He bent and kissed her mouth. "Relax your bottom. I like it rough, but I don't want to hurt you too much."

Her heart pounded so fast she felt dizzy.

"Veylin, relax. My finger *is* going inside you."

She shivered, wincing because her body couldn't relax. Her tired muscles screamed in protest that things were happening too fast. Then she couldn't clench any longer. His finger invaded, thick and stretching yet another small muscle. It was too much. She longed to scream.

And then he started to thrust again, banging against her clitoris, grinding when he got deep, which was every thrust. She felt the orgasm coming, tried to fight it. Then it crashed over her, and he let go of her wrists. Her body convulsed, and she felt her bottom milking his finger just as he'd predicted. She felt all her muscles spasm and release, spasm and release, again and again and again.

She lay limp as he moved her. One finger stayed nestled up her ass, while he cupped her and turned her hips to the side and lifted her top leg so it rested against his

torso. She couldn't move it. Her leg felt so heavy. He began to thrust again, his cock still hard as a spear inside her.

Her pussy caught fire again, tingling and throbbing with his repeated penetration and he moved his finger in and out of her slowly, pushing it deeper with each thrust.

She caught her lip and bit down in anguish. The sensations were so raw, and she couldn't fight her body's response. She was a soft bit of flesh that he hammered into. And when she came again, he smiled down at her, knowing.

He withdrew his finger and his cock, still hard, and stretched his body, showing off massive rippling muscles. "Tired?" he asked, looking her over.

She nodded, still breathless.

"Okay, I'll be quick then, shall I?" he asked with a roguish laugh.

She raised her eyebrows at his joke. He'd already proven his incredible stamina.

"This time I want you to look in my eyes. No closing them and pretending you're with my brother."

She blushed because she hadn't even thought of Thane. She'd been far too preoccupied with the sensations Gatler created in her body.

He slung her legs up onto his broad shoulders and then sank back into her plush pussy. She was warm and wet, welcoming him home again.

"Mmm. You feel wonderful, all soft and swollen. A pussy always feels best after some hard use."

He thrust deep and slow, pressing his thumb into her bottom again as the tension started to rise. Recovered slightly, she writhed weakly and when she relaxed, he leaned forward doubling her over, bringing his face close to hers. Her muscles, warm and willing, allowed themselves to be stretched, it felt luxurious after the hard workout. She stared into his blue eyes as she came again, gasping and she felt him let go, felt the warmth gush into her as he groaned.

He pulled his thumb free and moved so that her legs fell to the bed, their lower bodies still locked together. "Tell me that you're mine too."

She nodded, exhausted. There was no question about whether she'd been conquered. They both knew she had.

"Say it."

She was tired, the effort of controlling her voice seemed almost insurmountable, but she gathered her will and strength and focused. "Yes," she whispered. "Yours too."

He kissed her then, gently on her mouth.

* * *

In the morning, she woke groggy and sore. Gatler was behind her, his muscled bulk solid and warm against her back. She found one of his hands cupping her sex, long fingers tangled in her coarse curls. She tried to move, but he pulled her closer to him and licked her neck, nuzzling like an animal might.

"Let's rest a bit more," he mumbled lazily.

She struggled and turned in his arms so that they were facing each other. His eyes opened to slits to study her.

"Want something?"

"To get up," she mouthed.

He shook his head. "We need to talk first."

She touched her throat and shook her head. Descended from sirens, her voice could be mesmerizing when she controlled it, but ear-shattering when she couldn't.

"I know. Just mouth the words. I'll understand."

"What do we need to talk about?"

"Us."

She quirked a brow.

He smiled. "You'll be with Thane most of the time, but I expect to have my turn. Why don't you come to me for the Green Season? It's short. Not much to ask."

She rubbed her arms, which were sore from the previous night's struggle.

When she didn't mouth any words, he continued. "Good, that's settled then. The Green Season. I think it'll be better if you're the one to tell Thane that."

Her eyes widened, and he chuckled, his throaty rumble nearly making her smile.

"And I need you to advise me on something."

She looked at him expectantly.

"The binding symbol you took with Thane. I want you to take one with me too. Just a small one. You can put it on your hip or your ankle. But I want a mark of my own on your body. And I'll take one for you. Where do you want me to put it? You can choose."

The thought touched her. He wouldn't only use her for her body; he would proclaim their attachment in the most sacred way. And any woman who ever saw him naked would know that a part of him belonged to another, to her. She wondered if that would hurt his chances for a match and mouthed the question.

He smiled with a shrug. "Any woman that binds herself to me will bind herself to my brothers. Better if she knows it from the onset."

She paused, thinking. She touched the right side of his chest, high where his large upper arm could hide the mark.

"Right over my life's breath. The chest is a good choice."

He looked up at the sounds coming from outside the tent. The army was stirring to wakefulness.

Gatler reached behind his head and yanked the roll free. He pulled hers from under her neck too and sat up.

"What?" she mouthed.

He bunched the rolls together and then, quick as the wind, flipped her onto her belly on them. Before she even had time to struggle, he'd parted her pussy lips and slid his cock inside.

She gasped, startled but not unready for the unexpected invasion.

He sighed. "Very nice. I like a pussy that stays creamy all night."

She struggled, and he swatted her upturned ass. She went still, realizing she had no idea what he had in mind, and she didn't want a spanking right before she had to ride a horse all day.

He thrust back and forth, groaning. He reached underneath her and fingered her clit, making her body catch fire. Her eyes went blurry and her body thrummed, happy to let him use her again.

She bit her lip as the pressure built and she felt a slippery finger touch her bottom hole. She squirmed, trying to resist. He chased the ring and put strong, steady pressure. She trembled, wanting to defy him, but his hand on her clit and the thick rod inside her made it impossible. The finger pressed into her, adding to the sensation and making her come immediately.

"That's my good girl," he groaned, thrusting harder until he came in a shuddering rush. He bent forward, his sweat-slick body sliding along her back.

"You have a very beautiful ass, Veylin. I can tell you're not used to having anything in it," he said, sliding his finger out. "I want you to get Thane to stretch it for you with either his cock or at least two fingers."

Her heart pounded and her face flushed with embarrassment. This was a conversation she'd never expected to have with anyone, let alone a warrior prince. She wanted to crawl under the covers and bury her head.

He planted a kiss between her shoulder blades. "Calem could do it for you too, but he's thick, and he likes to fuck that way so much that he might not be as gentle as Thane would."

He moved so that he was kneeling up again. Her face burned realizing that he was probably staring right down at her upturned bottom, might even be able to see her tiny hole between her trim bottom cheeks.

He slapped her bottom gently. "I don't care who does it, but one of them needs to before the Green Season because my cock is far too rough to be the first."

The fine hair on her body stood up and every sore muscle tightened. He put his hands on her spine and massaged her back. "Relax, you don't have to be nervous. You'll enjoy it. It's intense, but you respond strongly to having my finger there. And Green Season's not for quite awhile."

She felt the bed sag and then spring up as it was relieved of his weight.

"Now you should probably get up and have a bath. Though I do like the sight of you lying naked like that, my aides will be here shortly, and they're accustomed to seeing *acadenas* with their naked asses in the air, but not so much princesses."

She rolled to her side even before he was finished speaking, and pulled the coverlet around herself.

"I suppose you're blushing because of the morning's exertions," he teased. "It was a good way to start the day, wasn't it?"

She scowled, which made him laugh. And then he was gone, out to the makeshift bath cavern with only a large wrap around his waist.

She sat on the edge of the bed, trembling. What by creature's curse had happened to her life?

* * *

"I think it is not uncommon for those who are bound to make requests of one another," Veylin said, leaning forward to run her hand over the dark horse's neck.

Gatler shifted in his mount as his eyes met hers, and he waited.

"I've accommodated you," she said. When he didn't contradict her, she continued. "Will you grant me two favors?" Gatler's gaze swept over her. The sort of favor he wanted to grant involved bedplay, but the time for that was past. The palace at Fraseyn was within sight, a pale stone structure on a mountain with soft clouds scattered around the towers. "Bid me as you will. I am at your disposal."

She smiled then, and it warmed his heart to see it. It would be more difficult than he'd expected to relinquish her to his brother. He very rarely felt any real emotional connection to women, not since the warrior girl he could never forget. But Veylin had ignited something inside him, a need to protect her as well as to fuck her. It was an interesting and stimulating combination. He wanted to further explore their relationship, but he knew that would have to wait. If he didn't return her to Thane, his brother would come looking for her. And that was only right. Thane had loved her first.

"I'd like to finish the ride to the palace without you. You could send a man or two to escort me."

"Why?" he asked, suspecting he knew the reason.

"Things may be awkward with Thane if he sees us together. It will be easier for me to see him alone."

Gatler cast his glance at the palace and then shrugged. "I would prefer to ride with you. If Thane is angry, I am better equipped to deal with him than you."

"I think not."

He cocked his head thoughtfully. Perhaps she was right. For two men, warriors, to settle things, violence might be required. But Gatler had seen the way Thane looked at the beautiful woman riding next to him. Thane would never strike her, and if she were to work on him, his anger would likely melt with the first kiss.

Gatler's thighs tightened on the horse's flanks, and the horse stopped. Veylin brought her animal to a halt as well.

"It's a small request, easily granted. I'll wait here. If you change your mind and would like me to come, send word with one of my men."

She nodded. "There's a second thing. Less small."

He waited.

"I have a half-blood sister, Lalanc. I was never in a position to inquire after her. I believe her to be safely bound to a quiet man and living on the outskirts of Kenart. And yet..."

"What?"

"I worry that, knowing my affection for her..." Veylin pursed her lips, the thought seeming to pain her too much to complete.

Gatler leaned forward. "Tell me what troubles you. I will set things right."

She reached over and squeezed his forearm in silent thanks. The small touch pleased him.

"When I left, they would have been angry, wanted revenge. I was not there to inflict it upon." She shook her head. "I don't wish to disrupt her life in any way. I only want to know that she is well. Kenart is closed to strangers and visitors. It will probably be difficult to get information. I shouldn't ask you --"

"Don't trouble yourself about it. This life is made far better by having to do difficult things."

Her eyes widened. "Is that really your opinion?"

"How could I revel in the silky texture of your skin so well if I had not cut my hands on rough terrain, climbing sharp rock faces, yanking on coarse ropes?"

"I suppose that makes sense, but be careful what you confide. I may make a list of difficult tasks that I would not like to do myself."

"Command me as you will. I'll have my turn to command you, after all."

A blush stained her cheeks, but she smiled. "That's true." Her voice had taken on a high note at the end and she fell silent, touching her throat. She shook her head.

"That signals the end of our conversation then. Your voice needs rest."

She nodded.

"Let me have a last taste of you," he said, leaning down.

Her kiss was tentative at first, but she yielded to the thrusts of his tongue. His groin ached with longing, but he released her when she finally drew back. He exhaled slowly and shifted in his mount. "I will miss you."

She mouthed a goodbye and then nudged her horse forward. He signaled two of his men to ride on with her, regretting that he would not be one of them.

He wasn't sorry that she'd ask him for a favor. He relished it. It meant she trusted and had need of him. It would bind them closer together. Yes, it was as he suspected. They had a connection, and she felt it too.

Chapter 2

The small stone cottage was a perfect place for solitude so Gatler was surprised to see Calem ride up to it. Gatler had sent the army home for a brief rest, and he was at the edge of the queendom, contemplating espionage. He'd been walking back from a stream when he spotted Calem on horseback.

"Everything well?" Gatler asked.

Calem nodded as he slid from the beautiful sleek flank of the horse.

"What are you doing here?"

"I have a break between courses and felt restless," Calem said.

"I don't remember any break between courses when I'd advanced as far as you have."

"Yes, but it has been a long time since you took any courses, hasn't it?" Calem said with a glint of humor in his eyes.

"True enough," Gatler said.

"What are you doing out here on the edge?" Calem asked, glancing as if he could see some mark that showed the divider between queendoms.

"I'm thinking of stealing a nation."

Calem raised his eyebrows.

"As a present for Veylin," Gatler added.

"Careful. You'll make Thane and I look bad."

Gatler grinned. The thought had occurred to him. Gatler had a competitive edge to him and always had. "If you're bored you can ride with me. I go to pick up a tool I need."

"The army?" Calem quipped.

"I didn't say I was going to conquer it in open war. I said I was going to steal it. You're supposed to be very skilled in semantics. Do let's see the evidence."

Calem gave a slight bow. "So not the army. What tool then? A weapon?"

"Exactly." Gatler said with a nod. "An *acadena*."

"And you'll go to the training center to collect her?"

Gatler nodded.

"When do we leave?"

Gatler laughed. "Yes, I had a feeling this was an errand you'd be happy to join me on."

* * *

The *acadena* center was sleek with pale pearly gray walls sloping smoothly to a reflective roof. Calem followed Gatler into the antechamber, and Gatler handed him one of the neatly folded clothing bundles. They showered in the available bath caverns and donned drawstring trousers and wrapper robes.

Calem was happy for the diversion. He'd been restless after Thane left. They'd been roommates and best friends their whole lives, and Calem missed the easy companionship more than he could've anticipated. And he envied Thane his love with Veylin. They were a couple now, and Calem felt left out. Though perhaps, after a bit of time, he'd visit and seduce her into letting him become part of a threesome. He could imagine them all sharing a bed. He and Thane had shared women before during The Frolic. It had always been fun. They knew each other well, could get into a rhythm that drove the girl to a cock-milking passion that was unsurpassed.

Maybe he'd visit soon. Until then he'd tag along with the enigmatic Gatler, who did travel to interesting places.

Gatler and Calem walked into the main facility, and Calem forced himself not to gape. The well-lit space had large white mats where men and women, mostly naked, stretched their bodies into amazingly erotic poses, showing off graceful strength.

"These have graduated, and they go on assignments when invited," Gatler said.

A woman with smooth dusky hair approached them. Her pert nipples beckoned Calem's tongue, but he ran it over his lips instead.

"Gatler, welcome. Thank you for visiting us and bringing such a handsome soldier with you. Does he prefer men or women?"

"We are actually not here to invite a group of your fine male and female graduates to travel with our army. I'd like instead a personal companion."

"Of course."

"Which isn't strictly in keeping with Melotin law... so your discretion --"

She waved away talk of legalities with an elegant hand. "What sort of companion did you have in mind?"

"I need her to be from Kenart."

The woman frowned. "Unfortunately, we don't accept applicants from that nation anymore."

Gatler raised his eyebrows. "No? I thought you had a large influx last season."

"Yes, but we learned that the applicants who came to us had not chosen their own path, and that's a requirement for this way of life, as you know."

"They'd been forced?"

"By a monarch and his inner circle who wanted a collection of sex slaves to torment in ways not pleasurable to the men and women who were so diligent in their training with us."

"So when Kenart tried to send new trainees, you said no?" Calem asked.

"Correct."

"Weren't you worried that Kenart would retaliate against you for refusing? They've become powerful," Calem said.

She smiled and gave a small shrug.

Gatler chuckled. "Calem, nearly every army on this world comes to one of the four centers to invite *acadenas* to travel with them. Do you imagine that any nation would attack what the entire world's warriors hold sacred?"

"Ah," Calem said with a shake of his head.

Gatler glanced back at the woman. "So there are no women from Kenart left here?"

Calem saw her hesitate. Gatler must have noticed as well because he leaned forward.

"There is one in training. She was from the last group that we welcomed, but though she claims to embrace the path, she has not advanced in the training."

"Why not?" Calem asked.

The woman didn't answer, but turned to Gatler with a conciliatory smile. "There are so many here who desperately crave an invitation from anyone in Melotin's army. May I tell you about some of the other candidates?"

Gatler shook his head. "Certainly for the army, the next time we come, but this time I really need the girl from Kenart.

"She could not represent us in the proper way."

"I'll consider it a personal favor if you still allow it, and I'll be discreet with her, not allowing the center's reputation to come into question."

"I will speak with her to assess her interest."

* * *

Lalanc listened to the mistress of the center tell her what an honor it was to be singled out by a prince of Melotin. Lalanc forced herself to smile and nod. She had been told that she would not be allowed offers of invitation until she completed her training, which she had carefully not done. She had simply taken refuge in the *acadena* center to make her plans in quiet.

On the other hand, all the erotic training had created a certain hunger in her that had been long dormant. She wondered if the prince was well endowed. She might use him for recreation before she refused to travel with him. That would be better than to refuse a request outright.

"Will you meet him?"

Lalanc nodded.

"I recommend the golden sheer frock."

Lalanc nodded. She would certainly take the other woman's advice. The *acadena* coordinator had far more experience with selecting outfits to seduce than Lalanc did.

* * *

The fabric concealed nothing. It twisted around her body like a silky caress. Lalanc opened the door to the suite and stepped inside. She paused and smiled, looking the young man over. He was remarkably handsome, a face beautiful and unblemished by time or war.

He watched her with interest. She was supposed to let him approach her, but that was one of the things she never planned to master about the life of an *acadena*. She strode to him, dropping to one knee. She rubbed her cheek against him, the soft fabric of his trousers tenting over his erection. He exhaled slowly, his fingers sliding into her hair. He had a lovely touch, sensual, softly massaging her scalp, beckoning her face closer still. He smelled delicious, heady and masculine, faintly of the thermal shower gel. She took the ties in her fingertips and tugged gently. She rubbed her lips along the length of him. Yes, thick and solid. He would serve her purposes well.

"Hello," she heard a voice murmur from over her shoulder. She turned her head and froze. She recognized the other man who'd just entered the suite. It was her young warrior. Well, not hers really, but that was the way she still thought of him.

His eyes widened. Apparently he recognized her too.

"What are you doing here?" he asked when he found his voice.

She rose from her knee. "I'm introducing myself to a prince. Are you his bodyguard?"

His smile flashed bright white teeth for a brief moment. "No, I'm his older brother. Gatler of Melotin."

Stunned to see her, Gatler waited for her to tell him her name. He was anxious to hear it, having waited a third of his life for the moment he would.

After that one night, carved out of time, he'd been sure they'd not only see each other again, but that they'd be together forever. It had been a great source of regret and

eventually bitterness that she'd disappeared without a trace from the training center, but that was a very long time ago now.

She stood before him as beautiful and powerful as she had ever been, tall, large-breasted with wide hips and long strong thighs. And her hair, a dark brown curtain falling down her back, he remembered its texture. It was burned into his mind.

"Are you from Kenart then?"

"One half. The other half Banzian."

"Of course." A tribe of ferocious women warriors. They'd been all but wiped out in a treacherous ambush. "How did you survive the attack?"

"I wasn't with them." Her eyes were bright as she said it, still grieving the loss of sisters at arms, no doubt.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

"I'm studying to be an *acadena*."

He smiled. "I don't think so."

"You doubt I could acquire the skill?"

"I doubt you could acquire the disposition."

She glanced at Calem. "Your brother seemed to find my attention sincere."

"Calem's not a soldier. He wouldn't have known the difference."

"And I wouldn't have minded the difference," Calem added, his eyes grazing her large brown nipples, easily visible under the shimmering fabric.

Gatler had loved the feel of them between his teeth. Now, he wouldn't admit that though. He'd been young when they'd met, and he'd poured his heart out. She'd insisted that they wait to tell each other their names or details about their pasts. Later he realized it was because she wanted to disappear.

"We came here with a purpose beyond the obvious," Gatler said.

"Oh?" she asked.

"I need someone with connections to Kenart to assist me entering that nation."

"Why do you want to get in?"

"I want to overtake the country, to restore it to lawful leadership."

Calem's eyebrows shot up in surprise, but Gatler noticed the woman never blinked. Gatler knew that if she were in the center, it was because she wasn't safe in Kenart and must be biding her time for something.

"I'll help you on one condition," she said.

Let it be on the condition of resuming past intimacies, and I will risk my life a happy man.

As soon as he had the thought, he pushed it away. This woman was dangerous for him. He needed to keep his emotions out of things.

"I will be the one to kill him," she said.

Him? She must have meant the pretender to the throne, Equeid, a man who had abused Veylin and who would have to be dealt with before Veylin could return to Kenart safely. Killing Equeid wasn't the sort of task Gatler would comfortably leave to someone else.

Their gazes locked. They were warriors, and they understood each other in a way that outsiders never could. And he knew how skilled she was. He'd seen that first-hand.

"If the kill is yours, you'll have it," he said.

The tension in her shoulders relaxed.

"May I know your name?" he asked softly.

"Soon," she whispered.

He clenched his jaw. Again she meant to conceal herself from him. Well, this time it didn't matter. He was no innocent boy anymore. He'd lived his life without what he'd wanted from her. He could go on living it that way.

Still, his fingers burned to touch her. He reminded himself that he needed her for far more than his own pleasure, and yet desire crashed through him with every beat of his heart.

"So you're not here to learn to be an *acadena*," Calem said with a regretful shake of his head. "If you're not going to be my slave, can I be yours?"

She laughed. "I've likely had more practice, but you're beautiful enough to be a male slave. Yes, come undress me, then yourself."

Gatler's muscles flexed involuntarily. His nerves were raw at the thought that he might have to watch them and not be invited to join in. In fact, he hated that he'd brought Calem to the center at all. He should have been alone with this woman, as he had been once. Normally he liked a challenge, a competition, but not over her. If she belonged with anyone for an erotic encounter, she belonged with him.

He watched Calem unwind the fabric from her amazing body. Her breasts jutted toward him, full and heavy. Gatler clenched his fists, trying to restrain himself. Blood roared in his ears, and he fought the urge to spring forward and knock her to the bed.

Calem stripped out of his clothes, and she smiled as she looked him over. Black jealousy curled in Gatler's belly. He couldn't bear to watch them, but neither could he make himself go. He was entirely consumed with her, and he wanted to throttle his brother.

Then she turned back to Gatler. "I hope you'll join us," she said. "I've not had the experience of two men, but there have been exercises here to prepare us for such an encounter. I admit it has me rather curious about what it would be like with real men of flesh rather than things made to resemble them."

Gatler exhaled slowly. He should have walked away. Give her a taste of rejection. But leaving her to Calem was something his body couldn't tolerate. His feet simply wouldn't move.

Lalanc held her breath waiting for Gatler to respond. She could scarcely believe they were in the same place again. Their encounter had stayed with her, and she'd always hoped to see him, even when she wouldn't have been free to act upon it.

Now she walked to him, hopeful that she'd made the right decision to invite them both to take her at once. He'd certainly been with *acadenas* many times, and she wanted to seem as comfortable as he must be with varying numbers of partners.

"You're nervous," he said.

She tilted her chin up a fraction. "Am I?"

"Your muscles are tight, battle ready."

"Perhaps I'm just anxious to begin."

He smiled, and she glimpsed the boy he had been, when they'd both been younger and less sure.

"Anxious? Then let's not let the time slip," he said, sliding his robe off. She glanced over his chest. He was much broader than he had been, heavily muscled, marked with several scars, and he was made all the more luscious to her because of it. He'd become everything she'd imagined he would.

Gatler glanced over her shoulder. "Cale, watch the stretching class for a time then come back."

She felt the warmth of Calem's body at her back and his lips on her shoulder.

"Don't spend yourself completely with him," Calem said.

"Go," Gatler said, giving his brother a gentle shove.

Calem fastened his robe as he left. He was very pretty, but Lalanc wasn't sorry to see him go. She wanted to be alone with Gatler. They needed to talk, but how could she even begin? So much time had passed. Too much. She noticed that he didn't speak, didn't question her. Instead he seemed focused on pleasure. Well, that she could give easily, maybe it would even be enough this time.

Gatler shed his pants, his cock stiff and ready. He pulled her to him, and they kissed, warm tongues tangling together. His fingers found the slippery wetness between her thighs. His thumb pressed against her clit, rubbing hard, making her legs tremble.

He broke the kiss, gasping. "I have to take you hard and fast the first time."

She caught his lip between her teeth and bit down. He groaned.

"That's what I want," she said.

He pulled her to the bed and tumbled them onto it. He knocked her knees apart and, with a fist around his cock, guided it to the moist opening. He plunged forward, burying himself inside her, her tight wet sheath suffocating him. He withdrew and

thrust again, banging their bodies together. She shifted, meeting him, gripping his flanks with her long fingers. The friction burned and felt exquisite, and then he plowed deep and exploded.

He caught his breath in seconds and slid down her slippery body. Her pussy tingled from the hard use and his rough mouth on it made her cry out and writhe. He held her hips, her legs spread on either side of his bulky shoulders. The pressure built and she bucked, but his strong hands forced her hips back down and he sucked on her until she screamed and the shockwaves crashed over her. He crawled up to lie next to her, but his palm found its way between her limp thighs and pressed against her where she still throbbed.

She clutched his forearm, trying to pull his hand away. "I need to catch my breath."

He ground the heel of his hand against her flesh and thrust two fingers into her, gripping her. Another orgasm rocked her body. She groaned and grabbed his shoulders as the walls of her pussy kissed his penetrating fingers.

He continued to cup her when the throbbing lessened.

"Let me go for a moment," she said.

"No." He sucked her nipple hungrily. The sensation was so powerful it shot all the way to her feet, making her toes clench. Every muscle began to ache from the struggle to thrust her pelvis up again.

She grabbed his hair and yanked him back. "I'm not used to this. I haven't done it in such a long time." She gulped the air. She scissored her legs, crushing his forearm.

He smiled and managed to push a third finger into her. "Your body can take much, much more. We both know that." He rubbed her inner walls, gently but firmly, caressing her, keeping her open. The moisture saturated his fingers. Her legs started to cramp so she relaxed them, allowing his arm more freedom of movement. His fingers continued his slow assault.

Without warning he flipped her over and slid slippery fingers into her back hole. She gasped at the sudden penetration. He bit her shoulder hard enough that she knew it would leave a mark the next day.

"Remember the way we were with each other?" he rasped. "How I trusted you enough to lay face down and bound? The way we made each other beg for mercy?"

She heard the arousal in his voice, but also something else... pain. He stretched her tight anus with his fingers. She tried to be still, but couldn't. He was being purposely rough. She writhed, gasping. He was pushing her, dominating her, maybe waiting for her to tell him to stop. She felt the thick knob of his cock a moment before he slammed it into her.

"Gatler," she gasped, trying to move.

His weight pinned her, and the erotic punishment continued. The fiery penetration of his fingers matched the deliberate pounding of his cock.

Cre, he was thick, and it felt raw and carnal. All those years ago, she'd let him take her ass, but never in this position. They'd faced each other. They'd kissed each other. She knew he meant for this to be different. He'd always known plenty about strategy and even more about sexual politics. Part of her wanted to fight him for power. Another part of her wanted to see how it would feel to be taken by him.

Both feelings won out. She tried to move from under him, but he didn't allow it. He pulled her arms inward as he slowly withdrew and thrust again, deeper. Her pussy clenched with excitement. He was big and he knew just how to grind into her to make it hurt and feel good at the same time.

He held her in a vice grip, licking and biting her shoulders.

"Have you let other soldiers fuck you this way?"

"No," she husked, panting as his pace increased. Soon he was using his cock and his fingers to devastating effect, rough and hard and relentless. She spread her legs wider. She was desperate to come and for him to get whatever he wanted from her body.

Finally, it was too much. She screamed from pain and arousal as she came.

He froze inside her, and his arms released her. He withdrew, and she shivered, unable to stop at first when the hard spasms racked her body.

She looked over her shoulder and saw his head tipped back, his chest heaving, his cock still hard.

"You didn't finish," she said.

He didn't look at her, and she could see by the flexion of his muscles he was tense enough to shatter bone. "I hurt you. You should have said something. I would've stopped."

"You didn't want me to stop you."

With a hard sigh he said, "No, I didn't." Moments passed. "I loved that about you that night. You seemed to know what I wanted better than I did."

"And you knew me better than I knew myself."

His head snapped down to look at her, his dark blue eyes fierce. "I didn't know you at all. I thought that night was the beginning of something. I would never have --"

"What?"

"Told you the things I did. I would never have let myself fall in love with you, if I'd known you never planned to see me again."

She crawled onto her hands and knees and turned to face him. "I meant for us to see each other again." She whispered the words against his mouth.

He pulled back and shook his head. "Don't." He climbed off the bed. "You know, I tried to find you. No one at the center would tell me anything. I believed something had happened to you and that they were concealing it. It made me frantic, as I'd never been in my life. I went into the dangerous surrounding sectors, nearly getting myself killed looking for you. I confronted those in charge. Finally my instructor told me that you'd gone home to your duties. That it had been your choice to go and that you didn't want me to know where you were. You'd left instructions to that effect." He clenched his jaw. "I admit some part of my mind wouldn't accept it. I wondered if you didn't come back because you were dead. But you're not dead. You chose to stay away."

She sighed. "I told them not to tell you because I didn't want you to follow me until I had the chance to tell him myself."

"Tell who?"

"I'd made an impulsive promise to be bound to someone who should only ever have been a friend. I knew Ilnin would release me from it. And I was planning to come back to the battle center after it was done, to finish my training and to see you. But things happened, and I didn't." She waited for him to ask her what had happened, but instead he backed away.

"No, you didn't. For a long time after, I checked. It's of no consequence now."

He disappeared into the bath cavern, and she let her head thump back onto the bed. She heard the water and wanted so much to follow him, but what right did she have to do that? She'd obviously caused him more pain than she'd ever imagined. And it was too late to fix things. Besides she had a mission. She would see it through. She could not afford to allow her personal feelings to jeopardize things. She needed Gatler to help her destroy Equeid's hold on Kenart. That was all that mattered.

When he emerged from the bath cavern, his face was composed and a distant look had replaced the anguish from earlier.

She sat wrapped in the bedding, wondering what the best way would be to ask him about his plans. Before she could come up with anything, the main door opened, and Calem strolled in.

"The class ended. But the good news is that I come with gifts." His rakish grin made him endearing and sexy at the same time. He set several different sexual implements and lotions and oils on the small stand near the bed. He stripped without reservation, giving her a quick display of his stunning masculine beauty as he crawled into bed.

Gatler stood with his arms folded across his chest in an angry stance. "We're not staying."

"Not staying?" Calem echoed, pulling at the bedding. "Maybe you're not, but I am. Unless the beautiful woman wants me to leave?"

"Gatler and I have tired ourselves."

"Surely not. The king of stamina? When I was a kid, I watched him fuck women all day and night. And women have such a wonderful capacity to get aroused over and over. Are you sore? Because I can be very gentle." He pulled the bedding loose. "Look at that amazing body." He cupped the breast closest to him, smiling, and pinched her already stiff nipple.

She glanced at Gatler and waited for him to say something, but he didn't. He walked toward the door.

Calem's mouth had latched onto her nipple, arousing it against her will. She tugged his head back by the hair. "I'm afraid not. If your brother doesn't stay, you can't either."

"Why?" Calem asked, staring at Gatler's retreating form.

"It's between him and me."

Calem hopped off the bed and crossed the room with surprising speed.

"This is decidedly unfair," Calem said, putting his arm out to block Gatler's escape from the quarters.

"Calem," Gatler growled, knocking his arm away.

"You sent me away so you could have her to yourself and then you create some weird atmosphere that ruins my chances? Just exactly what did you do to her?"

"Nothing," Lalanc said filling the silence.

"Then what is this?" Calem looked between the two of them.

"You can stay, but I'm leaving," Gatler said, shoving Calem aside and stalking out.

"We know each other," she said.

"I never would have guessed."

"I hurt him. I didn't intend to, but I did."

"You hurt him tonight?" Calem asked, his brows drawn together skeptically.

"No, back then."

"Not possible. Gatler is Stone Man in all things. Stone cock. Stone heart. Stone stubborn."

"Ever wonder what made him that way?"

Calem gaped at her.

She shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe it was more than me. But we had something and then it was over. I wished it wasn't. I guess he did too."

"Why did you leave him if you didn't want to?"

"It wasn't my choice."

"What happened?"

She sighed. "You know, you're gorgeous, but I really am tired."

"The odd man out again it seems. This is becoming a pattern," he grumbled.

"I must ask you something before you go."

"What?"

"There have been rumors in Kenart that our princess, the rightful heir, is secretly in Melotin. Is it true?"

"I wouldn't know."

She doubted that. Calem had a clever, perceptive look to him. "I suppose you wouldn't necessarily trust me, but I am loyal to her. She's actually my sister. Maybe she mentioned me? Lalanc."

Calem's jaw dropped open. "Are you kidding?"

She shook her head.

"Does Gatler know that?"

"No. I didn't get the chance to tell him."

"*Cre*, this is twisted." Calem cocked his head then shook it. "If what you say is true, you have a second connection to our family. You and he will be thrown together again for certain."

"She's there then! Safe?" Lalanc exclaimed.

Calem smiled. "Yes, she's there and safe. She's got the most successful champion in the world as her bodyguard, our other brother, Thane."

Lalanc smiled. She'd heard of Prince Thane. He was rumored to be handsome, honorable, and an amazing exhibit of male power. She was so happy that Veylin had escaped to safety and that she'd found someone she could count on. Now there was at least something in the world to be grateful for.

* * *

Gatler took guest quarters for the night for one reason only. As soon as he went inside his chamber, he went directly to the small thermal chest and opened it. He snatched two vials, uncapped them and poured the fiery, spiced liquid down his throat.

Images of the female warrior swirled around his head. The texture of her skin and breasts, her silken cunt and soft lips. He sunk onto a cushioned bench, squeezing his eyes closed. He wanted the memories to end. He couldn't believe the way his emotions had ruled him, were still ruling him.

He swayed as the ferment took hold. Better.

There was a brief chime to alert him that someone would enter the chamber. He wanted it to be her and cursed himself for the hope.

Calem stepped inside. Gatler looked him up and down.

"I prefer my solitude, Cale. Leave me to it."

Calem raised his eyebrows. "Your voice is deepened." Cale looked around and spotted the empty vials. "I see. So, she seems an interesting woman. How did you know her?"

"I'm riding out in the morning. They'll continue to entertain you here if you wish to remain, but don't overstay your welcome. It's customary to engage in an *acadena* center's hospitality no more than two nights."

"So we're giving up the quest to reclaim Kenart?"

Gatler blinked, startled. "When have you known me to abandon an intention so suddenly?"

"When have I known you at all?" Calem countered. "We -- Thane and I -- had no idea you were ever close to any one woman. You never said."

"I'm to keep counsel with children? That's what you were at the time when I knew her." He shook his head. "And it was of no consequence. We met each other for a few days and one night."

Calem glanced again to the vials. "You don't act as if it was inconsequential."

"Cale, I am in no mood to be contradicted. Go find some amusement."

"You said you're going in the morning. Are you leaving her here?"

"To you?" Gatler growled, jealously gripping his insides again. "Tread carefully, brother. If you would have her, don't ever taunt me with it."

Calem held out his arms in a gesture of surrender. "I wasn't asking so that I could try to seduce her in your absence. I just wanted you to know that I think we have to take her to Frascelyn. She's Lalanc, Veylin's sister."

"That is not true!" Gatler roared.

The room was utterly silent for several moments before Calem spoke softly. "She told me she was. Perhaps, she lied?"

The room spun. He should not have drunk two. And she...she could not be the sister of a woman he'd bound himself to. She could not be tied to him by the duty and rights of family for the rest of his life.

Feelings like he'd never felt coiled inside him. An icy panic. Risk of his own death had never troubled him as much as the thought that he would have no escape from her and the emotions that seemed beyond his own control.

Finally, with a profound depth of will, he steadied himself.

"Calem, as you see, I am under the sway of the ferment. Let me alone."

"All right."

"I'll find you in the morning."

Calem nodded and left.

* * *

Calem spent the night worried, a terrible waste considering he was in an *acadena* center. He should have been sampling flesh all night. Instead he walked endlessly,

wondering if Gatler needed him. Calem passed through the corridors and courtyards, around the structure and within it.

By dawn he was exhausted and determined to check on Gatler before he collapsed into bed. Calem was nearly to the door of his quarters when the chime sounded, and it slid open.

Gatler looked refreshed as he strolled in. The haunted look of the night before had been replaced by his usual hard-planed countenance.

"Hello," Calem said carefully.

"Don't study me as if I were an uncaged animal, Calem. You'll annoy me."

"It's only that I'm having trouble keeping pace. You seem ever changing in this place."

Gatler's cold smile didn't reach his eyes. "I am myself today, the older brother you've always known. I have a task for you. You'll precede me to Frascelyn. Let's sit and talk over the steps in my plan."

Calem was relieved to see Gatler looking like his old self, but Calem also had an itching curiosity about the woman. Would Gatler see her today? What were his intentions there?

Calem dropped to a bench, hopeful that Gatler would mention Lalanc without him having to ask because he didn't think he'd be able to resist bringing her up if Gatler didn't. She was, after all, permanently connected to them now.

Chapter 3

"Calem, welcome!" Veylin said, hurrying down the hall to greet him.

He hugged her to him. "Your voice."

"Yes, I've been practicing. I have a great deal more control now. Come down to Thane's room. He'll be so excited to see you. He's missed you so much. Where have you been? Bettis sent a letter saying you'd left Galinea."

"I traveled with Gatler."

She blushed. "How is he?"

"Complicated as always. He mentions you often. He talks as if he knows you better than I do." Calem made an impatient gesture. "Of course, I've known you much longer."

"You have." She rapped lightly on Thane's door.

A few moments passed and it opened. Thane smiled at her, stepping back to let her inside, then spotted Calem and grinned.

"How are you?" Thane said, embracing him.

Calem glanced around at the large, well-appointed room. Plush fabrics, thick cushioned chairs, and an enormous bed with a frosted metallic base.

"I'm very well. Nice place." Calem settled down into a chair. "Gatler sent me. We're going to retake Kenart. And the plan involves the two of you."

Thane sat on the edge of the bed. "What plan?"

Veylin's heart raced at the thought of rescuing her homeland. She clasped her hands together, trying to keep still as Calem spoke.

"The queen will issue a challenge. Thane, you will go as champion, and we'll be part of the entourage. Once inside, Veylin will use her voice to control the troops and

citizens while the Melotin army marches in. Gatler and I happened upon Veylin's sister. Lalanc was part of the resistance and will help coordinate our army's entry."

"You saw her?" Veylin gasped.

"I spent time with her. She's relieved to hear that you're doing well."

Veylin sank down onto the bed, stunned. She didn't hear the rest of what was said and interrupted several times to ask about Lalanc. She was saddened to hear that the man Lalanc had been bound to had died, but happy that Lalanc survived and escaped.

"... and the army will be in position," Calem finished.

Veylin blinked.

"Sounds dangerous," Thane said. "I'll go, but I won't risk taking Veylin there."

"She's a key part of the strategy. We need her voice."

"We can devise a strategy that doesn't involve her."

"I'll go!" Veylin blurted.

They looked at her.

"Whatever Gatler asks, I'll do. I want to help liberate my home."

"Veylin," Thane said, shaking his head. "We can do it without involving you."

"I'm involved. It's my country. If not for me, you wouldn't be going there to fight."

"I'm trained for it."

"I wouldn't want you to go there alone."

"Alone?"

"Without me to protect you."

Thane chuckled.

"We're bound," she added. "We face danger together now."

Thane leaned forward and brushed his lips against hers. "No."

"Let's drink together," Calem said, going to the bottle stand. He lifted an etched bottle and filled three cups. "All will be well. I'm sure of it."

Veylin swallowed the warm liquid and watched Calem distract Thane until they'd both fallen into easy conversation about other things. She refilled the cups and walked around the room, getting more and more excited about the possibility of being able to go home, of seeing Lalanc.

She leaned against the wall, enjoying the sounds of their voices, deep and full of amusement as they talked. She sank down into a chair, draining the cup and setting it next to her.

"Vey?" Thane said sometime later. She opened her eyes to find them standing over her, both gorgeous, one dark-haired, the other light, both hers if she wanted them.

"She's exhausted. I'll go," Calem said.

She caught Calem's hand. "Wait." She released it and turned to Thane. "What if he stays?"

After a moment, Thane inclined his head and said, "He can, if that's what you want."

"I do." She paused. "I mean if he wants to." She looked at Calem.

Calem pulled his shirt off, revealing his perfectly sculpted chest. "Let's lie down." He held out a hand to her. Her fingers trembled slightly as she rested her hand in his palm. He pulled her up.

"Come with us," she whispered to Thane.

"I'm here."

She felt lithe, as though all her muscles were stretched to their full length, ready to move, to coil her limbs around them.

They moved together to the edge of the bed, and Thane slid the frock off her tingling skin. She shivered, and Calem's arms slid around her from behind, pulling her to his warm body as Thane undressed. She felt dizzy, awash in sensations, in anticipation.

Calem turned her in his arms and pressed a kiss onto her upturned mouth. His lips were soft, his mouth hot and wet. She could feel his erection against her belly and

then Thane's hands cupped her breasts from behind, pinching the nipples. She gasped against Calem's mouth.

Eventually, Calem broke the kiss to strip out of his clothes. He climbed onto the bed, pulling her with him. She glanced over her shoulder at Thane, his body taut with desire as he leaned over the bedside cabinet. He opened a compartment and fished out a small tube of something, which he tossed to Calem.

"What is that?"

"Nothing, sweetness."

Calem lay down and pulled her next to him, kissing her again, his tongue playing a slow seduction with hers. And then she felt Thane's long fingers probing between her legs, sliding into her wetness. She was slick with need already.

Thane moved his free hand beneath her head and turned her face to his, capturing her mouth. His mouth demanded more, familiarity making him less cautious than Calem. She turned toward his golden body.

Thane maneuvered his cock to her opening and replaced his fingers with the long hard erection. He rolled so that she was lying on top of him with her knees on either side of his hips. He rocked back and forth, letting her clitoris ride his pelvis.

She felt Calem kneel between Thane's legs. He moved forward so that his cock pressed into the channel between her buttocks. She tensed, nervously. Thane gripped her cheeks and pulled them apart, splaying her wantonly, making her feel vulnerable and excited at the same time.

A warm spicy gel oozed down between her spread buttocks over her twitching anus. Memories of sex with Gatler flooded back, her nipples growing even harder, her breasts ripening, filling. Thane groaned, feeling them press against his chest. He pulled her all the way down on his cock and held her still. She ached to move, to grind against him, but he wouldn't let her.

She felt Calem's finger tracing the gel around her tiny whorl of muscle that closed the back passage.

"Thane, I need to move," she murmured.

Thane licked her earlobe. "Be patient. It'll be worth it."

Calem pushed a finger inside, invading her. She squirmed, wanting to thrust. It was maddening. She made small circles with her hips.

"She's ready," Thane said in a husky voice. "Come inside."

Calem pulled his finger out and then she felt the round bulb of his cock pressing her tight anus. The penetration was sharp, and her eyes widened with shock. He was too thick.

"Wait," she gasped. "It's too much." She tightened the burning ring in protest and heard Calem groan.

"Relax. He's inside now," Thane said.

"I can't." She felt breathless as Calem slid further, a hot lance impaling her. "Cre. Oh please."

"So warm and tight. You are exquisite," Calem groaned in her ear, pressing her body down against Thane. He licked her earlobe. "Relax. Let yourself enjoy the feel of both of us inside you." Calem thrust deeper so that his pelvis was against her bottom. "That's it. That's a good girl. See how your body can take us both."

She felt trapped and yet stretched in the most intensely erotic way.

"Please," she mumbled. She didn't know if she meant please stop or please go on. It didn't matter. They were inside her with no plans to leave.

Thane began to move, sliding her up his cock and then down again. Calem barely moved, letting her slide up and down his cock on Thane's rhythm.

"So wet," Thane mumbled. "You like that, don't you?"

Her body throbbed, and she felt them grinding against each other within her. She was just a small hot barrier between them, the friction igniting her whole body. Then the sensations began to blur. Her men receded and thrust again, and her heartbeat pounded around them.

The orgasm gripped her hard and she cried out, pulsing, milking them.

Calem groaned and thrust faster and deeper into her bottom channel. She felt the hot bursts of fluid filling her insides.

"So good," Calem ground out, slipping from her burning bottom.

"Lay on your back, Cale," Thane said.

Thane lifted her off his cock and positioned her so that she was on elbows and knees, her legs straddling Calem's head.

"Yes, give me that juicy pussy," Calem said before his mouth took her.

Behind her, Thane gripped her buttocks and separated them again. She blushed, knowing he was examining what his brother's cock had done to her tender anus. She could feel a little trickle of seed escaping and knew she must still be partly dilated.

She cried out as Thane's cock pushed into her bottom, stretching her again on a thick hard cock. Calem's earlier entry had been very gentle, but she was still sore. When Thane thrust hard and deep, her breath caught then she cried out.

Calem sucked her clitoris, making her scream with arousal.

"Yeah. A great tight fit back here," Thane ground out through clenched teeth, his breath labored. He thrust into her, ravaging her until orgasms crashed over her and she sobbed. He roared and his cock erupted inside her.

She collapsed onto Calem's body, totally spent. He licked her gently, drinking her juices and rubbing her low back. Thane's spent cock slid from her aching anus.

Thane collapsed onto his back and pulled her body over to him. Calem flipped around so that he was lying next to them. He kissed the back of her neck, running a tongue lazily over her spine.

She caught her breath slowly, and Thane kissed her softly on the mouth.

"Now that you've had us both together, will I get another invitation to bed?" Calem whispered.

Veylin cuddled close to Thane, but pulled Calem's arms around them. "Yes, but not until I'm recovered from tonight. I'm so sore."

"Yes," Calem said. "I know how it feels. I like to experiment, so I let someone take me that way. It hurts, but in an arousing way."

Veylin squeezed Calem's hand. So he'd been the vulnerable one, too, once. It reminded her that there were many things she still didn't know about her beautiful men. How she would enjoy finding all those unknown things out.

* * *

Gatler released his horse into the round pastures at the edge of Frascelyn and watched Lalanc and several of his men do the same. After he'd confirmed her identity, there had been no possibility of leaving her at the *acadena* center, but he also couldn't imagine riding alone with her for days, so he'd collected several high-ranking soldiers before making the journey. It had provided them with plenty of time to create a strategy for entering Kenart.

Gatler could tell that his warriors liked and respected her. Indeed she was perfectly competent and comfortable among them. He couldn't help but think that if things had been different, he and Lalanc might have been bound to each other very young and traveled in armies together, fighting by day and making love by night. How content would he have been? Very, he suspected.

Now, her presence only made him restless, and he was glad to escape it. The castle was large. They could avoid each other.

He didn't wait for her. He instructed one of the men to take her to Veylin while he called upon his mother. He wanted a quick visit with the queen so that he could retire alone to his chamber for a little peace.

* * *

Veylin's reunion with Lalanc was a sweet one. Lalanc and Thane, very alike in personality and temperament, were immediate friends and Calem arrived with his usual overwhelming charm and heightened the celebration even further with spiced drinks and delicious food that they sampled while sitting on floor cushions. Veylin found herself beaming and more than a little aroused, but there was one distraction. Gatler had not come even to say hello. As the night wore on, it made her increasingly preoccupied. She worried that he might think that she and Thane wouldn't welcome him. Later, Calem alluded to some trouble between Gatler and Lalanc.

"Thane, let's go to Gatler's quarters to greet and welcome him," she whispered.

Thane kissed her then shook his head. "He likes his solitude. If he doesn't come in the morning, I'll seek him out. For tonight leave him be. Let's rest. I can hear the strain in your voice."

She glanced at Lalanc's tall form stretched out next to Calem. Both were asleep. She smiled down at them. She climbed into Thane's bed and lay listening to his breathing.

Sleep would not come for her. She had to see Gatler. She slid from the bed and tread lightly over the floor. She hurried from the room and down the corridor to the door to his chamber. She stood on the footpad that would sound a chime in his room to alert him that a visitor waited.

If he didn't answer, she would go. She could be content in having tried to wish him welcome. Her heart raced at the thought of seeing him. Gatler was always an ungoverned force. He terrified and excited her.

The door slid open. She bit her lip and entered hesitantly. He lay on a bench with only a bed linen across his hips. Text streamed before his eyes as he read. The words slowed to a stop when he turned his head.

"Better late than not at all," he said, running his gaze up and down her body.

"They thought you wanted to be alone."

He sat up, the muscles of his chest rippling. "When they were boys, they liked to trail around after me, getting underfoot. Whenever I first arrived home, I was too busy to spend time with them, so I taught them to wait for me to seek them out. The habit stayed with us," he said with a shrug.

"You could have come to us. I hoped you would. I wanted to thank you for finding my sister and for making these plans to recover Kenart."

"So come thank me with a kiss," he said, holding out his hand.

"Should we go and see the others? You could greet them too," she said, but her words pitched too high. She touched her throat. Her voice did need rest. She always had trouble controlling it by nightfall.

"Still wary of me?" He smiled. "I don't blame you. You kept me waiting all evening. I'm liable to punish you for it in bed."

She blushed, and her muscles clenched. She wasn't afraid of him, but the way he teased her made her worry about herself. Things weren't settled between Thane and Gatler with regards to her. It would have been smarter to sit down together as a threesome.

She contemplated how to phrase things so as not to offend him, but he stood, letting the linen fall and walked to her, his erection swaying and deeply colored.

He swept her in his arms and carried her to his bed, which was covered in plush brown metallic linens, so exceedingly soft. He kissed her thoroughly and his hands lifted her frock. She caught his hands, breathlessly.

"There are things to discuss."

He tugged his arms free of her hands and captured her wrists in one hand, raising them over her head and pinning them there.

"Gatler --"

"Hush, your voice is tired, and I don't wish to have my eardrums pierced."

She squirmed, trying to evade his free hand's unclamping of her sex covering. He grinned.

"At least the rest of your body's not tired. I'll enjoy the feel of your hips dancing like that when I'm buried in your pussy."

She panted, struggling to free her wrists. She couldn't say why she played at resisting, except that instinctively she knew the game excited them both.

"Did you tell Thane how I seduced you before I brought you here?"

She stilled, trapped by his low course voice and intense blue gaze. She nodded slowly.

"Was he angry?"

She shrugged, her eyes locked on his face.

He smiled. "I bet he was jealous. I fucked you deep, made you come over and over. And he wasn't there to join in and enjoy it. Did he agree to let you see me alone tonight? Or did you sneak here of your own accord?"

She bit her lip.

"I thought so," he whispered. The slightly menacing glint in his beautiful blue eyes made her pussy clench and flood with cream. "Do you deserve to be punished?"

She blinked, wide-eyed.

"I suspect you do. The conscience can be a terrible torment otherwise. I once made a bad decision that nearly cost my army a battle. Afterward, I had my second in command take over while I fought five enforcers in the challenge ring and then had to recover from the beating. It eased my mind to suffer punishment."

She suspected that his smooth-voiced cajoling was more to get her to agree because he would enjoy punishing her than because she needed it, but, as usual, she found him difficult to resist. He was such a natural master, it was impossible not to submit.

She licked her dry lips as he sat up and pulled her across his lap face down. She squirmed as he exposed her buttocks. The position brought back memories of how he'd slid his finger into her backside and how Calem and Thane had spread her cheeks and fucked her little hole with their thick cocks. Her face burned as he slid a hand under her body and pinched her clit between thumb and forefinger, sending electric shocks of arousal to her belly, breasts, and pussy.

"I expect you to take your punishment bravely. No trying to cover your ass. Put your hands under your forehead, Veylin, and leave them there." His voice was firm but warm with lust. She obeyed.

The spanking set fire to her body. She couldn't be still and bit her hand to keep from crying out. She felt vulnerable and humiliated, but also unbearably aroused. He rubbed her clit even as the slaps jarred her backside. She found herself raising her bottom and then falling with the blows so that her clit was crushed against his hand.

She gasped and writhed, spreading her legs. When she finally couldn't take another stinging slap, he flipped her onto her back and drove his cock straight into her. She shattered into orgasm with the first thrust, her buttocks burning against the cool bed linens, her body rocking with shockwaves from his thrusts and her response to them.

After a dozen strokes, he pulled his dripping cock out. He looked down between their bodies. He slid down, lapping her juices with his tongue, sucking her as he squeezed her sore buttocks in his strong hands. She came undone, thrashing desperately.

Then he moved up again, sliding back into her pussy for a couple strokes before pulling out. He flipped her over and pinched her bottom then spread her cheeks. She squirmed when she felt the slippery tip of his cock at the tightly puckered hole. He'd done nothing to dilate her, though she was wildly aroused. She didn't know if she could take him there or not. It didn't matter. He didn't ask her permission.

"Relax. The master's cock wants into your ass."

She screwed her eyes shut as the big knob punctured her ring. She gasped, going still. He lifted her hips, bringing her butt toward his eager cock. He speared her slowly, bit by devastating bit. The thick-capped penis sank deep into her rectum. She gasped, clutching the linens in her fists, trying not to cry out as he stuffed her bottom full, pinning her to the bed.

"Mmm," he groaned. "Deliciously tight. I know that hurts, Veylin, but your ring is a beautiful fit for my cock. There's a good girl, let that pucker relax and get used to being stretched on my rod. In a moment, I'll be able to move in and out and the aching will turn to pleasure. I'll fuck you deep in the ass and you'll come for me the way you always do."

Both sets of her cheeks scalded from punishment and embarrassment, but when he started to fuck her, she couldn't resist him. He rode her ass down to the bed, grinding her clit into the palm of his hand and curling his fingers into her pussy.

"Always so wet," he groaned. "So beautiful and creamy, so ready to be fucked." The pace increased and she barely felt the pain as the pleasure became unbearably intense. Her small shriek pierced the night, but if it hurt his ears, he didn't let on. He fucked her until she came and milked him into spurting a thick load inside her.

She panted and sobbed silently. He pulled out and curled her against his chest, kissing her face and soothing her with soft words.

He rubbed her sore buttocks, cupping her gently. "I know. I'm too rough with you. I don't deserve to have you come to my bed, Veylin. Tomorrow if Thane seeks to beat me unconscious I won't resist, but I want you to know that being with you is the only thing that eases me. I have deep wounds that won't heal, but when you let me seduce you, I forget everything that tears my heart."

He drew a slow breath, hugging her to his body. "I love you. Not so much as Thane because his soul is far purer than mine, but in my way... And I will crush Equeid and return your queendom to you. Mark my promise. You will never want for anything that is in my power to give."

* * *

In the morning, Gatler awoke too groggy to see straight, but felt flower petal lips kissing him as Veylin slid from his bed. He sought to catch her, but she slapped his hands away, playful as a kitten, and escaped before he had rubbed the sleep from his eyes.

He found his feet and managed a blazing shower followed by an icy rinse. He was full awake when he came back into his quarters and found Thane waiting for him.

Gatler probably should have been abashed, but he couldn't find it in himself to feel guilty. He'd been troubled and taking Veylin had distracted him.

"Having a good morning?" Thane asked.

"So far," Gatler said with a smile.

Thane frowned. "Have a care with her, Gatler. She's young, and she worships you. She won't say no even when she should. Since you don't see fit to invite me, I'll

have your promise that you'll not use her as recklessly as you'd use one of your *acadenas*."

"I'll use her in whatever way pleases us both. And I am not reckless with *acadenas*. In their way, they are as brave as my soldiers, and I value them accordingly."

Gatler waited because he could see that Thane wanted to say more, but was composing his words. Gatler pulled on his clothes and then sat on a bench.

"Why?" Thane asked softly.

"Why what?"

"Why do you have to take her to your bed when there are a world of women trying to get into it."

"I could ask you the same."

Thane blinked.

"You chose her because you found her special. You can't blame me for finding the same," Gatler said.

"It's completely different. I love her. You're just amusing yourself with her because you can, because of some pact we made when we were too ignorant to know better."

"Just amusing myself?" Gatler said. "Don't presume to instruct me on my own feelings. I have never taken you into my confidence in that regard so you can know nothing of them."

Thane nodded. "And that is precisely why I had to come. With Calem I understand and trust his intentions. He joins us in my own bed. You wall yourself off from Calem and me and always have. Now you seek to draw Veylin behind that wall of yours, and you expect me not to try to climb over it." Thane smiled bitterly. "I won't beg to be taken into your confidence, Gatler, but neither will I share her when you shut me out. From this day forward, she'll have you or she'll have me. I'll tell her, and let her choose." Thane stalked toward the door.

"Wait," Gatler said.

Thane stopped, but didn't turn.

"Don't put her in that position. She'll choose you, of course. She loves you far more than anything. But I..."

Thane looked over his shoulder, waiting. "You what?"

"I need her right now."

Thane turned to face him. "I've never known you to need anyone."

Gatler shrugged.

"Calem said there's something between you and Lalanc. Something unresolved that's tormenting you both."

Gatler held out his hand. "Veylin is your concern so I have no choice but to have an occasional conversation about her with you. The rest of my affairs are mine alone."

"Lalanc is Veylin's sister. She spent the night with Veylin and Calem and me in my room --"

"In bed with you?" Gatler snapped. He immediately regretted the force of the question.

Thane raised his brows. "No, but close enough. We were too tired for more than sleep. That won't always be the case. If there is reason that we shouldn't seduce her or that we should invite you to join us when we do, tell me now."

Gatler recovered himself. "I have no claim on her. Do with her as pleases you both."

"Stone stubborn," Thane commented as he turned and walked out.

* * *

Veylin finished securing Lalanc's hair in a series of thick loops.

"Queen Lemoar, Thane's mother, has issued the challenge using Equeid's invasion of Saris as an excuse. Melotin and Saris are allies so no one will accuse Melotin of bullying Kenart."

"Bullying?" Lalanc scoffed. "Equeid's on a conquest. He's using Kenart to exploit other nations, to absorb and enslave them."

"I know, and rather than accept the challenge, Equeid has replied that they'll convene a diplomatic sojourn," Veylin said.

"Coward! Equeid is stalling. He doesn't care about diplomacy. If Melotin were smaller with a less substantial army and a less famous champion, he'd have immediately accepted the challenge."

"I know, but don't worry. Calem won't let diplomacy win out. And then Gatler will be ready. Calem said you know the rebel leaders."

"I was one of them."

Veylin smiled. "I shouldn't be surprised. You always were a fierce warrior. You and Gatler have a great deal in common."

"Except that I am in exile, and he leads an army and a nation," Lalanc said dryly. She loved Veylin's sweet optimism, but thinking of Gatler put Lalanc in a sour mood. She wanted to spend more time with him, but he avoided her at every turn. Instead of talking directly to her, he sent his officers to get the information that was needed to plan the attacks. The officers were also how he kept her informed of his plans. He had made no attempts to cut her out of the fight, which she appreciated, but what she found herself craving even more than Equeid's demise was one night in Gatler's company and the chance to put things right between them.

"Calem said that you and Gatler have a history together. I've noticed the way Gatler watches you when you come into a room," Veylin said.

"Have you also noticed the way he leaves it?"

"Yes, actually," Veylin said, chuckling. "Since Gatler never runs from anything, I find it rather amusing the way you seem to scare him away."

Lalanc smiled too, though she couldn't find much humor in it. "I don't scare him. He simply despises me."

"I think not. The stories of Gatler's battles are legendary in Melotin. If he despised you, he'd create a reason to kill you."

"Unless he were smitten with my sister and spared me to keep from hurting her."

Veylin blushed. "We do have a special relationship. Maybe that's why I know he doesn't hate you. He looks at you in a certain way that I recognize. When Gatler can't

arrange to catch me alone because I'm with Thane, he gets a frustrated look that's laced with longing. It's the way he always looks at you, except in your case it's more intense."

"You're imagining it."

"Do you want him?" Veylin asked.

Lalanc looked away. Veylin and Calem were the same. Always asking such probing questions. Never allowing a person to have clandestine feelings. It was completely contrary to a warrior's way to simply disclose whatever might be in one's mind and heart.

"Lalanc," Veylin said, clutching her arm. "Answer me. I can't help you if you don't confide in me."

"What makes you think I need your help?" Lalanc said coolly as she extracted her arm from Veylin's grip.

"Because if I ask him to meet me, he will. Can you claim the same?"

Lalanc scowled. She did not want to think about it. "We need to focus on reclaiming Kenart. After that, we'll see."

Veylin shook her head. "Once the battle is over, Gatler may be engaged elsewhere. So might you. The time to act, if you want him, is now."

Lalanc sighed heavily. "I'll think about it."

Veylin rolled her pretty eyes. "You're thinking about it. He's thinking about it. I thought warriors were supposed to be people of action."

Lalanc laughed. "I'll see you later."

* * *

Calem sat across the table from the one remaining diplomat from Kenart. He'd frustrated the others to fury, which hadn't been difficult. He wanted a fight, and they weren't a well-trained group. The rest of Calem's group of advisors and colleagues had gone for a meal, but Calem stayed behind hoping to finish things... or perhaps to start them.

Dornic ran his knuckles over his short auburn beard and leaned back in his seat. The man was nearly twice Calem's age and far more experienced. He was the only

diplomat who had served prior to Kenart's fall. There were faint lines around his dark eyes, eyes that reminded Calem of a teacher he'd once had.

"So there is nothing that will appease you then?" Dornic said. "We've offered a number of satisfactory options that will allow Kenart to save face and yet allow Saris to remain sovereign."

"We're not concerned with Kenart's world image. Certainly its current ruler has done nothing to mask its flaws."

"While it's true that Kenart doesn't have so beautiful a face as those of the princes of Melotin, you must understand that Equeid is not a fool. He will not tolerate humiliation. With the death of his cousin, he must show that he can hold the country and continue its political objectives. He cannot afford to show weakness."

"Nor can he apparently afford to show mercy. We've heard about the slaughter in the woods surrounding Saris."

Dornic's eyes widened for a moment, making Calem suspect that Dornic was yet unaware of what had happened. Calem leaned forward, asking the direct and personal question he'd wanted to ask all morning. "Why have you stayed with his diplomatic council? Surely, your conscience must insist on your resignation."

"I'm loyal to the state," he said flatly.

"Tell me, do those who resign have their families and friends tortured and murdered?" Calem guessed.

Dornic inclined his head slightly. Dornic, Calem noticed again, was rugged and handsome in a way that was unusual for most diplomats who were often indoors negotiating.

"How old are your children? And when will they be old enough to join the revolution so that you can unshackle yourself from a leader who is not fit to lead?"

"You ask when I will be ready to commit high treason," Dornic said, crossing one leg casually over the other. "You'll understand if I don't answer."

Calem nodded and noticed again the way the other man studied him. It was intriguing, but a little unnerving.

"There is no harm in answering a few personal questions, is there?" Calem asked.

"Except that it creates the illusion of friendship, a tactic you hope will make me more yielding," Dornic said.

"We'll trade information then, over a meal. And as I'm the more inexperienced, I will likely become more yielding than you, right?"

Dornic uncrossed his legs and leaned forward, dark eyes scanning Calem's face. "You're here to insure that the challenge is accepted, so you cannot waiver on that point. Tell me, young prince, what then could you yield that would be of interest to me?"

Calem's heart thudded in his chest. Human conflict and the nature of power always stimulated Calem. Dornic was attractive and intelligent, but more importantly he held the promise of strength and sexual prowess in his manner.

"The fate of Melotin is woven with my very soul. I cannot betray the nation." Calem leaned forward so that his fingers lay very near Dornic's hands. "But it wouldn't trouble me to use creative negotiations to insure that the least amount of blood is shed during the inevitable conflict."

Dornic's voice dropped to a coarse whisper. "You suggest a private negotiation?"

"My brother is my best friend. As a formidable champion, it is not unusual for other nations to try to prevent him from reaching the champion's ring in good health. The challenge in Kenart will place him on the path with a treacherous and dishonorable ruler. I would value a friend there. So would the woman he is bound to, the rightful heir of the state to which you pledge loyalty. If by some circumstance she were to regain the throne, those who offered friendship would not be forgotten."

"I know Veylin. She is not spiteful. My sisters and brothers and their children would not be in danger if she recovered the throne. But if she makes an attempt that fails and someone inside were to help her, Equeid's wrath would be terrible."

"There is risk," Calem whispered with a nod. "Is there something that can be offered to make the risk worth it? Property or wealth? Free travel within the world?"

Dornic shook his head sharply, studying Calem's mouth. "None of those things."

"What then?" Calem asked, his cock stiffening at the hunger in Dornic's eyes. He licked his lips and glanced at Dornic's hands, touching them with his own warm fingertips.

"What indeed?" Dornic said.

Calem glanced up at his face to find that Dornic's wry smile did not reach his eyes. Dornic's hands clasped Calem's wrists suddenly and pinned them to the table. Calem's heart pounded in his chest, his muscles twitching.

"You are certainly beautiful fruit. None with eyes could deny that, but I am not so weakened by beauty that it blots out sense. The lives of those I love are not for sale." Dornic's hand snaked through the space between them and pulled Calem's head forward. The kiss was brutal, full of pent up frustration, bruising Calem's mouth.

Calem was breathless when Dornic released him. The older man stood. "It is past time for a meal, and I'm hungry. Have a care for your body and eat something too. You tremble as if weakened from lack of nourishment."

Calem watched Dornic leave the room, admiring his strong buttocks and thighs encased in tight trousers. After he was gone, Calem leaned back in his chair and smiled. So Dornic was too honorable to take what he wanted at the risk of his family's lives. If Calem became important to him, Calem could expect that same fierce loyalty to bind Dornic in the promises he made to Calem. He ran a thumb over his bruised lower lip, contemplating his next move.

* * *

Dornic had not returned for the late day negotiations. He'd sent a message that the talks were not progressing as well as he hoped and that he would use the free time to reflect on what more might be tried to settle the conflict.

Calem retired too from the fruitless meeting, leaving the councils to squabble at each other. After his evening meal and shower, he dressed in a soft robe and trouser set and slipped through the negotiation center to Dornic's suite of rooms. He knocked on

the door and Dornic opened it, shirtless and glistening with sweat after some sport on an exercise disc.

Calem's belly tightened at the look of him.

"I would like a side discussion, separate from the negotiations of our countries. You have experience in diplomacy that I could benefit from. I would like an evening of mentorship," Calem said.

Dornic stepped away from the doorway, allowing Calem to enter the room. Dornic sealed the door and turned to face him.

"This is my private time that you intrude upon."

"I'm aware of that," Calem said. "The World Association of Diplomacy allows for a young diplomat to seek knowledge from --"

Dornic laughed, running a hand through his damp hair. "Enough with the pretence. The only knowledge you're seeking is whether I'll fuck you the same way I kissed you."

Calem shrugged and smiled. "You can't blame me. You know you used that kiss to bait me."

"You think you're clever."

"I *know* I'm clever."

"Conceded. But while I might admire that at a negotiation table, I don't suffer it in bed," Dornic said.

"Don't you?"

"No. Strip and let me see you."

Calem shrugged off the robe and pushed down the trousers, standing naked and terribly excited. Dornic stepped forward swiftly and captured Calem's cock in his fist, choking it in a wonderfully hard grip.

"Have those royal cheeks been parted often?"

Calem shook his head, a slight flush rising in his cheeks. "Only once."

"Taken by another boy?"

Calem nodded. "We were both fairly young."

"Was he well hung?"

"Not especially," Calem rasped, his cock hardening to its full length.

"And did you come when he took you?"

Calem glanced down at Dornic's large hand squeezing him. "No, but afterward he sucked me and used his finger inside me where I was sore and that made me come very hard." Calem was used to being honest about what excited him, but somehow the confession seemed more charged than usual.

"So this is another experiment."

"Well --"

"It wasn't a question. No one with a mouth like yours has only been kissed twice in his life, so it's usually women and girls beneath you." Dornic released him, and Calem's heart sank. He should have lied and said it was men in general not Dornic in particular that appealed to him. A terrible miscalculation and his cock bobbed angry and inflamed at the blunder.

"Look, this isn't a tease. I wouldn't have come to your room if I wasn't sure I wanted to spend the night."

Dornic walked over to the table near the bed. "I wasn't dismissing you. It makes no difference to me who your usual bed partners are. I'll use you the same way. I just wanted the information because I'm a diplomat and it's second nature to assess a situation."

Dornic lifted a jar of cream and tossed it on the bed then he shoved off his pants. Calem stared at the cock that was even longer and thicker than his own, an extremely different member than the boy's he'd accepted before. He thought of Veylin, how tight and tender she'd been, how she'd wept from the strain of being stretched. He somehow doubted Dornic would be as gentle with him as Calem had been with her. Calem's muscles tensed nervously as Dornic strode over to him.

Dornic slid one hand behind Calem's head and held it in place, while the other touched his chest. Dornic kissed him, exploring his mouth, teasing his tongue, while

scraping a nail over Calem's nipple. Their cocks encountered each other, and Calem jerked in surprise at the feeling of their erections crossing.

Several moments passed and then Dornic moved swiftly, turning him and knocking him onto the bed, face down. Calem's breath came in quick gasps. The jar was next to his face until Dornic's hand plucked it off the bed.

Dornic's knees knocked Calem's legs open. Calem's heart hammered in his chest.

"Put your hands back and spread yourself."

Calem's hands shook as he reached back and gripped his own muscled buttocks. They felt strange to his fingers. He was use to the supple flesh of women. He pictured the pretty little rings he'd punctured and moaned softly. He rubbed his cock against the mattress.

The cream was frosty and thick as Dornic's finger smeared it around the hole. The stimulation was amazing as he traced the ring and then pressed a fingertip inside.

Calem couldn't resist thrusting his hips forward, causing the finger to slip out. A sharp stinging slap struck his spread cheeks.

"Be still," Dornic growled.

Calem panted against the sheets, fighting for control. And then the world came into sharp focus as two strong fingers pushed into his back hole. Calem gasped, the pain of the sudden penetration made him freeze.

Calem's voice was strangled. "*Cre*, that hurts."

"Relax." Dornic's fingers parted, stretching Calem mercilessly, and then he replaced the fingers with his huge cock, making the ring burn as he penetrated it.

Calem bit his lip, struggling not to cry out. Dornic thrust slow and deep, and by the third thrust the pain blurred with arousal. Calem imagined Veylin beneath him, her legs spread in a V to allow deep penetration, Calem's cock sliding into her soft wet heat as Dornic ground into his ass.

Dornic moaned above him. "Such a perfect royal rump, all mine for the taking. Hmm. That's good. Raise that beautiful ass." Dornic's strokes quickened, and Calem's

belly knotted, his cock aching relentlessly. Then Dornic slowed, teasing him with shallow little pokes.

"Dornic."

"What do you want Calem? Want it harder? Deeper?"

"Yes."

Dornic reached below and stroked Calem's cock. Calem clutched the pillow, squeezing it to his chest.

"Tell me."

"Please. Deeper," Calem said, shoving back against the thick cock.

"Yes. I've got what you need." Dornic drove down into Calem's body. He set a driving pace, stroking Calem's cock in time. Calem's heart thudded as his cock erupted. Dornic continued to pound away, his groans drowning out Calem's. Then Dornic's cock seemed to swell and stretch him just before the seed jetted into him.

Calem collapsed on the mattress with a soft sob. Dornic bent forward and kissed between his shoulder blades.

"I don't know what you're like with women, but you're the perfect fuck for a stiff cock." He caught Calem's hair and turned his face to capture his mouth in a deep kiss.

"I didn't know it could be like that." Calem said when they were both lying on their backs.

"It isn't always. But sometimes one is fortunate."

"And if Veylin were to rule Kenart, this wouldn't be the last time we'd see each other."

Dornic laughed. "I wish I were Veylin. I'd like such a handsome weapon at my disposal. I could probably trade your body to a few key people and take over the world."

Calem pushed a hand through his sweat-damp hair, stretching his chest muscles. "Veylin's lovely, but she isn't the only reason I'm here. I came because I wanted to."

"I'm pleased to hear that." Dornic rolled on to his side. He ran a hand over Calem's chest and belly. "Let's not waste tonight sleeping."

* * *

Gatler had left the release command on the door so that Veylin could come straight in. He lay on his back, attempting to read, but not making much progress with the text. He and Lalanc had had to meet for some final preparations and he had barely held his emotions in check. He wanted to kiss her and fuck her and to punish her and cast her aside all in the same moment. It was maddening.

He hated the easy rapport Calem and Thane had with her. And whenever his soldiers flirted with her, it inflamed him to jealousy and lust. He was marking the nights until he could ride away from Frascelyn and her. He would occupy himself with battles and *acadenas* and forget her.

The door slid open. *Praise the queendom, Veylin has come to distract me.*

Except it wasn't Veylin in his bed chamber. Sheer scarlet fabric floated around Lalanc as she strolled in. Gatler's cock instantly hardened at her body's magnificence.

He should not be alone with her, but he would not vacate his own chamber.

"I expected your beautiful sister." Maybe he could insult her vanity and drive her off.

"She sends her regards."

"She sent you?" The little manipulator. He would punish Veylin for this in ways that would leave her sore for days.

"It was my request of her. You avoid me or see me only in the presence of a room full of soldiers. There has been no opportunity to speak privately, and with the battle looming, I thought this might be our last chance."

"I don't care to hear your explanation of what happened in the past. If you are alive, there was an opportunity for you to contact me. You did not."

She sat on the edge of the bed. He fought the instinct to reach for her or to retreat. It was his own bed. He would not be pushed from it.

She stretched a hand out, but he caught her arm to stop her touching him.

"Don't. We both know how attractive I find you. I won't allow you to use my body to subdue my mind."

She drew her arm back and smiled. "You give me too much credit. My attempt to touch you wasn't calculated. I simply couldn't resist the impulse."

He exhaled slowly.

She folded her hands in her lap. "I'll be brief and then I'll never intrude on you again."

The finality of her words struck him like a blow, and he could not fathom his own reaction. It was pain to see her and yet the thought of not seeing her again always wounded him. There was no way to win among his battling emotions.

"I wanted to be with you, Gatler, but I could not discard my honor. I had to speak to Ilnin myself, to explain that I had to take a chance on my affair with you, even if it led to nothing.

"But as soon as I returned to Kenart there was upheaval. Veylin's cousin Likus and brother Equeid had seized control, killing so many. They had Veylin, and we'd heard that they were torturing her. I had to try to save her, but there was no way to get close to them. When I tried to force my way into the palace, they tried to kill me, and I was wounded badly.

"Ilnin saved my life. He hid me. When I recovered, we were busy forming and organizing a resistance. We planned to make things right in Kenart, and I could not let myself think of anything else. But things took so much time. They blocked us rescuing her every time. Likus was obsessed with Veylin and the stories we heard of how he used her..." She frowned bitterly. "She was there too long." She paused. "Then she got herself out. I was proud of her. And we nearly overthrew them, but we were betrayed. They killed Ilnin in front of me. After all his steadfast support and friendship, they cut him down and made me watch. I couldn't save him, but I vowed to see the wrongs righted."

Gatler nodded.

"They didn't kill me because there was so much unrest and killing the sister of the rightful heir to the throne... well, Equeid didn't think they could risk that. First they kept me imprisoned, but I wouldn't play their games. So they shipped me to the *acadena*

center with a lot of other women that they wanted to control, women who agreed because they wanted to escape that place.”

“By the time I could have contacted you it seemed ridiculously late. We’d known each other one night. I never realized you felt so strongly about me. I realize you said as much, but I thought you were just young and overcome in the passion of the moment. I expected that you wouldn’t have cared to hear from me after so long.”

“I know war, Lalanc, and how one must focus during battle, but you had a long time. You could have sent word. I was a soldier too. I could have helped your cause.”

“It wasn’t your fight. I didn’t even know what nation you were from.”

“You made it impossible for me to find out what happened to you!” he growled.

“I only didn’t want you to follow me to Kenart immediately. I felt it only fair to Ilnin that I come alone to explain things.”

He nodded. “He was your friend and very loyal it seems. I don’t blame you for protecting him.”

She sighed. “But you’ll always blame me for not understanding the depth of your feelings?”

He shrugged. “I admit it wasn’t rational to feel so strongly after a few days and nights. So there’s no logic in blaming you for assuming that I’d moved on with my life and put that encounter out of my thoughts. But I did confide my feelings that night.”

“You feel that I betrayed you.”

“Not intentionally, it seems, but through carelessness and lack of faith.”

She sighed. “I lived in a bad dream. It wasn’t until I saw you in the *acadena* center that I fully woke. I’m sorry that I hurt you. I’m sorry that I didn’t contact you sooner. Not only for myself, but for a nation that needed military support from a great leader, which you clearly are.”

“Kenart will have Melotin’s support.”

“Because you love Veylin?”

“Because we all love her.”

She nodded. "And do you consider me to be connected to your family through her?"

His mind shifted uneasily. There would undoubtedly be some trap in the question, but the truth was as it was. "Yes, you are."

"But there is nothing specifically between you and me anymore is there? Nothing but a difficult past and the duty of our current connection?"

"That's accurate."

She leaned forward so that her hair fell over him, the strands caressing his naked chest, making the muscles tense in response.

"Then I think you should let me make amends, so that we can continue as friends."

"How would you make amends for all that's passed? I returned to that center many times looking for any message from you, for any sign of you. Not something that's easily repaired. And you have been wounded too by the difficulties in your country. You deserve your own happiness. After we retake Kenart, you should find a match, settle into a contented life." The words burned in his throat. They were true, but didn't come easily.

"That's not acceptable to me." She lay her hand flat on his stomach, very near where the head of his cock lay in wait, erect just beneath the linens across his hips.

"Why isn't that acceptable?" he said, his voice low with arousal.

"Because I'm a warrior. I betrayed and wounded you, and I must make amends. My honor demands it, just as yours would. And if the debt is not easily repaid, well then it is not, but I must be allowed to do so."

His heart thudded in his chest. "What do you propose?"

"My first talent is fighting. I can train your warriors, particularly females in the Melotin army. There are Banzian strategies they could benefit from. My other talent, the new one, is that I've been trained at the *acadena* center. I'll serve you sexually. I'm certain that with enough time and energy afforded to my duties, you'll consider my debt repaid."

He opened his mouth, but words wouldn't come. She didn't wait for a verbal response. Lalanc slipped her hand under the linens and gripped him firmly. His body jerked at her touch and a drop of arousal pearled at the tip of his cock head.

"I can take on any role. You have only to tell me what you'd like for the evening." She bent her head and licked moisture from him. His lids drifted closed, and he moaned.

She sucked the knob for a moment, sending a burning need through his entire body. "I've never forgotten how good you taste and feel, better than any other man I've ever known." She tongued him slowly. "And you know how strong I am. You won't have to hold back your strength when you fuck me. You can lose yourself inside me."

Cre, she knew what to say. He always took such care with Veylin and with the *acadenas*. He was strong and aggressive and experience had taught him that he must be careful.

"You left my bed the other night because you thought you'd hurt me, but you really hadn't. You can trust me to protect myself. I would have bucked and fought if I'd wanted an end to it. I like to feel your strength."

She sucked his cock into her mouth, the head caressing the back of her throat. The strong suction made him groan. He slid a hand into her hair, massaging her scalp, encouraging her to take him deeper. He rocked his hips, fucking her mouth, savoring the feel of her full lips around him. She squeezed his balls as they tightened, and he found himself unable to contain the orgasm. He roared and seed jetted from him. She swallowed as expertly as any *acadena*.

When she released him, she stood next to the bed. She shed the frock and fingered her nipples, pinching them taut. She slipped a hand to her dark thatch and between her lower lips. "During our encounters, you must think of this body as an instrument for your pleasure." She crawled onto the bed and straddled him. She bent forward, her breasts swinging near his mouth.

"Maybe we'll be at dinner and you'll find yourself aroused. You might want me to slip subtly under the table to suck you off." Blood flowed into his cock again, the

engorgement beginning anew. “Or while assessing the horses. You mentioned once that watching a stallion take a mare inflames you. Maybe you’ll ask me to join you in pasture and bend me over a rigging and spread me open right there, fucking me as the stallion does his mare. How many positions and situations could you make me available for? With no one to compete with you for my attention? And what about after a battle when you’re thickest and most ready. If I fought alongside you, you would never even need to wait to get back to the camp as the other soldiers do.”

She slid down on his cock, her hot pussy a delicious sleeve. She tightened her walls around him, making him moan. “I know what it is to finish a fight and feel my breasts ache with wanting to be bitten and sucked. To have the smell of blood and sweat make me want to fuck. What parts of your nature could you reveal to me that you could never freely confess elsewhere?”

She rode him hard until they were both spent. Then she kissed his mouth and the tenderness of the kiss settled into his whole soul. He didn’t speak. He didn’t need to. She’d surely seen how rapt he was while she talked, how fiercely he wanted the things she promised. More than anything, that was her talent. To reach inside him and grab his heart and his cock by the roots. She was his other half. There was no point in denying it anymore.

Chapter 4

Lalanc and Gatler cut through the thicket to reveal a small gate usually hidden from view. She glanced at Gatler, his face determined. He'd turned over leadership of the army to his second in command so that he could sneak into Kenart with her, to cover her with force should she need it.

They broke through the hitch that kept the gate secure, and Lalanc took a deep breath before pushing it open. The faded light in the sky was still bright enough to reveal an overgrown path. Lalanc led the way, winding through the brush, behind the abandoned homes at the edge of the princedom.

When they got to the narrow point in the river, they used trees for cover and could see the guards at the stronghold. Gatler consulted the timepiece strapped to his hip, and he tapped his ear. She nodded and opened the small pouch on her wrist. She pulled the ear seals free and fashioned them over her ears. She created a snapping sound with her fingers, but couldn't hear it.

They had a small communication board, but were unlikely to need it. If the plan worked it would be obvious. She hoped again that the ambassador that Calem had befriended could be trusted to help Veylin and Thane. She also hoped that Gatler was right about the power of Veylin's mesmerizing voice, that when projected through the nation it would entrance all who heard it.

Gatler sat at the base of the tree, his eyes scanning the woods continuously. Now that they were effectively deaf, they would have to be more vigilant. Lalanc watched the guards.

Time passed, and her heart thudded in her chest. Perhaps something had gone wrong. She prayed for Veylin's safety and thought about their contingency plans. All of the contingencies were unlikely to work.

Then she saw both guards look up at the sky and cock their heads as if listening. She tapped Gatler, and he glanced over. The guards smiled, even swooned and sunk down to the ground. Descended from sirens, Veylin clearly had the gift.

Gatler grinned, and they slipped into the water. They swam across the river and flanked the guards. Even when they were directly on top of them the guards seemed unperturbed. Gatler clunked them over their heads, knocking them out.

Lalanc felt a bit startled by the ease of it, and she was terribly tempted to uncoil the ear seals and listen to Veylin's singing. What must it be like to get fighting men to lie down?

They cranked open the door and walked carefully inside. The staff and soldiers lounged with upturned heads and smiles. Lalanc felt an icy chill run through her. What a powerful weapon Veylin was with her siren's voice. In the wrong hands, riding before an army, she might incapacitate an enemy to devastating results.

Lalanc followed the main stair, dagger in hand, to Equeid's chambers. There was a woman, naked and bloody from a beating, chained to the foot of the bed, but even she looked placid under the influence of the voice. Equeid lounged on a chair, his legs outstretched, resting in front of him.

He looked only vaguely aware of Lalanc approaching him. His normal savageness was mostly blotted out, but she could see the flickers behind cold eyes. It might have been unsporting of her to attack him when he was unarmed, but then he'd never given anyone else a fighting chance.

"You are a scourge. I wash you away," she said, unable to hear her voice in her ears, but it echoed through her bones. Her hand was swift, and then his blood ran as freely as that of the ones he'd slaughtered. She turned to find Gatler unbinding the young woman and covering her carefully with a sheet. Lalanc smiled at him, liking the care he took with someone wounded and defenseless. She was unlikely to ever need that kind of care from him, but it spoke well of his character.

The floor shook and she looked up. A sonic pulse, the first signal. The Melotin army, ears sealed, was advancing. Then the young woman's dazed expression cleared.

Lalanc and Gatler exchanged looks then Lalanc pulled the seal from her ear. The singing had stopped. Something had happened to Veylin.

"Treachery!" a voice from down the stairs shouted.

"Ready to fight?" Gatler asked.

"Always," she said as they charged to the door.

* * *

When Veylin had stopped singing briefly to draw breath, she'd been knocked off the dais by an off-duty Kenart soldier. Fortunately the Melotin army had already breached the city.

With Veylin unconscious, Thane and Calem had battled to get her out of the street and Dornic had led them through the underground. With all the fighting above, he'd snuck them to his home to protect them. Dornic hoped he wouldn't regret it later.

Calem stood behind him and squeezed his shoulder as a doctor examined Veylin. She stirred to the acrid liquid he dabbed under her nose. Thane held her nervously in his arms.

"Vey," he whispered. "Open your eyes now. Look at me."

Her lids fluttered, and she reached for her head. "What happened?"

"You fell. Where do you hurt?"

"Did we win?"

"I don't know. I need to get you out of here," Thane said.

"Take me back to the street. I need to help the Melotin army."

"No, the amplification equipment will have been destroyed by now."

"Well, I'll sing without it! Take me to the palace. Gatler and Lalanc might need me." She stumbled to her feet, but Thane quickly caught her in his arms.

"Gatler and Lalanc can take care of themselves. You lie down and rest."

She tried to argue, but she was too unsteady to give him any real trouble.

* * *

They had won the day and when the people of Kenart realized that it was Veylin who had come to reclaim her throne, the celebration in the streets had reached a fever pitch.

Gatler walked over to where a doctor was sealing up a wound on Lalanc's arm with a thermal polymer. She clenched her jaw at the pain, but made no sound. *A warrior to the marrow.* Gatler had his share of cuts, but none deep enough to need medical intervention. He owed Lalanc the credit for that. They'd fought back to back at one point and she'd cut the arm from a soldier that nearly sliced Gatler's neck. If not for Lalanc's quick blade, Gatler's head would not still be attached.

When the last of the fighting had ended, she'd collapsed to her knees laughing in relief. He understood that joy and had drawn her behind a house and fucked her against a stone wall. She'd answered his passion with her own that was just as strong.

"You are still one of the finest warriors I have ever seen," Gatler said. "It was an honor to fight with you."

She smiled running a finger over his arm. "The pleasure was mine, I assure you."

"My second has found Veylin and my brothers. I thought I'd see them."

"I'll come with you," she said, getting up.

He strode out of the medical center and into the street, watching the people celebrate. Lalanc walked next to him, close enough for him to feel the heat and power of her body. He knew after they checked on their family, they would slip away again. And he would celebrate again, inside her.

Epilogue

Gatler wrapped the ceremonial burgundy and gold robe around himself as the door opened. He was surprised to find Thane. He'd expected Veylin and Calem to arrive to check on his progress in preparing for the binding ceremony.

"Lalanc's nearly ready. She looks beautiful," Thane said.

"I never doubted it."

"How did your night of celebration with the other soldiers pass?"

Gatler grinned. "Well enough. Though I'd have as soon had Lalanc with me in the shelter at the end of the night. Seems a shame for us to each have suffered a cold bed on the eve of the ceremony."

"She wasn't cold."

Gatler glanced over at Thane. "No?"

"She spent the evening with Calem and Veylin and me."

Gatler raised his eyebrows. "In bed with the three of you?"

"Yes."

Gatler was not pleased to have missed such an encounter, but he was not jealous. Nothing could threaten his connection to Lalanc now. "And none of you saw fit to extend me an invitation when she is mine?" he asked lightly.

"Technically, she's as much mine as yours. Bound to three brothers equally, yes?"

Gatler measured Thane's expression. Though Thane's stance was still casual, there was a certain tension in his shoulders and a slightly hard line about his mouth.

"That is the truth." Gatler had certainly stressed that to Veylin often enough.

"And Calem and I thought it best to have her without you there. So that she wouldn't be distracted."

"I suppose that makes sense," Gatler said amiably. "Though she was probably thinking of me the entire time anyway. Not present in the flesh doesn't mean absent from the heart."

"I thought you might be angry."

"Why? Lalanc is my perfect match. She commands Kenart's army now. She has shown herself to be cunning, yet honorable. If she occasionally craves the pretty brothers that I have bound her to, so much the better for us all sharing the ruling of two nations." Gatler finished trimming his beard. "Besides, I can make her forget the two of you in the span of heartbeats."

"Is that so?"

"Yes. With my tongue between her thighs she cannot recall even her own name."

"I'll remember that trick when she visits me during Green Season. I wouldn't want her to suffer overly from missing you. Much better if she doesn't think of you at all."

"That would be a good plan if she were coming to visit you then." Gatler didn't mind that Lalanc had spent the night with his brothers. On the other hand, he did not want her away from him for an extended period of time. He had waited far too long to be reunited with her.

Thane frowned, widening his stance. "Well, I don't see the fairness in you having them both. Veylin said you'd requested she visit you. Perhaps now that you'll be bound to your own match, you won't have need for mine."

Gatler sat on the edge of a bench and sighed. "Lalanc is beautiful and fierce. She calls to a warrior's soul. Surely you have felt an inkling of that. I've seen how well you like to join her in sport, with a bow or a sword, on horseback."

"Yes, she is remarkable," Thane said carefully.

"Veylin calls to a different part of me. I like at times to taste what is innocent. And in me, she finds a darkness that she would never want to find in you. There is no harm in a trade if we are all willing. The question is, are you?"

Thane paused. "Not for an entire season, no matter how short."

"How long?"

"A few nights. Not more."

"What does Veylin say to this?"

"Veylin loves me and would happily stay with me all the days and nights of our life. So she says." Thane rubbed his thigh absently. "But she is drawn to you and doesn't want to defy you. She also feels indebted, but I don't intend to see her exploited on that account."

"Exploited?" Gatler frowned, standing. "I do not like your word choice, Thane. I might play a game or two, but I would never wound her spirit. Not only do I love Veylin, I also love those who love her. You, Lalanc. I would never betray that." He set his hand on Thane's shoulder. "The pact was forged to bind us all together."

"Then you must not undermine it."

"And you must not resist it. Being bound to Veylin in such a way inspires my loyalty. We've done a good thing because of it. Kenart is restored to its rightful and benevolent monarchs."

Thane took a deep breath and blew it out slowly as if bracing himself for a battle. "There is something I need. For myself."

Gatler tensed, worried that Thane would insist on being present whenever Gatler was with Veylin. That would not work in a way that would leave any of them satisfied.

"I want *my* child to grow inside her."

Gatler relaxed and smiled. "Then send her to me when you've already made it so."

Thane looked relieved, and Gatler realized that that had been Thane's main concern.

"And I'll, of course, abide by the same. You can keep Lalanc with --" Thane began.

Gatler shook his head. "I am not troubled about it. I have been father to an army and to two younger brothers who lost their father as boys. For me, we are one family. All the children will be equal in my heart."

Thane smiled. "At moments, I see glimpses of a very generous nature in you. Your reputation will be ruined," Thane teased.

"It will not. I expect you to keep my secrets. Now, fetch Lalanc. I wish to bind her to us and to take her to my bed swiftly."

"Always issuing orders. Will you ever see me as an equal, I wonder?" Thane asked, but he was still smiling.

"Yes, when we are the same age."

Thane laughed. "We'll meet you on the path."

* * *

Lalanc smiled at Thane's exuberance. Whatever he and Gatler had talked about seemed to have put him in good spirits. Veylin and Calem too joked playfully as Veylin admired his robes and fussed with Lalanc's upswept hair. Having been isolated from any personal connections for such a long time, Lalanc felt an overwhelming joy to be in the circle of such a wonderful close family.

She stepped outside and climbed into the small open carriage. The others took the one behind her. Her stomach tightened at the thought of Gatler waiting for her at the mouth of the path to the binding ceremony. She had not seen him in two nights, and she missed him. Prior to the brief separation, they had been together every day and night since the successful liberation of Kenart, and she found she enjoyed Gatler's company above all others.

Lalanc rode through the streets, which were lined with interlocking rows of benches where the citizenry from Kenart sat and sang folk songs in celebration. Occasionally Veylin's voice rose in song with them and the crowds swayed and cheered in response. Lalanc swelled with pride at the sight of her people so happy.

Gatler stood tall and broad, staggeringly handsome at the entrance of the cobbled path. She nodded at him as the carriage stopped and took his hand as she stepped down.

"You are as beautiful as you are deadly, and that is quite an accomplishment," he teased.

"I could say the same about you," she said.

"But am I as handsome as my younger brothers? They would have me snarling with jealousy over the time I missed in your arms last night."

She smiled, glancing to the others who were out of earshot as they walked the path. "They are handsome, in a young and sweet way. I enjoy them."

"Less than me... or more?"

"Do you really need reassurance?" she asked skeptically.

He laughed. "Not really. But I do expect retribution."

"For?"

"I should have been invited."

"I see. And what retribution do you seek?" she asked as he led her down the winding path.

"I have a game in mind. I expect you to indulge me."

"Perhaps I will. After all, a great deal of teaching was spent on games at the *acadena* center. I should hate for all that training to have been a waste."

"Exactly my thoughts," he said.

"I'm sure."

Their laughter was low and soft, mingled together like their hearts and their families and Lalanc's spirit rejoiced in the world's possibilities.

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 Cowboys 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.

You can read more about Alexa's current projects and upcoming releases at <http://alexaaamesbooks.blogspot.com>.