

Poison, Lies, and No Win Choices

Bride Ball, Part II A Grimm Revisited Story by

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Dedicated to

Grimm, the first love of my fantasy life, as it is for so many fantasy authors.

Tamer, the love that was meant to be.

Chapter One

Benjamin's cock came up at the feeling of Alana on his lap, her laughing body vibrating against his.

It had to be soon, appearances be damned. The game of decision was amusing enough and a social nicety, but he'd long ago decided that only Alana would do.

Her face dipped close to his, and he captured her lips in a kiss that released his frustration and need...at least, a modicum of them. It left them both ragged, and sweat coated his bare chest, most likely from clenching his muscles in restraint.

Mora's chattering broke the moment, and Alana levered herself onto the arm of his chair, giving the other contender room to sit on the opposite arm. Her smile faltered at the sight of the noblewoman, with her fine clothes and augmented body. Alana recovered quickly, smoothing the simple blouse and skirt most of the lowborn in attendance wore.

Another reason it has to be soon. Alana was becoming disheartened by his failure to choose formally, unsure of her appeal.

Mora offered the cup in her hand. "It's warm in here, don't you think? I thought you might like a drink."

Before he could take it, Alana did so. "My thanks," she breathed. "I'm frightfully parched."

"But that—"

It was too late. Alana had tipped her head back, baring her graceful neck, draining the contents of the cup in a few hearty swallows. That accomplished, she handed the cup back to a horrified Mora. It was a bold move, riding the edges of uncouth, but contending to a prince was thinly-veiled civility, at its finest.

Benjamin bit back a laugh at the tactical prowess that had won Alana this round of the chase for his attentions. How could he choose another, when such a witty and inventive woman had captured his heart? The words to dismiss Mora were on the tip of his tongue when one of the other ladies saved him the trouble by drawing her away.

"Mora? I need a word."

He worked at the mystery of Mora's upset and distraction without success. Surely it wasn't Alana besting her that caused the reaction; that had happened many times before. The hair rose on the back of his neck in warning, but his alcohol-muddled mind couldn't work its way to an explanation for his unease.

Mora engaged in a whispered discussion with her fellow, and Benjamin turned back to Alana, noting the pain in her eyes. It had to be tonight, propriety or no. When Mora returned, he'd make a public show of choosing Alana. If the Goddess was kind, he'd be taking the latter to his bed after that.

* * * *

The drink went straight to Alana's head, and she wondered at what vintage it might be. Wine, even strong wines, didn't usually affect her this quickly.

She'd only been drunk once before, but she didn't remember it feeling this good. Her entire body sang in a pleasant awareness.

Benjamin's hand settled on her thigh, then trailed upward. It clasped lightly at her hip, and he pulled her back into his lap. "Where were we?" he growled playfully. His mouth closed on hers, and Alana shifted closer to him.

She shivered at the touch of his ready cock through the silk trousers that comprised the whole of his outfit. Every night of the event, she'd prayed she'd feel that length, but Benjamin had decreed only the one he'd ultimately choose would.

And Mora is still a contender for his love. Mora, with her cunning and cold resolve. Alana wished there was a way to open his eyes to Mora's true nature.

That an unlikely proposition, she had to make her own sincerity clear to Benjamin. She threw herself into the kiss, moaning at him surrounding her in textures and scents.

He was so potent, he made her head swim. The need for more rode at her, and Alana tangled her fingers in the crisp hairs that bisected his chest.

Benjamin came at her mouth more avidly, urging her on. Emboldened, Alana touched him, moaning as muscles tensed beneath her palms and fingertips.

Her body burned and ached for an end to the game. His kiss wasn't enough. His hands exploring over clothing wasn't enough. Alana cupped his rigid length between their bodies.

Benjamin broke off the kiss with a half-swallowed cry. She forced her eyes open, meeting his questioning gaze. He wasn't stopping her, so she stroked him through the silk.

Her heart pounded in apprehension. Would he rebuff her? Dismiss her and choose Mora? This was presumptuous, but her need was maddening in its intensity.

The kiss resumed, a harder, hotter kiss that announced his interest. Benjamin guided her around to face him, and Alana placed a knee on either side of his body, stretching her skirt to its limits. One of his hands fisted in her hair, and the other grasped at her hip, drawing Alana to his body.

The temperature in the room jumped abruptly. The heat between them followed in kind.

Alana pulled at the fasteners on his trousers, and Benjamin wrenched his mouth from hers. He shot a startled look between their bodies, then met her eyes, swallowing hard.

"Here?" he whispered.

"Anywhere." *Anything.* "As long as it's now." She shifted her hips against him, making the offer.

He pushed up at her skirt, and Alana opened his trousers. His cock strained against her hand and she grasped it, moaning at the feel of him.

Benjamin positioned her over the crown, then guided her down. Alana's breathing hitched at the first touch. She forced her hips down, gasping his name as he arched off the seat and filled her.

She held to his shoulders, her fingernails biting skin, her eyes sliding shut. His cock filled her, stretched her, eased the ache.

"Goddess, Benjamin, yes," she urged him.

* * * *

Benjamin froze in disbelief. It couldn't be... But he knew it was true. Alana was a virgin. *Well, she was, until I—*

"Goddess, Benjamin, yes," she pleaded.

At least I didn't hurt her. Thank the Goddess for that.

There'd been an even chance she was untouched...perhaps less than even, all things considered. When she'd agreed to exhibitionism, he'd assumed she was experienced.

Alana rose and fell over him, scattering his senses. Who knew a virgin could move this way? If this was what she did to him untrained, her sexual education might well kill him.

A hoot of appreciation opened Benjamin's consciousness to other sounds from the assembled crowd. That brought a measure of sanity to his fevered mind.

Benjamin shook his head, cupping Alana's face. "No, Alana. Let me—"

"Let me," she purred.

Any thoughts he'd had about a virgin being too skittish for exhibitionism fled. He couldn't decide if she was too involved to notice their audience or uncaring that it existed. If Alana wasn't bothered by it, Benjamin wasn't going to force a stop.

It was a wild ride, and the end was kinetic. Alana threw her head back and screamed at the first jet of his seed into her. Her contractions gripped him hard, and he roared in possession. She was his, and the Goddess help anyone who stood in his way.

Her eyes slid open, and the look of longing made his heart stutter. She was innocent of what her expressions did to him, how they turned him into clay in her delicious, little hands.

She's innocent. That fact finally made it through the haze in his mind. Benjamin glanced around at the attendees of the Bride Ball, some watching them avidly...some less overtly...none oblivious to the spectacle.

It's unacceptable. Benjamin eased her skirt over her buttocks, shielding all but the sight of the root of his cock extending up between those silken thighs.

Alana whimpered at his touch, her eyes pleading for more, her body still gripping and releasing in the throes of waning climax. "In my rooms," he offered. "Will you accompany me—" "Yes."

"Highness," one of Alana's supporters addressed him. "Highness, I must—"

"When Mora returns, tell her to move on to other pursuits," he announced. "I've chosen Alana, if she'll have me."

Aftershocks ripped through her, and tears misted her eyes. Alana laughed in delight. "Oh, yes."

"But Highness, I must tell-"

"Enough."

She fell silent, though she shifted nervously.

Benjamin set Alana on her feet, carefully covering her. He fastened his trousers, glad he'd chosen purple. Gold would have shown the smears of red more clearly. At any respectable distance, the stains on the purple would be mistaken for clear female fluids, and the masses wouldn't have leave to gossip about watching Benjamin deflower his wife.

He took to his feet, wrapping an arm around Alana. The woman he'd dismissed twice dared to approach him again.

Benjamin motioned her to silence before she could speak, glaring her down. "One more time, and you will find yourself in a cell."

She dipped a quick curtsy and scurried away.

Chapter Two

Matthew looked around at the hoot of a voyeur coming from the direction opposite voyeurs' row. His jaw dropped at the sight of Benjamin and Alana.

He knew his brother had been at the edges of madness for the girl, and it seemed the game had ended with an explosion of repressed passion given wings. The two hadn't even made it as far as voyeurs' row.

That should calm the old man. At least, Matthew hoped it would.

It wasn't that Matthew was adverse to the idea of a wife or mistress. He simply hadn't found a woman he'd consider for more than a night or two with a male barrier.

He sank back into a sofa, closed his eyes, and sipped at the glass of punch, grinding his teeth at the sounds from voyeurs' row. *This was definitely not the place to find one*.

Benjamin had caught lucky with Alana. She wasn't the usual Bride Ball fare, and she doted on him. But how many like her could there be?

As if in answer, a feminine shape settled next to him on the sofa.

And it starts. Benjamin has chosen Alana. Most of the ladies willing to settle for a noble match paired off in the first four days of the event. As the second highest-ranking man in attendance, the focus of the remaining royalty-chasers has fallen to me.

He smiled. Then again, he wouldn't balk at a bed partner for the night. On that note, he opened his eyes to survey the first of his choices.

There were actually two of them, both dark-haired, both pretty enough to spark his interest.

"Care for some company, Hein Matthew?" one asked, running a finger down her cleavage.

"Company is all I'm seeking, I'm afraid." It was stated bluntly...a bed partner with no chance of a contract in the making. They'd either accept his terms or withdraw. He'd lay odds that one of each would occur.

The closer's hand settled on his thigh. "We'd be interested in no ties."

He flicked a glance at the other. "Which do you suggest?" His tastes were better known than this. Sex shows were amusing enough, but he preferred hands-on single action between the sheets.

"Hmm..." her cohort purred. "Perhaps a taste to allow an unbiased choice?"

"Now that is enticing," he admitted.

The first rose and circled his body. Matthew shifted to the center, allowing them to bracket him.

There was no fanfare. In a heartbeat, there was a warm woman pressed to his chest, their mouths meshing. Matthew wrapped his arms around her, testing the feel of them moving together.

He eased away. "Nice fit," he murmured.

She offered a vixen's smile and slid into her vacated seat.

Matthew raised his glass to cleanse the palate.

The second took it, laughing. She offered another glass that held a gorgeous burgundy. "Try this. James gave it to me himself. It's a *much* better vintage."

He took it and inhaled, chuckling. "Birchstand's best." It was just the thing to celebrate his brother's contract—fine wine and fine women. Half of the slim glass disappeared down his throat.

The next kiss was even more avid, as if they were trying to outdo each other. They probably were, since he'd made it clear he was only choosing one for the night.

He raised the glass, stopping to stare at the level. It was full. His lips quirked up in a smile. "Trying to take advantage of me?" he teased.

The first cupped her hand under the stem of the glass and guided it to his mouth. "Most definitely."

Matthew considered that and took a sip of the wine instead of a mouthful.

The next quarter hour passed in deep, carnal contemplation. With each trade, the play became more intense and involved.

Matthew threw himself into the game. He wanted this. He needed it. He didn't care which one he took to his rooms. He'd take them both, if they were willing...as long as he sated himself soon.

The one currently nestled to him stroked his cock, and he reasoned he wouldn't make it that far. "Voyeurs' row," he rasped out.

She laughed, walking her fingertips up his abdomen. "We prefer privacy in the sheets." She left his lap and shot him a look of invitation.

"My rooms, then."

The other hefted the wine bottle. "One for the trip?" she suggested.

Matthew pushed the bottle aside and dipped toward her lips. "Just what I was thinking." *I could finish here. Benjamin had it right.*

She placed a hand on his chest, signaling a stop. "I think we've had enough...here. The sooner we reach your rooms, the sooner the real fun begins."

He released her with a growl, taking to his feet...too quickly. His head spun. Matthew replayed his consumption in confusion; two glasses or so of good wine and one of spiked punch wasn't enough to do this.

They sandwiched him, hands roaming. The need slammed into him so hard it nearly floored him. Sweat beaded on his skin, and the air scorched in his lungs.

"Hein Matthew?" one asked.

"It's hot," he breathed. "So hot."

"Lodi?"

The other took his arm and guided him toward the corridors. "We'll open a window, Hein. In the meantime..." She passed him the wine bottle.

"Lodi!"

"Just something to wet the mouth," she explained.

Matthew nodded, raising the bottle and swallowing down two mouthfuls. He was thirsty. He was hot, and—by the Goddess Herself—he needed to get laid...hard, fast, and probably more than once.

The trip to his rooms was punctuated by touching and tasting...both of mouths and wine. The cool stone of the corridors soothed his bare feet.

At times, he swore there were more than two women with him...more than two pairs of hands touching him, but that didn't make sense.

The door closed behind them, and Matthew turned to the one at his right, seeking her mouth.

The other—Lodi—took the bottle from his hand and set it on the table near the door. Her hands worked at his suede trousers. "Time to get undressed, Hein. Time to cool the fire."

He was on fire. There was no denying it. The one in his arms led him toward the bed, and Matthew stumbled along with her. His balance deserted him, and they sprawled to the mattress together.

Hands worked at his trousers, yanking them down and off. Other hands stroked his bare cock, his buttocks, spread his thighs to play at his engorged sac...

Matthew pushed his partner beneath him, pulling at clothes, desperate to bury himself in her.

She ripped her mouth from his. "Lodi, hurry." She let out a sharp cry that overlapped with the sound of tearing fabric.

"Get him to his back," someone ordered.

Hands pushed and pulled, forcing him off his partner. Matthew reached for her, falling back at the mouth sucking him in. It wasn't perfect, but it took the edge off.

"Take off your shirt."

"What?" another woman gasped.

"Give Hein Matthew something to amuse himself with until his partner is ready for him."

"P-partner?" he managed. *Ready*? She likely had to insert her barrier.

The mouth was ruthless, and Matthew reached for the woman's hair. His hands were diverted by a grip at the wrists, guided forcibly to a full pair of breasts...augmented but acceptable.

He worked at his position numbly...one woman gripping his wrists, one suckling him, the soft globes of one kneeling beside

him...and still hands stroking at him? Climax loomed, and he closed his eyes to the patchwork reality of his rooms.

"You want a soft pussy, Hein?"

He nodded, moving his hips restlessly.

"Whose?" she pressed.

"Yours. Hers. Any. I don't care," he growled. "Just stop teasing me."

She chuckled. "He's ready."

The mouth retreated, and Matthew thrust up in response, needing to follow...needing to find a replacement.

One of them straddled him, and a hand positioned his cock at a ready body. Matthew didn't have time to buck into her; her downward thrust stole his breath. She rode him hard, venting screams and pleas for more. Matthew grasped at her hips, guiding her.

The end came quickly, making his head swim in the rush of orgasm. Every effort to open his eyes and look around resulted in a sickening swirl of half-formed images.

"Do you want more?" a voice teased.

I must be dreaming. This is paradise. "Yes."

Another voice overlapped his; he didn't try to identify it. Acknowledging that it was familiar was enough.

Someone brought a cup to his lips, offering a fortifying drink, and Matthew gulped it down.

"Would you take any cock offered, Mora?"

Mora? Matthew scowled and shook his head in disgust. What was Mora doing sullying this fine fantasy? *Maybe it's a nightmare*. He barked in laughter at the thought.

"Any," her voice rasped.

"Hein Matthew?" That taunt came from the one they called Lodi. "Any pussy?"

"I hate her," he grumbled, but the need clawed at him, and he started thrusting into the body gripping him, beyond questioning who it was, beyond caring. What did it matter? This was certainly a dream...a fevered phantom.

"I'd rather take a...a driver," Mora cursed.

Matthew had heard her say something similar before. It was a gardener last time...or a horse trainer. Mora loathed him nearly as much as he loathed her; it was impossible for her to surpass him in that regard.

A ruthless mouth played at his, and Matthew buried his hands in a wealth of hair. His cock demanded more of the heat surrounding it, and he pistoned harder.

A voice brushed at his ear, a voice he didn't recognize. "What delicious irony, Hein Matthew," she suggested. "What would you give to see that bitch Mora kneeling between your legs, sucking you, begging for your cock? Taking you in every orifice and moaning for you?"

It was a perverse sort of dark pleasure in the making. He pulled away from the foraging mouth and groaned. *That would be no nightmare*.

"She'll do it," the voice promised. "She'll love every second of it, and she won't be nearly as haughty, knowing you've mastered her."

He arched up with a roar, giving his fill.

A further voice teased at his raw senses. "Suck him, Mora. Suck him, while we prepare you for more."

Matthew opened his eyes, faces going in and out of focus. How many were there? Ten women? Fifteen? The one straddling him was the slowest coming. It looked like Mora, but it couldn't be; he'd never fuck her.

"What are you doing?" a shrill voice demanded.

A hand touched his throat, a cool hand on his heated flesh. A sickening trail of gold danced across his vision, and Matthew closed his eyes on a groan.

I must be ill...fevering. His stomach lurched. *I'm hallucinating, perhaps dehydrated.*

The body around him started shifting again.

"Stop," the shrill one ordered.

Matthew found himself halting mid-thrust, seeking out her eyes...blue eyes...big...luminous...wreathed in a mist of pink and gold.

Her hand cupped his cheek, soothing some of the inferno. "Goddess, no. You had no right to do this to him."

There was a hint of something sad in her voice. Matthew opened his mouth, intent on asking why she was sad. He'd even offer to fix whatever it was, just to see her smile for him.

Her voice came first...angry...furious. He furrowed his

brow, trying and failing to follow the chain of events that would cause such a change in her.

"You had no right to do this to him!"

A swing of gold sent his eyes sliding shut.

"Don't! Don't even attempt to justify this. Just get out."

"What should we do about—"

"I don't care. You created this situation; you correct it." There was a heartbeat of silence. "But you use that poison on no one else tonight. I don't care if you take turns fingering her, if you find no one willing to bed her. That's your problem and not mine."

"And if we refuse?" The hinted violence in Lodi's question had his muscles tensing to fight.

"I'll go to the guards myself." There was steel in that, a deadly calm that relaxed him.

"Very well. I believe Mora has been taught lesson enough."

"Or nearly so," another offered in a tone that promised unpleasant happenings to come.

The woman straddling him retreated in an awkward movement. Matthew gasped, groaning out a protest, reaching blindly for one of them...any of them he could reach, but there was no one close enough.

"Are you certain?" someone taunted. "If we leave, he's your problem, you know."

"Just go. I'll seek a doctor for him if I cannot handle this alone."

There was confusion of movement and sound. The door clicked shut, and silence stole into the room. Matthew was sure he was alone, until the hand touched his face again. He knew before he opened his eyes that it would be the golden-haired goddess.

She whispered to him, a balm on his ragged senses. "I'll care for you. You have my vow." A beat of silence fell. "By the Goddess, it was wrong."

Sailors told stories of sea angels with blue eyes you could drown in. Matthew was certain that was the turn this strange delusion had taken. She was his sea angel. The stories said they cared for half-dead sailors...and loved them well.

"I'll return in a moment," she promised, gliding from his

side.

The ache in his gut nearly doubled him, and Matthew panted it back. *Goddess, I hope she comes back nude and ready*.

* * * *

Sira returned with a bowl of hot water and a cloth, intent on cleaning Hein Matthew and caring for him, fuming at what Lodi and the others had done to him.

She went still at the sight of him, laid out on his bed, shifting uncomfortably. His cock was stiff, twitching in need still, though he'd given Mora his fill at least once.

Someone must care for him, she reminded herself. That's all this was, a moment of solace...with a nearly-perfect male specimen.

Pushing that thought away, Sira sat beside him and placed the bowl on the stool. She wrung out the cloth and, taking a deep breath, stroked it along one strong thigh, watching the muscles tense. Hein Matthew moaned, rising to her touch.

Sira blushed, well aware that she was teasing him. She would have to make the job quick and efficient. She wet the cloth again and went to work, trying to be detached, while he writhed beneath her, moved to her, seeking her touch...and finally climaxed to her hand as she cleaned his sac and length.

"Goddess," she breathed. Her hands shaking, she wet the cloth again, stroking it along his chest and stomach, cleaning the evidence of his latest climax, thankfully not much. It was probably a sign that he'd already poured out quite a bit.

His dark blue eyes opened, and he stared at her, his cock bucking against her hand. His expression was intense, verging on violence.

Sira eased her hand away, self-conscious at touching him. "I only mean to help," she assured him. "Do you wish your doctor?" Not that she had any clue how one found a doctor in a royal or noble household. The idea of explaining all of this to a guard was enough to send ice to her stomach.

The Hein stared at her, his muscles bunching and releasing, his eyes boring into her, challenging Sira to explain herself.

"Do you understand me?" she asked him. How far had the

drug clouded his mind? If he couldn't give her a coherent answer, she would have to fetch the guards for him.

A slight nod was his only reply.

"Do you need something? Do you want your—"

He moved fast, faster than she would have thought possible in his state. His hands locked around her upper arms, and the cloth slipped from her fingers.

Everything seemed to happen at once. The Hein dragged her across his body and onto the bed. Her foot struck the stool and sent it tumbling, water splashing the floor and the entire mess of bowl and stool landing with a crash.

In the next instant, she was beneath him, his weight pinning her to the bed, his face a whisper from hers. Sira pushed at his chest, hoping he understood enough to recognize her plea for freedom. His head lowered toward hers, and she moved, trying to work from under his bulk.

His hands tightened, sending shards of pain down her arms. She stopped on a gasp, meeting his gaze, manic eyes that showed he had no idea what he was doing. He was in the throes of the drug, needing, and she'd been stupid enough to try to care for him herself.

Why didn't I go for his doctor immediately? Because I didn't want to leave him alone that long? It had seemed like a good idea at the time, but now...

His hands loosened slightly, and he lowered his head again, tipping it to one side so that his lips touched the soft skin under her jawline. It was so tender, so unexpected, Sira let him.

The first nip brought her back to her senses, and she tried to lever him off with her fisted hand. The growl that escaped him sent her heart pounding. He nipped again and again, alternating between that and a series of little kisses and licks at the spot.

Sira bit back a groan, her body coming to life for him. This was a guilty little pleasure of sorts, and it was one she'd gladly give him.

Hein Matthew released one of her arms, cupping her knee with the now-free hand...forcing upward, dragging her skirt along with him. "My sea angel," he breathed. "My angel."

She gasped in realization. He was too far gone. He thought she was offering...for some reason. Was it because she hadn't fought his kiss at her jawline?

"Hein, please," she whispered, pushing at his chest again, not that she could budge him. Sira just wanted to get his attention.

His head came up, and he stared at her. Words stuck in her throat. He was beautiful and frightening, an exotic mix that made her head spin.

His hand moved higher, and she stiffened, well aware that Hein Matthew was far too close to his goal, and with him naked and her naked beneath the knee-length skirt, this could escalate quickly.

"Hein, please. This isn't-"

The kiss was hot and hard, announcing his intentions...and his needs. Sira had never been kissed this way before. It was consuming. Her body burned, and she understood what he felt...or at least a little of what he felt. If his drive was stronger than hers, he was truly afflicted.

As if in answer, he shifted his weight to one side, using the break between their bodies to push her skirt to her waist and bare her to him. Her legs clamped together in mute protest, and his hand tightened against her thigh, pushing outward, twisting brutally. Sira fought the move, squealing into his mouth at the spike of pain.

She calmed herself. He didn't know what he was doing. His senses were in a riot and his thinking mind an uncertain quantity. For that matter, her thinking mind wasn't faring well.

I have to talk him down.

With that in mind, Sira tried to extricate her mouth from his. That proved harder to accomplish than she would have thought possible. Her head was already pressed hard to the mattress, and when she tried to turn her face away, his hand left her thigh and cupped her cheek to keep her from turning away, his mouth tilting to take her deeper.

The urge to bite him was strong, but she resisted following through. He wasn't thinking. He could hurt her for it. Beside that, she didn't want to hurt him, unless it became necessary.

At a loss for something that would cut through his madness, she scratched hard at his chest. His mouth left hers, and he arched his back, moaning. His eyes opened, and Sira held her breath. He seemed to be lucid. Perhaps it had worked. She took a deep breath, preparing to reason with him.

"Hein Matthew—"

"Matthew," he invited. His eyes softened, pleading with her. "I need you."

Sira bit her lip, her heart aching. Did he need to sate the drives the drug had instilled in him with any female body, as he had with Mora? Did he need her...or someone like her, personally? Was the "sea angel" meant as a pet name, or was he lost in a fantasy where she was one of the mythical creatures? There was no answer to any of those questions, but whatever the case, he needed comfort she could offer.

Goddess, I want to offer it. I want him to need me, at least for the night.

When he knew his mind, it was unlikely he'd look twice at her again. Sira was the daughter of a minor noble, lowborn but for a small parcel of land they owned and the king's favor on them.

She unbuttoned two buttons on her shirt, offering herself silently. Hein Matthew swept it to one side, dipping his head down to latch onto a nipple, suckling hard at her body.

Sira worked at the buttons, shifting against him as she dragged the shirt off. He moved to the other breast, stroking insistently at the first. It was a brutal pleasure, twinges of sweet pain mixing with bolts of ecstasy.

The Hein pulled at the tie on her skirt, indicating that he wanted it off, as well. He released her breast, helping her out of it. Then his mouth closed on hers, his tongue sweeping inside her. Sira held to him, dizzy in arousal, meeting his kiss in a daze.

His hand eased beneath her leg, and he guided her thighs apart. Sira didn't fight him. She didn't want to fight him. He needed her—not a mindless, violent need but rather a soul-deep longing that was infectious.

His fingers circled at her clit, bringing her hips off the bed with a mew of delight. Sira stroked her hands down his chest and arms, learning his body by touch. Just when she would have explored his cock, he moved.

Sira clawed at his chest and back, a sob escaping her at the

slice of pain cutting her in two. The Hein hesitated only a moment, a moan escaping his clenched teeth. Then he was moving, his entire body contracting with each ramming motion.

A scream built in her throat and burst free, an exquisite pleasure-agony making her lightheaded. Hein Matthew growled, his hands closing on her hips, forcing himself further into her in a move that stole her breath.

"I need you," he whispered. "I need..."

His roar sent shivers of sensation down her limbs. His heat erupting into her wrung little cries from her. A sharp spike of some emotion she couldn't name assaulted her, and tears escaped her eyes.

In the aftermath, Sira lay trembling in his arms, gasping at the bucking of his cock in her full and aching sheath. His lips parted hers, and he came at her, ravenous. She wound her arms around him, encouraging him.

His renewed thrusts left her panting, fighting to form words. "H-Hein—"

"Matthew," he growled. His hips sped, his cock sliding in and out of her battered core, staking a claim she couldn't begin to understand.

She nodded, closing her eyes, exhausted, riding the waves of sensation with him, wondering how many times he'd need to escape the drug's hold.

Chapter Three

Matthew swallowed a metallic slick, wincing at the aches in his joints. Was he ill? He rotated his shoulder, and individual wounds seared him, prompting a hiss of discomfort.

Wounds? What happened last night?

He replayed what he could remember.

There had been a Bride Ball. He'd been drinking, but not heavily...not as heavily as Benjamin had been, at any rate. His mind protested that with a memory of him drinking directly from a wine bottle, but it was fuzzy and indistinct.

He moved on, disconcerted at the gaps and lack of clarity.

Most of the women had been either draped on Benjamin or running interference for the two top contenders to the place as the next queen of Lenvia, Mora and Alana. There had been a few who'd showed interest in Matthew, late in the evening. They'd brought him a drink and made promises.

Fractured memories of walking between them, trading kisses with both... Matthew shook his head, trying to dislodge it. He'd been unsteady...and horny...exceedingly so.

More memories followed. There were more than two, many more. Hands and mouths had played at him, an indecent foreplay orgy. Matthew wished he could forget that he'd taken part as much as he wished his memories of how he'd found himself in the situation were clearer.

Faces bobbed in and out of his visual record, one prevalent...Mora. Goddess, but he loathed that woman. Still, in the faint recollections of her, Mora was over him, meeting his mad thrusting, laughing, moaning, cooing...

Matthew opened his eyes, needing some reality but the one his mind had concocted for him. The room went in and out of focus for a few gut-clenching moments. When it cleared, little details supported the vision. There was a bottle of wine on the table by the door, a single glass settled next to it.

I wonder what the royal doctors would find if they analyzed it? A sick twisting in his gut accompanied the certainty that he'd been drugged.

His stomach vowed to empty at the first provocation, and he postulated it wasn't his disgust that accomplished it. Most aphrodisiacs were mild poisons. His stomach lurched again. *Or powerful ones*.

A soft sigh brought his head around, and his heart pounded in anticipation of Mora feigning his agreement to bed her.

It wasn't Mora. The lady in question was one he'd spied across the room several times the night before, but he didn't know her name. She wasn't one fawning over Benjamin, though she'd milled in and out of that crowd several times.

He took a moment to consider her. Her skin was a fresh pink and her lips a few shades darker. Her hair glowed like the gold silk of his father's cape in the morning sunlight.

His jaw clenched at her lack of clothing. Wisps of memory taunted him, less than those of Mora but enough to confirm for him that he'd tumbled her as well.

"How many?" he whispered. How many had he bedded in his drugged state? How many had laughed and taken a ride, at his expense?

Matthew turned over her, fighting the urge to throttle her. She gasped, her eyes flying open. At the sight of him, a lazy smile graced her lips.

Then her gaze locked with his, and the smile disappeared. She shrank from him in fear, pressing deep into the mattress.

She'd better fear me. She had also better tell me what I need to know.

* * * *

It took a moment for Sira to decipher the expression on Matthew's face. Her heart started to pound, and she recoiled from his anger.

He planted his hands on the mattress on either side of her, caging her in, looming over her.

"Matthew?" she managed, her voice squeaking a bit.

"That would be *Hein* Matthew," he informed her, one eyebrow rising in challenge.

"H-Hein," she repeated, nodding her understanding.

"How many of you?" he demanded.

"Wh-what?" What was he asking?

"How many of you was I tricked into bedding, after you drugged me?" His voice rose at that, and his expression promised pain to anyone that stood in his way.

Sira shook her head. There was no answer she could give him.

"Tell me," he ordered, his muscles tensing to do harm.

"I don't know. I wasn't a part of it," she pleaded.

"Then you admit you drugged me?"

"I admit they drugged you. I was only trying to help you."

Matthew snorted in disbelief. "I see how you decided to help."

"You—"

He tensed, and she pushed herself as far into the mattress as she could reach.

"I what?" he growled at her.

"You won't remember," she decided miserably. That alone could spell her doom, if he decided to press charges.

He wasn't mollified. "I remember much more than you might hope I would." That sounded of a warning.

"If you remembered, I wouldn't be worried. Your reaction proves you don't remember...at least not me."

Matthew visibly calmed himself. "And what are you claiming I should remember?"

"You grabbed me. You pulled me into the bed with you."

"I had no choice."

A sob welled in her throat, and Sira swallowed it down. "Perhaps not," she conceded. "The drug was apparently very powerful."

Her agreement seemed to mollify him...for a moment. "How many?" he repeated.

"I don't know. I know only...only the one I interrupted." Her face burned at the memory of Mora riding him.

"Mora," he spat. "Did you think it funny?"

She shook her head, misery eating at her. "It was wrong. I

told them. I told—"

"You had no right," he whispered. His expression eased into confusion. "You had no right to do this to him."

Sira didn't reply to him. Either he remembered it, or he didn't.

Matthew pushed away from her, settling with his back against the wall, scrubbing his hands down his face. "You said that. Didn't you? It was your voice...your...face. I know it was."

She nodded. "Yes. I did."

His eyes closed, and he laid his head back against the wall. For a long moment, he said nothing more. "Go. Leave me." It was weary, the voice of a man exhausted in body and spirit.

Sira knew that feeling, since she suffered it herself. She didn't question him further. She pushed from the bed, pleasant and not so pleasant aches slowing her progress.

Her shirt was hung over the foot of the bed. She pulled it on and went searching for the rest. She had her shoes in hand when she found the skirt shoved under the bureau. She retrieved it and started to pull it up her legs, stilling at Matthew's voice.

"Come here."

She finished pulling it up and half-turned, trying to gauge his expression. It was one she couldn't fathom and didn't want to delve too deeply into...something between shock and suspicion, perhaps. She didn't go to him, tying up her skirt instead and blousing the shirt over it.

"I said to come here," he repeated, none too gently.

"I don't think that's a good idea," she replied calmly, heading for the door. She could put her shoes on elsewhere.

At the sound of him moving, she ran, bolting into the corridor and down the wing toward the doors and freedom...or at least the illusion of it. A glance back told her that he'd stopped to dress and hadn't followed her in the nude.

She'd almost reached the central staircase when someone grasped her arm and dragged her into one of the dormitory-style rooms set up for the young women in attendance. Sira stumbled in with a squawk of surprise, coming face to face with Lodi. She pushed the older woman away with a grumbled curse on her entire family.

Lodi released her, shooting a sheepish look at Sira, then at

the crowd of "ladies" behind her. "I take it he's angry," she guessed.

"Don't you think he has the right to be?" Sira snapped back, raising one shoe and slipping her foot in with unsteady hands.

"Perhaps."

"Per... Perhaps?" Sira fairly screamed that at her, lowering her foot.

Lodi motioned for silence, and several of her cohorts winced, shifting nervously.

"Are you mad?" Sira asked in a calmer voice. "How could you do this?"

"Mora had to face censure, so she wouldn't try something so underhanded again," Lodi reasoned, seemingly unperturbed by the outburst.

Nuay nodded her agreement. "She had to be taught a lesson."

Sira felt her temper coming uncorked. "With a *willing* man, perhaps. But this was hurtful, criminal. It was—"

Lodi interrupted her. "Have you told him who we are?"

"Hein Matthew hasn't asked...yet." She worked on the other shoe, finally sliding it on, and lowering her leg.

"And when he does?" she challenged, straightening, as if Sira would back down from such a threat in her mood.

"I will turn you over in an instant. You had no right to do this. Neither will I go to prison as conspirator to something I had no part—"

The door behind her opened, and Sira stiffened. She didn't turn to look. She was afraid to. Whether it was Hein Matthew or his guards, the next few minutes were going to be ugly.

"And...here you are," he drawled. There was a moment of silence. "How convenient that I recognize several faces...and all in one place."

Lodi's look of confidence faded, and she paled alarmingly, backing off several steps.

Sira didn't question why. The heat at her back was answer enough. She swallowed hard, all too aware of Hein Matthew close enough to... She didn't want to contemplate what he would do when he laid hands on her again.

His whisper teased at her ear. "I gave you an order," he

reminded her.

Tears pricked at her eyes. Sira nodded, envisioning a prison cell. Here she was, with the conspirators. The Hein had no reason to trust her. The cell was probably her fate.

His heat receded somewhat. "Let me get this in perspective. You ladies were angry with Mora, because...?"

No one answered. Hein Matthew ambled around Sira, turning halfway toward her and catching her eye. His expression demanded an answer.

"She was trying to use the drug to seduce Prince Benjamin," she reported.

Nuay had told her as much when she'd dragged Sira off to "witness Mora's comeuppance." If everyone would see prison time, Mora wasn't going to be left behind. The drug wouldn't have fallen into Lodi's hands, if not for Mora's plans to use it.

Hein Matthew's eyes widened, and he motioned to someone at the door. "Check Benjamin," he ordered. "Check him now."

Footsteps pounding away were all the clue she needed that guards were in the corridor. She wondered how many, then decided she didn't want to know.

The Hein recovered quickly, his eyes narrowing. He crossed his arms over his bare chest, and Sira looked away, the memory of tasting that chest too raw and close for comfort.

"You wanted Benjamin for yourself?" he asked.

The silence was nerve-wracking. Why didn't someone answer him?

A throat clearing brought her attention back to the Hein. No one was answering, because he was staring her down, addressing her personally, as far as anyone with manners would assume, given his stance.

Sira shook her head. "It was obvious that His Highness was taken only with Mora and Alana," she offered. "I was hoping for Alana, personally."

"So was I," he admitted. Hein Matthew motioned around the room, without taking his eyes off of Sira. "These are the ones who drugged me? These are the ones you were arguing with last night?"

She hesitated, realizing that no woman would trust her, if she did this. The Hein waited for her answer, his arms tensing. "Yes." Sira's stomach twisted in the combination of hunger and apprehension. "I don't know which... I didn't see which one or ones actually did it; I wasn't there when they...drugged you. But yes. They were the ones I was arguing—"

"Honestly-given and well-stated, I believe. Gentlemen, I have heard enough."

A hand closed around her arm but loosely, and Sira closed her eyes, torn between looking at the guard and simply following him to her fate.

"If you would," he began.

"That one comes with me, Johnus."

Sira started shaking, wondering if this boded well or poorly for her. Considering his anger that she'd disobeyed him, it probably boded ill.

The hand retreated, and another circled her opposite arm. She didn't question that it was Hein Matthew's.

"Come with me," he ordered gruffly, drawing her along.

Sira stumbled. He paused for a moment, and she opened her eyes, realizing the futility of trying to follow along without watching where she was going. She reconsidered that when she caught sight of the Hein's expression of exasperation. She looked away at the guards, and he started leading her again.

He offered no conversation, and neither did she. What was there to say?

At his room, he ushered her inside and closed the door. He led her to the stool, now at the center of the room, then seemed to reconsider and turned her toward the bed.

Panic bloomed in her, and Sira planted her feet, shaking her head. Whatever he was doing, she wanted no part of it.

Hein Matthew pulled her to face him, locking his hands on her arms, just tight enough to restrain her but also tight enough to press at the existing bruises he'd left, reminding her that he was strong and angry...and powerful enough to explain away taking retribution on her. His jaw tightened in fury.

Sira expected him to point out that she hadn't minded the night before. He didn't.

"Are you sore?" he challenged.

She considered that. She was sore, but why would that matter?

"Are you?" That time, it was stated in a calmer voice, and his grip eased.

"Yes."

"Then you'll want the bed. I will take the stool." He released her, settling on it, as promised.

Sira stared at him, confused by his sudden show of concern. She backed toward the bed, sinking to the edge, her eyes locked on him.

Why? What do I think he's going to do? Vault across the room and attack me?

Hein Matthew shifted, finding a more comfortable position, and she backed away along the mattress, admitting to herself that she really did fear it. And why wouldn't she? He'd been physically attacked and made a fool of, and he thought her part of it.

A pained expression settled on his face. "You were virginal."

He didn't question it. Sira wasn't certain if he intended her to answer, so she took the safer route and nodded.

A series of curses streamed from between his clenched teeth. Hein Matthew panned his gaze up her body. "Did I hurt you?"

Sira stared at him, her brow knitted so hard the muscles complained.

"You were virginal, and I had no self-control. You say I grabbed you, that I pulled you into the bed. Did I harm you?"

* * * *

Matthew's heart pounded, and his palms went slick with sweat. The scratches on his chest burned a reminder that he'd almost certainly done something she didn't sanction.

If I've hurt her, I will push for the most severe punishments my father and the Counselors will allow.

She shook her head slowly. "No. I'm not hurt. Just the normal aches of a…" Her cheeks went crimson, and she averted her eyes again.

"Are you sure? I can call a doctor, if you—"

"No. Please. I'm certain I'm fine." Her half-choking voice

called her a liar.

"Did I force you? Did I force you to a single thing? Please, do not lie to me about this." *Goddess, this could drive a person mad.* His memories were fractured; he could be certain of so little.

What would he do, if he had? How could he make amends for it?

She didn't raise her head. "No. You...you seduced me, to be sure, but I was willing."

"That isn't what I asked," he grumbled. "I asked if I forced you. Did I..." He wasn't certain how to phrase it delicately. Perhaps the doctor would be best.

"You did ask—"

Matthew snapped. "Did I hold you down? Did I—" "Yes."

His heart stuttered. "I...what did I..." Her expression was so heartbreakingly innocent and lost, it tore at him. *Goddess, what have I done?*

"When you pulled me into the bed, you held me down. Hein Matthew, I don't understand—"

"They will pay for this," he vowed. "They will spend the rest of their days in cells...no matter how short a time that may be."

She paled, and her shaking intensified. "I don't under—"

He stood, intent on holding her and calming her. She scrambled to the far side of the bed, her breathing harsh and uneven, her eyes wide. Matthew put up his hands in a calming gesture, and she relaxed, her small hand unfisting against the quilt, her delicate fingers splaying out on the dark fabric.

A memory of that fist pressed to his chest ripped through his mind. *Hein, please. This isn't*— He'd silenced her with a kiss, a brutal one.

Goddess, please let that be a phantom, a nightmare and not fact.

"I don't understand," she repeated, seemingly pleading with him.

"I think you do," he replied calmly. At every move toward her, she runs from me. I must have frightened her to death, scarred her for the act, perhaps scarred her to men, in general. She shook her head, tears pooling in her eyes.

"How far did I force you?" he asked, easing toward her.

She didn't retreat from him, not that she had anywhere else to go but over the footboard and out the door again. "I don't understand." Her eyes widened. "You think... No, it wasn't like that. You didn't..." She paled a shade.

"I didn't?" Matthew prompted her, taking another step toward her.

"You didn't...rape me. You kissed, yes, but... You must know that I was convinced and not unwilling."

He nodded, settling to the edge of the bed. She gasped but didn't move away from him.

"I will not harm you," he promised. "You have my vow on that."

She nodded, taking a deep breath.

Matthew eased his hand over hers, squeezing lightly. "You don't know what to expect from me."

"No," she replied weakly. "I don't. Are you still..."

"Still?" he prompted her.

"Angry with me? I didn't... I swear to you that I had no part of it," she added miserably. "I only wanted to help."

A spike of guilt pierced deep at that. After what he did to her...however she wanted to minimize it, his treatment upon waking had been deplorable. "I know you did," he offered.

Her eyes closed, and her body relaxed. He noted the dark circles under her eyes, her pallor, her shaking. This was his fault.

No. It is their fault, and they will pay for it.

Matthew raised her hand to his mouth, pressing his lips to it, a silent promise that he would make this as right as he could.

Her eyes opened, and a tear spilled down one cheek. With that one drop, he knew he could never take away what she'd suffered.

And what she still might. Goddess, what a mess this was. "If you carry..." he began.

A second tear spilled. "I will ask nothing," she promised. "Your actions were not your own. I know that."

You will have everything I have to give.

But now was not the time to argue with her. Considering the circumstances, she might choose not to carry the babe at all, and

the law would allow her termination...now or in the future. "You will contact me when you know for certain," he replied.

She nodded, seemingly miserable at the asking.

I have a right to know.

But had he forfeited that right? Only she could say, and this was the wrong time to ask it. He wanted to growl at the way his hands had been tied and his choices taken from him.

"I will have my guards see you home. I have to attend to...to the rest."

"I understand."

There was one more thing he had to know. "What is your name?"

She stared at him, a fresh tear dropping from her golden lashes to cheeks that were starting to redden in response to the salt tears. Matthew resigned himself to the fact that she might not want to answer him, that he might have to learn her name from someone else.

"Sira," she whispered. "Sirana Firloch."

Chapter Four

Alana woke to wisps of sensation she didn't recognize. Something soft was trailing over the tip of one nipple.

"Benjamin," she whispered, holding to the sweet dreams of moments before.

"Open your eyes," he requested. "I want to see them as I love you."

It wasn't a dream.

Alana opened her eyes to the sight of Benjamin leaning over her, stroking the petals of a red rose over her breasts. Startling memories of him teaching her all manner of sexual positions and practices made her head spin.

"How many times did we?" she managed. And what *was* the strange taste in her mouth?

Benjamin chuckled darkly, moving the rose to the sensitive bud between her legs. "Not enough."

She moaned, rising against the flower.

"Do you like it?" he teased.

"I prefer yellow roses, but..." She gasped at the stroke against her nether lips.

Benjamin tossed the rose away and turned her beneath him. "But?"

"Any touch you grant me is paradise."

"Slowly," he breathed. His lips parted hers, and his tongue offered lazy promises that made her spinning head more acute.

Alana explored his body, committing him to memory, reveling in his attention to pleasing her. When his cock eased in, she whimpered, sore and sensitized to intimate pleasures.

"Slowly," he promised.

She nodded, holding to him while he produced sparks of bodily paradise within her.

The corridor door burst in, and Alana startled. Before the

first soldier cleared the sitting room and made it to the bedroom, Benjamin had a sheet pulled to their hips.

"How dare you—" he started to rant.

"Are you well, Highness?" a captain asked.

"What? Of course, I am. Now, if you don't mind-"

"I'm afraid we can't, Highness," a major intervened. "If your...companion would be so obliging as to dress and accompany us, we will—"

"Are you mad?" Benjamin thundered.

Alana sank closer to him, wondering the same thing.

"Your brother was drugged, Highness. Illegal use of a powerful aphrodisiac. The conspirators claim the attempt was made on you, as well. That being the case—"

"No," Alana breathed. "Oh no." Goddess Mother, please tell me he wasn't drugged.

* * * *

The horror in Alana's expression told Benjamin all he needed to know. She knew nothing about the plot. She'd had no part in it. Not that he had reason to doubt it, of course. Alana was the last person he'd suspect of such machinations.

"We'll have to question the lady," the major stated.

Her eyes went wide and wild. "I didn't," she attested. "By the Goddess, I swear I—"

"I don't believe the accusations," Benjamin assured her.

She took a calming breath and buried her face in his shoulder, trembling hard. The reaction made him want to tear the major limb from limb.

As if speeding toward his own demise, the man spoke again. "Believe it or not, I must insist on a doctor for you, Highness. If there is no sign of the drug, I can forgo on questioning the lady."

"I tell you, I haven't been drugged," he roared. Were they deaf?

"The sex show last evening was quite out of the ordinary for you," the major offered delicately.

A retort died in his chest. *It was completely out of character for Alana...completely unexpected for any virgin.*

Benjamin shifted his weight and guided her head back to

meet her frightened eyes. "I believe you," he whispered.

Alana shook her head. "I didn't, Benjamin. I would never-

"I believe you."

,,

Tears dotted her lashes. She nodded.

"What are the symptoms Matthew reported?" he asked calmly. Benjamin held her gaze, watching her expressive eyes for a sign he hoped he wouldn't see.

The major started listing them. "Urgency for the act, confusion, a feeling of being overheated in a comfortable room—"

Alana's mouth opened, then shut, and she swallowed hard, her breathing going ragged.

"—a metallic taste in the mouth, indicating Gorus or Rallex—"

She went a sickly shade of pale, and she swallowed again, looking as if she had to faint or vomit.

"—nausea—"

"Enough," Benjamin commanded. He smoothed Alana's hair, smiling weakly.

It was Mora. He didn't question it. Visions of Alana downing the wine meant for him taunted him. He'd sensed danger then. He'd known something was wrong, but he hadn't seen the signs of it.

My poor Alana...poisoned in my place.

Memories of the insistent woman who'd tried to speak to him followed. *She meant to tell me, and I didn't let her. What did the delay do? Did it harm Alana?*

"Highness?" the major asked. "Prince Benjamin?"

"Send a doctor for Lady Alana. Send *my* doctor, my father's personal physician." She would have the best.

They didn't move.

"Now! And leave us to dress."

They retreated, closing the door between the two rooms.

Alana blinked, and a dislodged tear dotted her cheek. "It was real," she pleaded. "It was real."

Benjamin nodded, wiping away the tear. "The drug may have loosened your sensibilities, but I have no doubt it was real, Alana. You are still my wife, if you wish to be." "I do."

He laid a kiss on her lips. "We need to dress. Once we know you're well..."

"Yes?"

"I intend to continue where we were interrupted...if you feel up to it."

* * * *

Benjamin tried to focus on Doctor Ivyvine's words, but Alana kept drawing his attention away.

She was dressed in her skirt and one of his shirts, the sleeves rolled to her elbows. He'd insisted that she meet the inquiry in his bed, a stack of pillows behind her and a light quilt drawn to her waist. The one time she'd tried to rise, she'd been struck by nausea. It was an aftereffect of the poison, he'd been told.

"Highness," the doctor demanded his attention.

He abandoned the sight of a young journeyman healer hovering over Alana, asking her questions to better gauge her condition, and forced his focus back to his father's personal physician. "There's no question that Mora drugged her, then?"

"I can't say who, but your testimony is consistent to it. It wasn't a full dose, but enough to cloud her mind and bury inhibitions," he confirmed. "Had you taken the cup instead...perhaps half a dose for your weight, I'd estimate. It would have been enough to make you more open to the suggestion...more than open to it, if you'd imbibed enough alcohol in addition to it."

"I had," he added, to be certain it made its way into the doctor's report. "Is she still...clouded now?" At what point had it been Alana coming to him so avidly and not the drug pushing her to him?

"I can't imagine she would be. Gorus berry processes out of the system in a matter of hours, unless one is overdosed on it, and Lady Alana was not, thank the Goddess."

Benjamin's heart eased in relief. She was naturally so responsive then; that was good to know.

He motioned to Alana. "But the nausea persists? Was there

some damage done?" And how will I forgive myself, if there was? If my inattention and the delay caused it?

"It's still a mild poison. Not enough to cause permanent damage," he hastened to add at the first sign of Benjamin tensing. "It will persist for a day...two at the outside." Ivyvine sighed. "Your brother will be feeling its effects for a week, I'm sure. The younger Wheatstand says he's drowning in the poison, even now, weakened as it is by time."

And drowning in guilt, misplaced as it is.

The guards had brought word of the latest fiasco to Benjamin, since he'd been unwilling to leave Alana's side to seek information on his own. *Goddess, how much of the poison did they give Matthew to cause him to attack a woman*?

He promised himself to speak to Matthew when Alana was settled. His brother likely needed someone to verbally beat sense into him again.

Alana's protest drew his head out of contemplation of his brother's soft heart and back to the bed. He strode for her, noting crimson patches in her pale cheeks.

"How dare you," she choked out. "How dare you insinuate—"

Ivyvine's journeyman made placating motions. "I must ask in such cases, Lady Alana. Nothing more, I assure you."

Benjamin stopped over them. "Ask what?"

Alana's voice wavered in anger. "He insinuated I'd taken others. He—"

"No such thing," the young man offered patiently. "I—"

"Phrased it badly," Ivyvine cut him off. "Apologize for your tactless handling, please, Roger."

The journeyman tipped his head to her. "My apologies, Lady Alana. I only meant to ensure no one had...taken advantage."

Benjamin ground his teeth at the thought of it. "She was virginal our first time and hasn't left my sight since. There is no possibility."

Ivyvine smiled, no doubt postulating the king's pleasure at having such news delivered to him. "Well, then. We needn't trouble Lady Alana with tests to confirm it." He motioned to the sitting room. "If you would, Highness?" Benjamin drew her hand up and kissed the palm. "I will be close. Call if you need me."

* * * *

Alana's heart leapt at the assurance. She watched him stride into the sitting room: confident, proud, beautiful...

"Lady Alana?" the damned journeyman called to her.

She turned her gaze on him with a sigh. "Yes?"

Roger studied a pen and notebook and not her. Though his attention unnerved her, his avoidance was worse.

"When is your fertile window, mi'lady?"

"What?" Why would he ask such a thing?

He met her gaze, seemingly pained. "Do you know your cycle?" he rephrased the question.

"My courses, but... I'm no lady of means, Journeyman Roger."

She didn't know his family name to address him correctly; he might be an Ivyvine and might not.

For that matter, he was addressing her incorrectly. Benjamin had called her "Lady Alana," but she was lowborn and not a lady, by birth. *I suppose the future wife of a prince has to have a title of some sort.*

Alana forced her mind back to the subject at hand. "I've had no testing to determine the rest. Nor am I taking drugs that would enhance or time it to...needs."

"When did your last courses begin?"

"Mun the ninth...or perhaps the eleventh."

"You're certain?"

"If I was certain, I would produce an exact date. I know it was before mid-month. Is that precise enough?"

His expression said it wasn't. Roger motioned to one of the techs, and a syringe settled in his hand. Alana looked at it in apprehension.

"What are you doing?" He'd already tested the level of Gorus in her system. Why would he need more blood?

"Just a bit of blood, mi'lady," he offered in a soothing voice.

"I can see that. I am asking why you need it."

"It is procedure. I must confirm your cycle. In cases of illegal use of an aphrodisiac, it is considered primary evidence."

"To prove motive, but I didn't drug Benjamin to win a child."

His jaw tightened in some strong emotion, but he kept it reined otherwise. "Or to prove hardship inflicted. Please, allow me to draw the blood." The fact that he was asking proved he couldn't do so without her permission.

Carrying Benjamin's babe would be no hardship. As his wife, it would be expected that she do so, and she wanted to.

Still, it was procedure, and Benjamin was intent on seeing those responsible punished...all of the guilty, including Mora. She offered her arm. "You may."

The draw was quick, and he left her side, whispering instructions to the techs that would analyze the sample. Alana had never realized such tests could be processed out of the office or lab, but royals seemed to have whatever they wished or needed.

She let her eyes drift shut, riding the edges of sleep, whispers and the whirring of machinery lulling her away.

"Lady Alana?"

She forced her eyes open, biting back her frustration. It had been a long night of revelry and exploration, followed by a morning of medical tests and endless questions. Could no one allow her a moment of rest? "Yes?"

He didn't approach the edge of the mattress this time. In fact, Roger fidgeted, looking as if he'd rather face a firing squad than her.

"Yes?" she repeated, her voice more subdued.

"The tests show... You are at the close of your fertile window, mi'lady."

Her heart stuttered at the news. Then there was a chance she'd carry from it. Would Benjamin be happy at the news? It was so soon. He probably wasn't ready for this. Alana wasn't certain *she* was ready for it.

A horrifying thought followed. She'd been poisoned. Would the poison harm a child just forming? She stuttered out that question, barely breathing.

"No. No, the babe would be fine, if one..."

She collapsed against the pillows, sending thanks to the Goddess for it.

"I have to offer, Lady Alana. Please, understand that this is the law."

"What is?" she squeaked out, her calm ripped away that quickly. *Oh, this is sure to be unpalatable*.

"Carrying a child produced under influence of an illegal aphrodisiac is classified as an undue hardship." He hesitated, letting that much sink in.

It's not. Not if it's Benjamin's child. And it would be. There was no question of it.

He cleared his throat. "The law demands, upon proof that you may carry from this...crime—which the cycle indicates, of course—that I offer you early terminating measures."

"No," she gasped. Her hands went to her womb, covering it, protecting the child that might be.

Roger nodded. "If you carry and find it a hardship, you may choose termination at any point up to—"

"No!" How could he even suggest it, when she'd made it clear she wanted no part of it? "Get out."

"Alana?" Benjamin's voice crossed the distance between them.

"Lady Al—"

"Get out. Now." Her heart pounded, and bile rose in her throat. At the sight of his hand approaching, she batted it away. "Don't touch me." This butcher was endorsing the unthinkable to her, offering to kill what she'd always wanted, a family...with Benjamin. She didn't want him in the same room with her, let alone touching her.

Benjamin appeared between them, pushing the journeyman away from her bedside. "What did you do?" he shouted.

"It's the law, Highness," Roger protested.

"The law needs changed," she breathed. It didn't. It was good that women were offered such choices, but women who'd refused them shouldn't be subjected to further pressure and reminders.

Benjamin's inquiry was preempted by a curse from the doctor.

"I'm sorry. Roger is young...learning. Roger, leave us,

please."

Alana relaxed at the sight of the journeyman's retreating back.

"You have my most abject apologies, Lady Alana," Ivyvine continued. "In service to Their Majesties... He's never had to make this offer before."

"Do you share his sentiments?" she breathed.

"I am old and experienced enough to temper the laws with compassion, mi'lady. If you have refused and mean to refuse in the future, I see no reason to trouble you with hurtful reminders."

"Apology gratefully accepted."

Benjamin turned and sank down beside her, cupping her cheek in his hand. "Do you feel up to telling me?" he asked.

"He offered—" The words stuck in her throat, and her stomach lurched at the thought of it. "Doctor Ivyvine, if you could... I can't bear to think it, let alone say it."

Benjamin raised her hand to his cheek, warming her silently.

Ivyvine cleared his throat. "When there is a chance a woman will carry, in a case of illegal use of an aphrodisiac—"

"Terminating measures," Benjamin finished for him. He guided her hand to his lips. "If you're about through, Doctor."

"Of course, Highness. Just follow the instructions I've given you, and contact me, if there is any negative change."

He nodded.

Ivyvine executed a formal bow to them and headed for the corridor. The techs followed silently, their rolling machines in tow. The door closed, and the silence beat at her.

"Are you angry?" she managed.

That seemed to drag him out of deep thought. "Angry? At what, precisely? So many things have happened to draw emotions out."

"That I refused? It's so soon, and you might not want..." She couldn't meet his eyes.

"I'm relieved that you refused."

"Are you?"

He smiled widely, then placed a soft kiss on her knuckles. "Ecstatic that you did." There was the promise of something sinfully decadent in that voice.

She pushed toward him, laying a trail of kisses up his throat and jaw. "Alana?" Benjamin whispered against her lips. "Slowly," she invited.

Chapter Five

"Mi'lady," the guard prompted gently, offering his hand to help her to her feet.

Sira took it and stepped out of the vehicle with a wince. Her exhaustion made the cloak she was wrapped in feel as if it weighed as much as a sack of grain. She looked at the house, sighing. How would she explain this to her parents?

She startled in the realization that the guard was peering at her, seemingly memorizing every expression. Sira averted her eyes, afraid to postulate on what he was thinking about her.

He led her up the path, using his larger body to block as much of the wind as he could. The move was so solicitous, it nearly made her laugh aloud. He was protecting her to the door, but she'd likely be under house arrest for the rest of her life, once he took his leave.

The door flew open, and her father rushed out. He motioned the guard away and pulled Sira to his body. His hand stroked at her hair, and he murmured his assurances that she was home.

She shivered at the welcome, wishing it would last. But once he learned the sad truth of her stay at the Bride Ball, his attitude was certain to change.

"The message arrived?" the guard asked.

"It did. It did, indeed."

Sira leaned into her father's chest, too tired to make much sense of the conversation.

"The doctor should be here soon."

"He's inside."

She tried to roust herself from her stupor to question that. What doctor was here? Why was he?

He brought the move to an end by lifting Sira and carrying her into the house. The guard followed, shutting the door behind them. "Must you stay?" her father complained.

"I am ordered to take word back to His Majesty immediately. My apologies for the intrusion."

"Then stay here. My younger daughter will fetch you a drink."

Sira held to her father's shirt, her attempt to open her eyes ending in a dizzying rush that rolled her empty stomach. She buried her face in his chest, feeling weak, spent.

She sighed at the bed beneath her, trying to sink closer to sleep. It was a wish destined to go ungranted, it seemed. Voices buzzed around her, growing louder.

"Go, Vic," her mother ordered.

"She's my daughter," he protested.

"Do you think she wants you to see this?"

"See what?" Sira mumbled, opening eyes that focused unreliably, so the tableau of her worried parents faded in and out.

"It is best that you wait outside," another voice suggested calmly.

Sira turned to him, startling at the sight of a strange man staring down at her. She straightened the cloak, well aware that her costume still lay beneath.

The man's kind, blue eyes narrowed, and he ran a hand through his thinning, gray hair.

"Don't look at her," her father ordered, sounding nearly panicked.

"I must look at her." The voice was soothing. The tone was light, hinting at a joke unspoken.

"Who are you?" she managed, her tongue thick and her eyes drooping. For some reason, Sira felt as if she was the one that had been drugged, but not with an aphrodisiac. It felt as if she'd been given a sleeping potion.

"My name is Doctor Philip Wheatstand."

The doctor... "Why..." Sira closed her eyes, trying to make her overtaxed brain function.

"Go, Vic," her mother ordered again.

Her father grumbled something unintelligible and then walked away.

"Good," Wheatstand breathed. "Now, let's get her out of these clothes."

Sira forced her eyes open, her breathing going ragged at the hands closing on her. "No." Why were they doing this? She'd told Hein Matthew she didn't require a doctor. "He didn't... I told him he didn't."

The doctor took a step back. "I see what he means," he whispered, seemingly troubled. "Young lady, you must understand. I am charged with examining you. If you would like, your mother can help you remove your clothing and wrap you in the cloak or a quilt, but I must examine all of you. Do you understand me?"

She shook her head. "I don't want this. I don't need it. He held me. That was all he did." It was hard to catch her breath.

"There are charges... You know about that?" he asked.

"The aphrodisiac. Yes, I know."

"How severe the punishment for those that used it will be based, in part at least, on what I find. This is necessary."

She nodded, glancing to her mother for signs of anger. There were none. If anything, Mother looked as weary as Sira felt.

"I'll help you change, if you wish," she offered, a strained smile pulling up at her lips.

Sira hesitated and then nodded. In her current state, it might well take her five times the normal to disrobe. She glanced toward the doctor, and he turned his back, giving her privacy...for the moment.

It was slow-going, even with help, mainly because Mother moved cautiously, as if afraid Sira would break at the slightest jarring. At last, she offered a quilt. Sira shook her head, pulling the cloak around her. It smelled of Hein Matthew, and no matter the misunderstanding that morning, Sira found his scent a comfort.

"Doctor," her mother prompted him.

He turned, panning his assessing eyes over her. "I will go slowly and explain what I am about to do," he soothed her.

Sira took a calming breath, praying it would be over quickly.

Wheatstand settled one knee on the edge of the mattress, leaning over her. "I'm going to check for injuries...just your face and neck." "Go on," she managed in a strangled whisper.

His hands pushed at her mussed hair, and his head swiveled to take in every detail. His fingertips pressed at a tender spot beneath her jawline, and Sira winced. He stopped and tipped her chin up, peering at it.

Memories of Hein Matthew nipping at her sent a pleasant heat through her that she found disconcerting. "It was—"

"Shhh," Wheatstand soothed her. "There is no need to explain it."

Sira didn't nod her agreement.

"Your arms, please."

She slipped them out, pressing the cloak to her chest. He turned them this way and that, noting several bruises on the insides of her upper arms. Wheatstand took his time, examining her hands, her fingernails, in particular. Sira found herself squirming under his inspection.

Wheatstand released her arm, standing straight. "Your chest...please, mi'lady."

Her heart pounded so hard it made her head spin faster.

"Sira?" her mother asked. "Sirana?" A hand touched her throat. "Doctor?"

In a flash, he was in motion, as was Sira, scrambling the opposite direction. She teetered on the edge of the bed, her mother wrapping her arms around her to keep Sira from falling off. Sira buried her face in her mother's shoulder, seeking escape, well aware that the cloak was gaping open, exposing her to Wheatstand's eyes.

"Allergies?" the old doctor asked in a low voice.

"No," her mother replied.

A sharp pinch at her thigh forced a cry of fear from her. Then it was gone. Sira held to her mother, pleading for her to make the doctor go as she had Father. Her muscles relaxed in a wave of warm fluid. Hands lowered her to the bed.

"Is she sleeping?" Mother asked, as she would have when Kiri was a napping babe.

"No. It's mild. If she wishes to, Sirana can open her eyes. I fear... I believe she has no wish to."

Mother stroked at her hair, humming a lullaby.

Hands roamed her chest and abdomen, touching her breasts

much less expertly than Matthew had. The sensation of being bathed followed, hot cloths stroking her intimately, much as she'd stroked him.

Fingers pressed at a sore spot on her inner thigh, and Sira turned her head away, grimacing. Incoherent sounds in her mother's voice flew at her, making the sense of unreality more acute.

Something breached her, and Sira tried to shut her legs, babbling out something incoherent, even to her. Her body wouldn't respond to her commands. It ached. It felt tight...whatever breached her too big. A twinge of pain cut through the fog, then a second, and she screamed. Hands held her shoulders to the bed.

"Stop," she begged, gulping in air. "Plea...please, stop."

Then the offending object was gone, and she collapsed to the pillows, her teeth chattering in the sudden cold.

"Cover her. Keep her warm," the doctor ordered. "Sirana, I need to take a blood test to determine—"

"No," she managed. "No more."

"As you wish."

The weight of the quilt on her was a comfort. Sira slipped closer to sleep.

"Is there damage?" her mother asked.

"It was a rough ride for a first time," Wheatstand surmised. "Physically, she will heal. I fear the hardest wrongs to right will be the mental scars."

He paused. "There are other decisions she may have to make, but not today. She's too scattered to make a rational answer to anything right now."

Sira wanted to ask what he meant, but her mouth no longer followed the commands of her muddled mind. In moments, sweet darkness took her.

* * * *

Matthew looked up at the knock, his heart sinking at the sight of the elder Wheatstand. "How bad?" he asked. The expression on Philip's face was assurance enough that he'd been right to send the old man to Sira and allow his son Douglas to handle the examination on Matthew.

Wheatstand took his time, settling in the chair across from Matthew with a weary sigh. "I thank the Goddess you were not responsible for your actions," he summarized. "I thank Her that we can prove it...and you should thank Her, too."

Matthew found forming words a physical impossibility. His breathing was harsh in his own ears. *Dear Goddess, what have I done?*

"Had you been, and had she chosen to call charges down, I would have no choice but to supply my honest assessment of it. As it is..." He faltered.

"I..." He buried his face in his hands, visions he hoped were fabrications taunting him. *Sira screaming... Matthew thrusting hard into her, while she did.* "It was rape then?"

"I cannot state it, but the evidence is consistent, in many ways. Had she come to me claiming it, I would agree it was plausible."

Matthew raised his head, posing the question with a look.

Wheatstand sighed. "There are bruises...on her arms, where you held her down; there's no question she told the truth about it. And that you guessed at the scratches correctly; there are signs of it on her. There are others..." He hesitated, shooting a weary look skyward. "If I was to guess, I would say you bit her."

His stomach rebelled, and Matthew was abruptly thankful he hadn't eaten at Douglas's suggestion that he do so. "A love bite, I hope?" But he knew it wasn't. Wheatstand wouldn't have considered that of note.

"No... A bite, but a small one, as if you caught only a few of your teeth in her. I can barely see the scrape of them in the bruise."

Matthew groaned. "Can this get worse?"

The doctor didn't answer that, lending to his greatest fears being realized.

"What else? What else did I do?" he asked bluntly.

"There is a bruise on the inside of her thigh."

"From? Can you tell?"

"Were I to guess, I would say ... perhaps ... "

"What?" Why couldn't the man simply say it?

"This is only a possibility, but it is consistent with a man

forcing a woman's legs apart...or attempting to do so."

Matthew's mouth went dry, and the foul taste of bile rose up strong. "And...the rest? Did I? Did I cause her pain?"

Wheatstand pulled out a flask and drank deeply. He didn't meet Matthew's eyes. He didn't speak.

"Did I rape her?" he demanded.

"She says 'no,' but the swelling and bruising, the tearing..."

"Tears? She had..." His stomach warned that he would have no appetite for weeks, if he'd heard it correctly.

"Small ones, and I've treated them. Thank the Goddess I'd already— I had to sedate her to examine her, so the treatment was not as traumatic as it might have been. She tried—"

"To run from you," Matthew finished for him.

Wheatstand nodded, taking another swig of the alcohol. "She shies from touch, from meeting the eyes of men, those she knows and those she doesn't. She wouldn't even allow the blood tests to...establish her cycle."

"Rape," Matthew forced out. There was little question now that it had been. "Then that is what we have to report it as." Damn what people said about him. He'd accept their scorn, rightly or wrongly applied to him.

"I already have. There was little choice but to do it." His jaw tightened. "I hope they rot."

* * * *

Sira straightened, her limbs aching, though she was just waking from sleep. Her bladder demanded attention, urgent attention at that. Though she'd like to stay tucked under the quilts, it was time to rise and take care of her needs.

The room felt unnaturally cool, and she pulled on a robe over her sleeping gown. Though it was light out, the house was silent and still. She considered calling out to someone, then decided to toilet first.

The walk down the corridor was a puzzle to her. Every muscle and joint in her body protested. Her arms were sore, her legs, even her stomach. Was she sick?

Sira stumbled, catching herself against the wall, shaking her head to clear it. Her vision shimmied and jumped alarmingly.

She felt drugged. She felt—

Sira grasped at the door jamb, the memories of the last day returning in a rush. She was drugged, and she was sore...with good reason.

The toilet beckoned, and she staggered toward it, shutting the door with one hand while she braced herself up against the sink with the other. She dragged her sleeping gown up and settled on the chilled seat, relieving herself in a rush.

The pain assaulted her a moment later, and she whimpered, crossing her arms over her stomach, rocking forward in an attempt to weather it. Goddess, but who knew she would hurt this much? The idea of patting herself dry brought a shiver of dread, but there was little choice.

A tentative knock sounded at the door. "Sira?" her mother called out. "Do you need me?"

It was on the tip of her tongue to refuse. This was mortifying, in the extreme.

She swallowed down her pride and admitted to herself that she needed help. "In a moment," she replied. She needed help to rise. That much was certain, but she wanted to clean herself first.

Sira patted at her tender body with the tissue, half-swallowing a sob.

"Sira? May I enter?"

She dropped the tissue in the bowl, then spread her sleeping gown over her knees. "Come in."

Her mother opened the door, silently assessing. "Have you finished?" she asked.

Sira nodded. Her head spun at that movement, and she pressed a hand to it, hoping to right the world.

Getting Sira back on her feet was easier with two than with one, as she'd hoped it would be. Her mother guided her back to her room, settling Sira beneath the quilts. That accomplished, she started speaking.

"Are you hungry?"

She wanted to answer in the affirmative, but her stomach was less certain. "A little," she managed.

"Soup and bread, then."

Sira made to rise, but her mother pushed back gently. They stared at each other, Sira's heart pounding in conflicting

emotions.

"Doctor Wheatstand's orders," she offered.

"He won't..." Sira managed. "He won't want to... Not again."

Mother sat on the edge of the bed with a sad smile. "No. Unless you worsen, I believe he's done his job. You have medicines to take that will help in healing."

Chapter Six

Matthew stared at the note, conflicting emotions pulling at him. He'd read it ten times. He would probably read it another hundred, searching for clues to her feelings that weren't there.

He closed his eyes, seeing the words in her flowing script.

My courses came on schedule. As promised, I'm sending word.

Take care, and may the Goddess watch over you.

Sira

Conflicting emotions made his newly-righted stomach roil as if the poison held him tight again.

She hadn't caught from their night together.

On some level, that relieved him. Sira wouldn't be forced to choose between bearing a child conceived that way and terminating one. Many of the dirt-nobles and lowborns considered termination for any reason against the Goddess's wishes. The idea of her carrying for religious reasons was enough to make him heartsick. Knowing she didn't carry meant that one less worry.

A rebellious streak screamed that she hadn't caught. His reasons for it were impossible to unravel.

It could be that he wished something good would come of it. A new life that she might rejoice in—and he might, if she were willing to share such a wonder with him—would give a positive bent to the thing. It would mean there was a meaning, no matter how the Goddess had managed to affect such a miracle.

Further good would come in the monetary aid he could lend to such a child. Offering Sira money for her suffering was a poor attempt at righting this wrong, he knew, though the money would ease her life in general. If she carried, it would be within the realm of believability that he would claim the child and support it. He could provide Sira with servants and comforts he dared not offer under other circumstances.

Or, maybe it was his continuing madness clouding the issue. It had been a little over a week, and he still dreamed of her. He'd hoped the dreams would end when the drug left him completely, but they hadn't.

No. I didn't hope it.

Had the dreams been of his attack on her, he would have done so, but they had been dreams of himself and Sira in slow, heated embraces, engaging in kisses that warmed the sheets.

He shifted, cursing his erection aloud. It was unseemly that he was thinking about her this way. It was morally corrupt that he did...on some level, at any rate. Though he couldn't reason himself to why it was—past his guilt, which wasn't a moral issue but rather an emotional one—he was sure there was some path to the decision he wasn't seeing.

Matthew folded the note blindly, finding the creases he'd pushed to the edges of tearing without his eyes to guide him.

He simply wanted to know she was well and comfortable. If he managed that, he'd leave her to her life and try to reassemble the wreckage of his own into something honorable again.

"Hein?" the guard he'd summoned intoned.

His heart ached that he was sinking to this. "I want you to make inquiries," he ordered.

"Of what type?"

"Of Sirana Firloch."

* * * *

Matthew knocked on the door, certain that he wouldn't be welcome, but he had to see her. It opened, and her father stared at him, dark eyes narrowing in challenge. He waited to see what Matthew had to say, neither dismissing him nor inviting him in.

"Good day, Firloch," he intoned.

The man bowed his head in response.

"I came to..." What? What excuse could he have?

"You wish to see her." He didn't question it.

Matthew nodded. "If Sirana is of a mind to," he conceded. "If you would allow—"

"Stay here. I will ask her." The door closed between them.

His heart ached at that. Typically, people rushed to admit him. It was another sign of how ruined he was that he wasn't trusted to enter their home.

Time dragged along, every moment an agony in which he was certain the dismissal would come. He turned away, looking at the fall colors. The door opened behind him, and he turned back, his heart aching at her refusal to see him already.

And she was there...still pale though not as markedly, her expression uncertain. She was beautiful, unblemished, but haunted no doubt.

"Hein Matthew," she greeted him with a bow of her head. Her eyes met his briefly, then darted away, her color deepening.

He hooked his hands behind his back, a silent reminder not to touch her. "Sirana."

Silence fell between them for a moment.

"Are you well?" he forced out, only one of a million questions he wanted to ask her.

She nodded, her smile strained. "Well healed, I think."

But she wasn't. The reports said she didn't venture from home, that she never did. Her mother had only just started admitting a few lady visitors, none Sira's age; no men entered the house, save her father, not even the lord's business partners and allies. Her curtains were always drawn tight. It wasn't right for a young lady to be so isolated. It wasn't natural.

She met his eyes again, a faint look of longing shining out. But longing for what? What did she want of him?

When he didn't answer, she turned...but not inside. Sira walked along the front of the house, toward the working buildings at the side. Matthew followed, at a loss to explain her actions.

She entered one, stopping at the far end, not facing him.

He waited at the door. "Sira?"

"I'm...sorry that you've been so vilified in this. I never meant for it to happen. I tried to tell them what happened that night, but no one would allow me to speak. No one..."

Her apology stunned him. "There was no need to make you

endure it. The physical evidence was—"

"Misleading." She turned to him, her hands clasped, seemingly tortured. "Have you never questioned it? Hein Matthew, how *could* you accept this without even asking if you were guilty of what you claim to be?"

"I hurt you."

"You did," she conceded, "but not in the ways you believe. Not in the ways others believe of you." Again, tears dotted her lashes.

"I am about to use your refrain, I'm afraid. I don't understand what you're saying."

"You should. I was clear enough the last time I told you. You didn't... You didn't rape me. Why is this so hard to comprehend? Of the two of us, who do you believe remembers the night, as it was?"

"Neither," he answered honestly. The doctors had told him as much, had said that her memories might have been reordered to fit her attempts to hide herself from the truth of it.

She sighed. "Perhaps, but I cannot agree."

Her upset ate at him. "You wish to do this, don't you? You wish someone would let you talk about it." If she said yes, could he be the one she unburdened to? Would it help or hurt his sense of guilt?

Sira nodded.

Curiosity warred with terror. *I did this, however oblivious to it I was at the time. It is my mess to wipe clean.* "Then tell me. Tell me what really happened that night." He doubted he'd get the whole truth, but it was worth it, if it eased her upset.

She took a calming breath. "I did argue with them and send them away. I did try to help you. I know you remember a bit of both."

Newly-recovered memories of her bathing him and him climaxing to it played out in his mind. Matthew nodded grimly. "I remember it."

"I thought you were cognizant, so I offered to get your doctor. Not that I knew how to find the man without spending a night or more in a cell for it, but I offered."

He winced at her candor. With Matthew incapacitated, she was likely correct, on that point. The guards would have detained

her, until some accounting could be made of the situation and her innocence proven...if that was possible.

"You said you understood me. I offered to get help for you, to get you whatever you needed." She paused, biting at her lower lip lightly.

"And that was when I forced—"

"You grabbed at my arms and pulled me down. Yes. I've told you as much."

His stomach rumbled in warning at the vision in his mind.

"You only clamped down and left bruises when I tried to escape from beneath you."

"And you say I'm not guilty of—"

"You are that far, but I've always said it."

Matthew motioned for her to continue, hoping she'd speed through the rest.

"You laid kisses at my jawline. I was so shocked by your tenderness that I allowed you to, and—"

"Tenderness?" he scoffed, well aware that he shouldn't question her version, not without a doctor to handle her reaction to it.

She took a step toward him. "You were."

"I was so tender, I left more bruises," he noted, loathing himself for doing it, loathing himself almost as much for saying it.

"The nips beneath my chin followed. Yes, they hurt, but the way... There was pleasure mixed with the pain. Had anyone bothered to ask it, I would have told them so."

His heart skittered, and he shook his head. That had to be in error.

"You're like everyone else," Sira accused, seemingly hurt by his denial of her version.

"No. Tell me. Please..." If it would give her ease, he would listen to her tale.

"I didn't protest it. I did push at you, but I didn't refuse you."

"It's no better," he muttered. *Why am I doing this? Why am I opening myself to how much a bastard I was to her?* Drugs or no drugs, he had to face that he had committed these crimes against her.

"You started raising my skirt, and I realized..."

"Go on."

"I realized there would be no barrier between us, if you did."

"Then you didn't want me. Sirana, you know what rape means, I'm sure," he reasoned.

"Will you let me tell the tale or not?" she challenged.

Matthew opened his mouth to speak, then shut it, nodding. *Perhaps this is my punishment.*

"I started to talk you out of it, and you kissed me."

"If it is the moment I remember, I ravaged your mouth. There was nothing kind in that moment. Do not make it over so, I beg you."

"If you remember it, how is it that you don't recall me responding in kind? Dear Goddess, have you no concept of what an appealing male you are, when you are intent?"

Memories he'd dismissed played at his mind. He'd dreamed of them for weeks, waking hard and wanting, cursing himself for writing off his crimes against her so completely, damning himself for being aroused all over again by the act...without the drugs to blame it on.

"You do remember," she whispered.

"I remember...something. It's hard to make sense of it," he qualified.

"Then let me make sense of it."

For the first time, his sense of dread was overpowered by his need to know. "Please," he invited her.

"You did hurt me once more, a hurt you intended, in your state."

He braced himself for the truth of it, barely breathing in his tension.

Sira continued. "You wanted to be in me so badly, you tried to force my legs apart to get there. Yes, it hurt. I won't deny it, but you didn't force them apart. You didn't force your way in."

His breath left him on a dizzying rush. Goddess, but that was good to know. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "I can never tell you how sorry I am that I hurt you."

"You had no choice in the matter. And I allowed much of it. If I had screamed, Ma...Hein. If I had screamed, someone would have—"

"Likely not...and you did scream. I remember it." His misery returned that quickly.

"You remember so little," she whispered.

He nodded, agreeing with her assessment. "Please...tell me." Oh, how the tables had turned. Now, he was begging her for information, wanting to hear how he could have done her such damage and not have her damn him for it.

"I scratched you." She faltered, her face going crimson and her eyes pleading with him. "I...I was at a loss to break through the fog over your mind. I never meant to hurt you."

"I believe that." Would that he had never meant to hurt her. "You scratched me," he repeated numbly. "And did I... Did I do something in return?"

Sira nodded. "You pulled away and looked at me with such longing... You said that you needed me. I didn't know if you needed me, because the drug was driving you mad or...or if you actually saw something in me that you needed, but either way, it was a sentiment I couldn't ignore.

"I started undressing for you, meeting your passion, inviting it. By the time you entered me... Yes, it was rough. It hurt, but there was something more...something I fear I will never be able to name."

Matthew tried to digest that. "You could have ignored it. You could have continued to deny me," he countered. "Why didn't you?"

"Because you were driving *me* mad. Because I wanted..." She looked away, her throat working on what was surely a sob.

"You wanted what?"

A sad smile turned up her lips. "I wanted that passion to be personal to me. I know it was foolish to want..."

His heart raced, though he couldn't tell which of his chaotic emotions caused it to. "No. It wasn't foolish, at all."

Tears pooled in her eyes, and she wiped them away in what appeared to be annoyance. "It was. I should have realized a man like you couldn't possibly..." She took a calming breath. "Of course, it was foolish."

"That I couldn't possibly be what?" he asked, his mind rebelling at the answer he wanted to hear.

Sira didn't answer him.

"Couldn't possibly want you?" he asked calmly.

She stared at her white-knuckled, clasped hands. "Don't lie to me about this," she stated bitterly. "It's not right, you know."

Matthew went to her, breaking his own counsel by raising a hand to her cheek. "How I wish we could start over," he mused.

"Then you don't wish to." Sira jerked in what was probably a silent sob.

"Oh, I wish to." He did. He'd wanted to, for varying reasons, since the morning he'd woken with her in his bed.

Sira raised her head, her eyes assessing, seemingly shocked into silence.

Matthew lowered his face to meet hers, stroking his lips along the line of hers. She sighed, her eyes closing.

"I want so much to start over," he breathed, closing his eyes and pressing his forehead to hers.

"Then we should."

Matthew turned his head and dipped it down, seeking her agreement. Her lips parted to his, a slow, solemn kiss that grew deeper and hotter in moments. He released her, panting in the force of his arousal. If this was what he'd felt that night, his madness might be more attributable to her potency than his state.

"Matthew," she whispered, not quite a question.

He captured her lips again, one hand settling on her shoulder and the other cupping her cheek. His cock hardened, aching to nest inside her again, a slower joining that they both could revel in.

"Release her."

The voice came without warning, drawing Matthew out of his daze. He turned to find Sira's father standing in the doorway, his hands fisted and his body tensed to fight.

"I said, 'release her'."

The choice was taken out of his hand when Sira nestled closer. Matthew wrapped an arm around her, mindful of the fact that he might have to leave her to block blows. He wouldn't allow her to stay in the middle of a fight, if it came to that.

Firloch's eyes widened, and his fists loosened. "Sira?"

"It is not what you think," she stated, though her voice shook at the admission. "For well over three weeks, I have told you all that it's not what you believe, what you want the evidence on hand to support."

He shot a look promising death at Matthew.

"If I may?" Matthew asked, hoping to diffuse the situation. Firloch didn't reply, so he continued. "Nothing excuses the pain I caused Sirana. I know that. I came here...looking for some way to accomplish that, pitiful as such an attempt was."

"And you think this is it?" he snapped.

"I wouldn't have thought we'd ever end up in such a situation, after the night of the Bride Ball. But not because I didn't want to touch her," he hastened to add. "I thought I had ruined any kind feelings Sira might have harbored for me." He met her eyes, smiling at Sira's blush. "Imagine my surprise to learn that, not only was I wrong about what transpired that night, I was wrong about your daughter's capacity and caring."

"Where were you?" he challenged. "Where were you, when she could barely put one foot before the other? When she wouldn't meet my eyes? When she couldn't face the world outside of her bedroom? If you cared so much—"

"I didn't think I had the right to see her," Matthew admitted, reliving his own days and nights of misery.

"You didn't, and you don't."

Sira wrapped a hand in Matthew's cloak. "I believe that is my decision," she offered.

For a moment, her father said nothing. He simply stared at her in disbelief. Then he recovered himself. "You cannot be serious."

"The choice to accept a position or trial position is my own," she reminded him.

Matthew kept his mouth shut. All three of them knew that her father could block such a move, if he appealed it to the king and Counselors...if the old man agreed with him. If it came to a challenge, Matthew wasn't certain which side his father would lend his might to.

Firloch stared at Matthew. "Is such an offer forthcoming?"

Matthew didn't hesitate. "If Sira would accept it."

Both men looked to her, and Matthew held to his mask of royalty as she paled. Was she going to refuse him?

"A trial, for now," she agreed. "I believe... I believe we

need to get to know each other away from Bride Balls and drugs that affect us, before we commit to more."

"And what sort of contract would you be offering?" Firloch continued.

Again, Matthew knew his mind. "One that makes her my wife."

Sira seemed surprised by the proclamation.

Chapter Seven

Sira wrapped her arms around Matthew's waist, pulling herself flush to him, licking her lips at the press of his cock to her belly through the layers of sleeping clothes. His mouth sought out hers again, making promises he'd yet to keep.

It had been over a week, and their time together still consisted of nothing more than touching and kissing, talking and sleeping under the same sheets.

She'd climaxed; Matthew had made certain of that. She'd come to his mouth and his hands, and he'd come to her hands, but he shied at every move toward sating himself in her. He shied even at both of them being completely nude at the same time.

That had to change. If she was to be his wife, Sira was going to carry his heir, and no amount of fear on Matthew's part was going to stand in the way of that.

He reached for her sleeping gown, and she pushed his hands away, working at the tie on his lounging pants instead. Matthew groaned into her mouth, giving himself up to her. His pants loosened, Sira worked them down his hips to his thighs, urging him to his back on the mattress.

Her mouth watered at the sight of him, and her heated body ached to feel him inside her again. She was healed; she knew she was. Sira had even tested it...carefully, with her fingers in the bath, at a time when Matthew was otherwise occupied.

He reached for her dominant hand guiding it to his shaft in silent request. Sira started stroking him, smiling as his eyes slid shut and his hips rose to meet her. This could work.

She shifted her weight, straddling his thighs, just below his jutting cock, far up on her knees so she wasn't resting on him. Matthew's eyes shot open, and his breathing hitched. Sira started stroking again, making no further move to mount him, and he relaxed.

No doubt, he thought himself safe from temptation, because she was dressed for sleeping. What he didn't know, couldn't know, was that she'd removed her panties when she'd begged off for a toilet break earlier. She would taste his length, if she had to trick him to it; it was likely the only way she would.

He watched her pleasure him, his breathing going ragged in his need to come, his body moving with her. Finally, his eyes closed again.

Silently, slowly, Sira eased her sleeping gown higher. Matthew's panting and his grimace announced how close to the edge he was. It was time.

She eased his cock back slightly and encased the head and first finger-width of his shaft inside her. Matthew cried out harshly, coming up off of his back so that he was nearly face-toface with her. The motion forced more of his cock into her, and he went still, his eyes half-closed in pleasure, his muscles bunching.

"You shouldn't," he gasped out.

Sira paused, enjoying the stretch of her muscles around his cock. In answer, she pushed down further, moaning at the delicious sensation. "Goddess, yes, I should," she breathed.

"Sira," he reasoned.

She silenced him with a single motion, the slide of her sleeping gown up her body and off over her head. He stared at her, his cock bucking against her walls.

"You want to. You hunger to do this. Don't you?" Sira tossed the sleeping gown away, noting that his eyes didn't track it.

Matthew started to shake his head in a negative response, then stopped. "You know I do, but it's too soon. You're not healed."

Sira answered by sliding further down his length. It was sweet torture.

"Does it hurt you?" he asked. "By the Goddess, tell me the truth."

"A light ache and no more. Matthew, my body must adjust to you. All women do."

He nodded, his jaw tight. "If it hurts you—"

"I promise to tell you."

"Then take me in."

Sira moved slowly, forcing his cock into her, stilling at the sharp little twinges where she had been torn the first time.

"It hurts you," he accused. "It is too soon. We will wait—"

"No," she panted out, easing back a bit and settling further. "Oh, yes. I'm going to take all of you."

"If you can."

"I can." She didn't question that it was true; she'd done it before. Instead, she slid back and down again.

Matthew's hips jerked up, and he pulled back, a guilty look on his face. It was unacceptable.

"Again," she pleaded.

"Sira—"

"Again, Matthew."

His hips rose to meet her, and she moaned in delight.

He hesitated a moment, then thrust up again, assessing every expression, every movement. At his next rise, she pushed down onto him, smiling at the touch of his body that announced she'd very nearly taken him to the hilt.

"Deeper," she urged him.

His cock bucked at her inner walls again. He breathed her name, bowing up from the bed to comply. He stayed there a long moment, his breath fanning hot and fast over her mouth.

Sira tipped her head to one side and tasted his lips. That kiss led to another and a third, each more involved than the last. She wrapped her hands in his hair, and his hips started to move, slowly at first, then gaining force as their kisses did likewise.

"Tell me," he demanded at a break between them.

"This is what I want...what we both want."

His mouth came at her, unrestrained. His body followed close in its wake.

Climax whispered, then roared through her, her scream muted against Matthew's questing tongue. His cock erupted within her, stealing her breath.

He collapsed back to the pillows, dragging her along by virtue of her grip in his hair. His chest rose and fell in ragged breaths, and his arms circled her back, holding Sira to him in his most unguarded moments. "Goddess, I have no control with you," he berated himself.

She laughed. "Who said I want you to have control? If this is you lacking in it, I fully support the idea."

Matthew turned over her, his eyes hard. Her heart rate jumped in alarm, then settled. This was Matthew...no drugs, no madness, the same man who'd refused his needs to give her ease and comfort...to allow her to heal.

"Like this, Sira?" There was a bite of something unforgiving in that. "Can you ever face the thought of me over you again?"

"How can you face me over you?" she countered. "The memories of—"

"The memories of what I did to you are worse...and better, which doesn't help my sanity," he admitted.

She tipped her hips up, watching his frustration and torture melt into something soft and dreamlike. "I can face you over me, because it's you, Matthew."

He buried his face in her hair. "I just want to hold you."

A plan took shape. "For now."

"And afterward?" he breathed in a voice that sounded of exhaustion.

"Do you still want me as your wife, Matthew?"

"Yes. By the Goddess, yes." His hands closed on her waist lightly, holding to her as if to keep her from leaving him.

"Then I have a wife's needs."

He raised his head, his eyes hot in understanding.

"Will you sate them?"

His cock answered with a buck against her before he verbalized it. "Every one."

Chapter Eight

Matthew glanced at Sira, then back to his work, his thoughts scattered. Having her spend time with him while he worked had seemed like a stellar idea, at the time. The reality was that her proximity made working impossible.

Sira questioned him with nothing more than his spoken name, probably taking note of his inattention to the matters he'd claimed a need to attend to and his fixation on her.

He set his pen aside and pushed his chair back. "Come here."

Surprise and curiosity warred in her expression. She rose smoothly and crossed the room in a sensual glide he was sure she was unaware she possessed, coming to his side without pause.

Matthew drew her across his lap, smiling at her demure shiver. She blushed lightly.

"I have needs, Sira. Goddess but how I need you." He'd avoided admitting that for days, focusing on her needs. Perhaps he'd been afraid that he'd know no control, that he would confuse wants and needs. There was no mistaking that this was a need that had been driving him all day, a need to have her close, a need to touch her.

Sira rose to him, seeking his mouth.

Yes. Goddess, this is wonderful.

There was nothing gentle about this joining, nothing careful. If Sira wanted him without control, there was little question she was going to get what she wanted.

Their mouths meshed, danced, parted, explored only to return and mesh again. Hands roamed, pulling at clothing, speeding them toward something hot and hard.

Matthew shoved his trousers down his hips, then her skirts to her waist. He turned her away, pressing her hands to the desktop, nipping at her neck as he dragged her panties down her thighs.

Sira didn't question what he had in mind. She levered herself up, and he positioned his cock, then thrust into her. Her body sinking over his wrenched a moan from him. He guided her by a hold on her hips, taking what he needed, what he hoped they both needed.

A click brought his head up, and Matthew forced her hips down, locking her to his body. He pushed the chair as far under the desk as he could, taking their last heartbeat to soothe Sira's fear.

The sight of his father striding around the door sent his heart into palpitations. Matthew swallowed down a growl of frustration; the king wasn't someone he could simply order away.

Worse, he'd probably have something to say about the current situation. It wasn't too late for him to disallow the contract between Matthew and Sira. Though his father didn't openly oppose Matthew, he didn't show favoritism either.

"Ah...Matthew. Here you are." The old man hadn't looked up from the file in his hands, and he was distracted.

Sira's little movement of shock sent tremors down his cock that weren't helping his aim to keep this scene as innocentappearing as possible.

Matthew bit back a groan of pleasure. "Yes, Father?"

Edward ambled to the bar and poured himself a whiskey. "I have to talk to you about...well, about the charges that were brought as a result of the Bride Ball."

Sira sank further into his embrace, and Matthew wrapped his arms around her.

"Is it important?"

His father drained his drink and turned, nodding. His color dipped, and his gaze trailed up and down their bodies.

"Oh, Sirana. I didn't know you were here. Would you excuse us for a moment?"

She stiffened in Matthew's arms. His move to answer was cut off by the bite of her reply.

"If it has to do with that night, I think I should be included."

Edward hemmed and hawed a moment. "If you insist, I suppose."

"Perhaps we should—" Matthew began.

"You have some concern?" the old man inquired.

Yes! Matthew had several concerns, not the least of which was the urge to finish what they'd started. But how to put that one into words? He shook his head.

"If you're sure, Sirana?"

"I am," she replied.

Edward turned back to the fire, seemingly searching for a way to begin. "It's not as neat as I wish it would be," he admitted.

Matthew tensed at that pronouncement, his cock waning. "In what way?"

"Mora supplied the poison, but she fell victim to her own misadventure. In short—"

"She became a victim," Matthew interrupted him. "More victim than assailant."

He poured another whiskey. "Precisely, I'm afraid. She hadn't used a significant amount of the drug in her bid to bed Benjamin. We can't even prove she meant it as more than a prank."

"So...Mora will walk free," Sira guessed.

Edward swallowed the second drink. "I'm afraid anything more than a punitive slap of the law would be seen as a further hardship to her. She was fed more of the poison than you were yourself, Matthew. She had no more control over who she bedded and how than you did."

"If I wasn't responsible, she shouldn't be either?" he guessed.

"That is what the Counselors believe," he confirmed.

"But the others," Sira managed. "Lodi and Nuay and the others? Surely, they have to pay for their crimes. They didn't have to use the Gorus. They had no right to, and the second crime doesn't make right the first."

"Since the Counselors want Mora relieved of responsibility, holding the drinking mob responsible for what happened next, with a poison that seemed to their muddled minds the perfect solution at hand... If anyone is to be held responsible for what happened under the influence of a mind-altering substance, all will. If we excuse one, we excuse all." Matthew's stomach dropped. "No one will pay for that night," he breathed. "Not a single person will be held responsible."

"If I hold them responsible—"

"Then hold me responsible," he demanded. If it meant punishment for the others, he'd accept that.

"No!" Sira and Edward answered together.

His father continued. "It would do no good, Matthew. The Counselors would be faced with the same choice. Even if you walked into the proceedings, intent on facing punishment you don't deserve, they would set you free and all the others with you."

Fury burned in him. Matthew fumed at the decision that had been handed down.

Edward sighed. "I did my best to sway them. The best I could do was a series of new laws."

"And those are?" Sira managed.

"Aphrodisiacs are now outlawed in Lenvia. They are too dangerous, too easy to abuse or to have go wrong, in the confusion of the moment."

"It's a poor recompense," Matthew noted, forcing his jaw to unlock far enough to form the words.

"It is," his father agreed. "Uncontracted women at sexual events will be escorted by an older woman, one not seeking a contract of her own, preferably already contracted herself. That escort is to remain sober and vigilant and will be responsible for all actions committed by her charges."

Sira nodded. "So, there will never come a time when no one can be held accountable," she summarized.

"Quite. There are other measures under deliberation. I'm certain a few will pass."

"For instance?" Matthew asked wearily.

Edward paused. "Guards on the bowl at drinking events. Only servants of the house may serve food or drink to attendees. Only the guards may carry weapons."

There was a moment of silence.

His father turned toward them, his eyes skating over them without much attention to detail. "Am I welcome to join you for lunch before I go?" he asked. There was a note of something broken in that, as if he felt he wouldn't be welcome, in light of the news he'd carried to them.

"Of course," Matthew assured him.

Sira wiggled, reminding him that they couldn't rise from the desk.

"If you'd give us a moment," he amended. "I think we need one."

* * * *

Sira watched King Edward depart, her heart aching for Matthew. He wanted so desperately to make this right for her. *Desperately enough to submit to a judgment he hasn't earned.*

"This is all the right I need, Matthew," she assured him.

"It's not."

"It's not, for your sense of guilt. It is enough for my peace of mind."

He sighed, as he always did when he wanted to argue something with her but dared not.

She turned on his lap, drawing his mouth down to hers. Matthew didn't argue the move, but he didn't resume the frantic pace they'd been lost in when they'd been interrupted.

Sira eased off of his lap and onto the desk, working the panties off her legs and spreading wide for him. Matthew stared at her, his eyes dilated and breathing choppy already.

"What you pursued before was precisely what I need, Matthew." It was. She wanted him at ease with the passion between them. She needed that connection, the raw passion that existed between them. It was real and tangible.

He lowered his mouth to her, taking a taste that turned into a feast of sensation. Sira fisted her hand in his hair, watching him lose himself in the moment, his cock going hard and pulsing, weeping fluids.

"I need you inside."

Matthew was on his feet in the next heartbeat, his cock thrusting home, his mouth covering hers. He released her lips on the second thrust, licking at the sheen of her fluids on his own.

"You'll have to be quiet, Sira," he breathed against her cheek. "Can you do that?"

Her answer died in a half-swallowed cry of delight, as he doubled his pace.

"You'll have to do better. My father is just down the hall."

She nodded, biting down on her lower lip, riding the cascade of pleasure foaming and rising in her.

Matthew took her harder, faster, his hands clamped down tight on her hips. He gasped out her name, burying his mouth against her temple.

Climax crashed down, and Sira clawed at his back, choking back a scream. He followed her with a moan, working his way down to her mouth, laying his claim.

They parted slowly, breathing in ragged gasps.

"This is right, Matthew."

He nodded, pulling her closer to his body as if loath to the very thought of letting her go. It was a sentiment she understood all too well.

Chapter Nine

"What did you say?" Matthew asked, certain he'd misheard or dropped off to sleep and dreamed the announcement. *This is a nightmare, not a dream.*

"Lady Mora Ashgrove to see you, Hein Matthew," Prentice repeated.

It was on the tip of his tongue to tell the butler to show the "lady" out, but that would make it seem he was afraid to face her. Though the words stuck in his throat, Matthew forced them out. "Show her in, Prentice."

He retreated with a slight nod and returned a few moments later. "Lady Mora Ashgrove," he announced smartly but in a voice that those who knew him would recognize as laced in distaste Matthew shared.

Matthew made a show of not looking her direction, feigning interest in the work stacked before him. At the appropriate moment to make his snub clear, he focused on her. His assessment of her made it as far as the pregnant swell of her midsection, and his clenched jaw slackened.

"If you're laying odds," she hinted.

"Not a chance in paradise or perdition," he countered.

Mora sauntered to his desk and dropped a sheet of parchment on it...then a second. Matthew didn't pick them up; he kept his fists clenched to avoid using them against her in haste.

"Go on," she invited. "The first proves paternity. The second proves it's your heir I carry. Both were confirmed via amniot draw."

"Achieved with an illegal aphrodisiac you yourself provided."

Still, he reeled. How had she proven paternity without him providing a sample? Had she somehow accessed the samples taken when Wheatstand reported the attack on Sira? Since it was related to that night, chances were she'd been granted it. But without notifying Matthew?

Mora settled in a chair, arranging herself artfully. "And we've all been forgiven our poor judgment."

"Some more than others," he quipped. If the Goddess was just, Mora and the other "ladies" who'd used the Gorus would pay for it in stigma for years to come.

"The child is still your heir." There was no hesitancy in that.

"Only if I claim him, and I have no intentions of tying myself to you to do so."

A sly smile pulled her lips up. "Whyever not? You could have your little mistress to warm your bed. I wouldn't even demand my wifely needs from you."

Mistress? I don't have— Realization left him cold. "Sira is my wife, not my mistress."

"She carries your second son at best. She may not carry an heir, at all."

"She is my wife, Mora. Any son she presents me will be named my heir. This child. The next. Four or five from now, if she and the Goddess grant me so many."

"Will King Edward support that choice?" Mora affected contemplation, though Matthew didn't believe the line of thinking was new to her. She'd planned this. She'd foreseen his refusal and was raising the stakes at every pass.

"He can't force me to dismiss Sira. He can't force me to marry you." He could highly suggest Matthew secure his heir, however he had to, but he couldn't force that either. "He can't even name the child Hein, if I don't claim him as such."

"All true," she conceded. "But he doesn't have to be happy about the situation. He doesn't have to give his blessing to you killing your true heir."

His heart stuttered at that. "What are you talking about?"

"If you won't claim your heir, it is a hardship for me to carry it." She paused, letting her logic sink into his rebelling mind. "How am I supposed to support it? How am I supposed to make a coveted position with a bastard son in tow and a body ruined by bringing it forth?"

The very idea of terminating a pregnancy for such a reason went against the core of the Goddess's teachings. Termination was for cases where the health and well-being of the mother were in jeopardy. It was for cases of real hardship—emotional or physical.

The fact that Mora was using the babe as a bargaining bit proved she had no emotional ties to be called a hardship. Her family could easily support the child, male or female, so there was no physical hardship to be argued.

Yet she intended to terminate a viable child in this petty game, invoking the very laws she'd called into play by using the aphrodisiac at the Bride Ball to her best advantage.

Part of him argued that Matthew should let her do it. The child wasn't one either of them had set out to create. It was an emotional hardship for himself and Sira, even if it wasn't for Mora. It wouldn't know love from Mora, even if Matthew came to care for it, and—Goddess as witness—Mora would use such an attachment against him, in the end.

Another part recoiled at the idea of it. Long-ago lessons imparted by his own dirt-noble mother demanded he try to save the innocent child, used as a lead piece in the game. It was morally bankrupt to terminate a child he was more than capable of supporting, that he had created, however that was accomplished.

This was something of a test of his faith and fiber. Matthew had taken responsibility for the harm he'd done Sira in his drugged state. Did he have less of a responsibility to right the wrongs he'd done Mora? Granted, the blame didn't rest solely on himself, and Mora bore more than a small share of it personally, but he was likely the only one who would take responsibility, among the many guilty.

He loathed her. Matthew had never made a secret of that fact, but did that excuse him? Was a wrong done an adversary or an enemy less a wrong?

No. Responsibility for one meant responsibility for all.

"Hein Matthew?" she prompted him.

"I will claim him."

Her smile spread into a sickeningly-smug version.

"But not as heir," he qualified.

It vanished as quickly, and a frightening calm took its place. "I'm listening." "I'll take you as mistress in name. You'll have freedom to discreetly take lovers, no duties to me, money and a small estate to raise the child on." *An estate somewhere Sira need never see her. And Mora will be forbidden to set foot in this house.*

"But I won't have a coveted position."

"Someone's name means more to you than security and freedom?" He would never understand women.

No. That's not true. I understand Sira well enough. But Sira wasn't like other women. She had a moral center that fell more in line with his than the line he'd seen in other women.

"I'll be your wife and my son your heir, or you will be living a lie, a lie I will not condone."

"It won't be a lie. I choose which heirs to claim. You forget your place, Mora." He owed her nothing, certainly not as much as he was offering her for a bastard he'd been drugged into planting.

She laughed harshly, a sneer twisting her face into a mask that more closely matched her inner non-beauty. "You'll claim a second son on a dirt-noble line, instead of a first son on the daughter of a favored lord? What an intriguing choice, Hein Matthew."

"It remains my choice."

"And if Sirana carries a daughter? If she never presents you with a son?"

"Then your son would be Hein, by default...unless Alana presents Benjamin with two heirs, in which case, even I wouldn't be, let alone my heirs."

"And where is the security in that?" she taunted.

"It's all the security I'm offering. Take it or not." He would never turn Sira out or make her a mistress for Mora.

And even if he wished to give either Mora or Sira more security than that, it was the truth of his existence as the son of the king on a mistress, when an heir existed on his contracted queen; he was only in line for the throne, until there were two heirs of the direct line.

Mora rose, sighing deeply. "Unacceptable. You have a week to reconsider. I offer security—the guarantee of an heir. If you insist on Sirana Firloch as your wife, you will do it without that guarantee."

"Then I will." He tried to make it sound inconsequential, but his moral center screamed at the choice he was making. Matthew was openly inviting Mora to terminate his child.

No. The choice is hers. I've offered an alternative. This is her greed. I will not dismiss Sira for this blackmail.

The slam of the door behind Mora sent a chill down his spine.

* * * *

"You accept it?" Sira managed, though she felt she might choke on the words.

"I have no more palatable choice." It was stated clearly and simply, as if he had no question that he was doing the right thing.

"What if the choice proves unpalatable?"

Matthew's hands closed on her shoulders. "Less palatable than Mora? How could it be?"

Was he shortsighted or dense? "What if I don't carry your heir? What if the Goddess decrees this our only child together?"

"Then Alana's son is the only heir to the throne. It won't be the first time in history that there was only one. It is the rule, rather than the exception."

"And you would make the choice with no idea whether I carry a son or daughter?" He couldn't; his station in life demanded heirs, if he could produce them. If Mora's tests were to be believed, and Matthew said they were sealed appropriately, he was more than capable of producing heirs. The question remained... Was Sira capable of providing them?

"Enough, Sira," he ordered. "I've rendered the decision. You are my wife. Do you want to be something less than that?"

She shook her head, her heart aching that he'd question it.

"Then it's settled." He dipped his head down and laid a gentle kiss against her lips, pausing there, his words misting into her mouth. "You are my wife, Sira. Nothing else matters. Please, believe me. Nothing else but that."

With that, he was striding out the door and down the corridor.

Sira stood for a long moment, watching his retreating back. On one level, she couldn't dispute that the choice was his own. On another, it was a choice he should go into fully-informed.

A blood test had failed to establish the sex of the babe she carried. An amniot draw would do so, without fail...and with little risk, all told, especially this early in pregnancy.

If Matthew knew she carried a son, he could be secure in the choice he'd made. If he knew she carried a daughter...

Would he reconsider? It was his choice, even if it was one she didn't care for. He was Hein, son of a king. His position held duties and obligations she could only dream of.

If Matthew chose to follow this path, Mora would vilify him in it. The best possible defense was an heir he wanted to claim on the way.

It was up to Sira to safeguard him, if he wouldn't safeguard himself.

Chapter Ten

"Sira?" The smile on Matthew's face dimmed at the empty rooms. He retraced his steps through the household, calling for her. When he'd reached his office again, he stopped to consider it.

"Prentice," he bellowed.

The old man came trotting out, appearing from nowhere. If only Sira would appear so neatly, but something told Matthew she wouldn't.

"Yes, Hein?"

"Where is my wife?"

His brow furrowed. "She left with Pierce this morning," he reported.

Ah...a day in town. "Where to?" He'd like to join her.

"I'm afraid I don't know," he admitted. "Lady Sirana called for a driver. I assumed she'd wanted to stretch the legs."

Matthew forced back a full-blown panic. What was she doing, a day after Mora's announcement? Had he dismissed her concerns too quickly? Should he have taken more time? Put her more at ease?

Sira, what are you doing?

"Hein Matthew?"

"I want to know the minute she returns. Not a moment of delay, Prentice."

"Of course."

"And...send a guard to her parents. Maybe..." He hoped to the Goddess he was right. "Maybe she just wanted to see her family." *Maybe she needs reassurance I can't offer*.

* * * *

Matthew stopped in mid-step, looking out the window at the

approaching vehicle. It was Pierce, hopefully returning with Sira. He forced a calming breath and headed for the entryway, waving off Prentice.

All day. She'd been gone for more than eight hours. He was torn between the urge to shout at her and the urge to hold her tight and never let her leave his sight again.

The door opened when he was halfway across the floor to it. Matthew came to a stop, his heart pounding at the sight of her.

Sira wandered in, a sheet of parchment clutched in her hand. Her attention was far away, and her step slow and solemn.

He stared at the parchment, the metallic taste of fear in his mouth. *She didn't*. Scattered prayers, asking that she hadn't terminated a daughter...or blindly terminated tumbled in his mind, mixing, overpowering each other.

She came to him, offering the parchment without comment and without meeting his gaze. His hands shaking, Matthew took it. Opening it took more fortitude than he possessed.

"It's a boy," she whispered. "Either way, you'll have your heir."

Matthew gathered her to his chest, his heart easing that she hadn't taken the choice from him. "What did you do?"

"An amniot draw. It's all I would have done, either way. I wanted... I needed to know you'd made an informed choice. Your father would have demanded that."

She was likely right about that, but his heart skittered at the thought of an amniot draw. "But the risk—"

"A small one. Much less than you abandoning your chance at an heir."

He held her tighter. "I wouldn't have cared. I told you I wouldn't have."

"Today," she conceded. "You're young, Matthew. It would have mattered more, when you were old."

"To my father, perhaps...if Benjamin hasn't given him adequate heirs by then. Not to me."

For a long moment, she was silent. "You mean to let her terminate, then?"

He sighed, letting his eyes drift shut. "The only way I have to stop it is too high a cost. She's made her choice."

"But we all have to live with it."

And her faith would insist Sira stop this, if she could. The teachings he'd been raised with weren't dissimilar in that, but there had to be a line he wouldn't cross, and Mora had crossed it. The Goddess had given Matthew a second chance with Sira, and Mora wouldn't interfere with that.

But Sira deserved an answer. "Then we will. It isn't our choice, Sira. Would you rather have me give in to her demands, outrageous and unpalatable as they are?"

She was silent long enough to make his stomach shimmy.

"No. I wouldn't rather see you blackmailed into a wife you loathe." She paused. "And I wouldn't want to lose you to her or anyone else."

"I agree. Then let me call the stakes in full, and let the blame lay on Mora, where it rightfully belongs."

She nodded and held tight to him.

That was what Matthew needed...what he'd needed from the moment he'd laid his sights on her, Sira in his arms, his personal sea angel.

Chapter Eleven

Knowing the blow was coming didn't lessen the effect when it fell.

At least Matthew had the foresight to have all missives to his wife redirected to himself. As he expected, Mora tried to take a final twist of the knife by having the notice of termination sent to Sira.

He sat with the notice in hand, relieved and heartsick by turns.

The howling emotional side of him wanted to burn the parchment. The rational side sent him to his cabinet to file it with the other two.

A son reduced to three bits of parchment.

Wheatstand was wrong. Mora's poison hadn't left him a week after the Bride Ball. It was with him still, making the life he was building with Sira sick beneath its pall.

I won't let it! That's what she wants, the only possible victory Mora has left to her.

In the next coherent moment, he was halfway up the staircase, intent on his wife and heir.

Matthew strode to her, seeking Sira's lips. Whatever question she meant to ask disappeared into his mouth.

There wasn't a second question. Sira gave her passion as avidly as she took of Matthew's. It was pure, untainted, the single blessing they'd managed to wrest from the maw of poison and lies and no-win choices.

Hands delved beneath clothing, touching, peeling away the unwanted layers onto the floor of the sitting room. Mouths sampled. Bodies joined in a fierce, uncompromising firestorm of need.

In the moments after, Sira lay over him on the sofa. Matthew stroked at her hair, reveling at the sweat drying in the cool room air. He smiled that they hadn't made it to the bed...hadn't even closed the corridor door before surrendering to the heat between them.

There was a stillness in the air, not just of sound and movement but also of the soul.

"I was wrong," Sira murmured against his throat.

"Wrong?" Where had that come from? What did it mean? Matthew couldn't seem to follow her logic in his pleasantlymuddled state.

"When I believed I'd never feel what I felt the night of the Bride Ball again...I was so wrong."

His heart pounded in a dizzying cadence. Horrified apologies died at his lips.

"I think I loved you, even then, Matthew."

Probably not. "Maybe so. I don't know what I felt for you that night, but it held to my mind and drove me mad to see you again. I dreamed of you, fantasized of you, craved you."

She nodded, strangely silent. Matthew opened his mouth to question her, but Sira beat him to the tape.

"She's done it?"

He nodded.

"And you feel what about it?" There was something hesitant about that, something guarded.

Matthew tried to order that into words; she deserved an honest answer, but what that answer was escaped him. "So much that conflicts, I can't find a place to begin. But it's done...and it was never real between Mora and myself." He combed his fingers through her hair. "This is real, and I won't let her destroy it."

Her head came up, and she stared at him, her expression moving from unreadable to joyous.

"What are you thinking?" he asked, stunned by the effect her smile had on him.

"That there is a perfectly serviceable bed in the next room we should be using."

"Our bed," he agreed. "I've never shared that bed with another...and I never will."

About the Author

Brenna Lyons wears many hats, sometimes all on the same day: president of EPIC, author of more than 80 published works, columnist, special needs teacher, wife, mother... In addition, she's a member in good standing of ERWA, MWW, RWU, WPM, IWOFA, and Broad Universe.

In her first seven years published in novel-length, Brenna has finaled for eleven EPPIES, three PEARLS (taking Honorable Mention second to NY Times Bestseller Angela Knight), two CAPAS, a Dream Realm Award and has taken Spintetingler's Book of the Year for 2007.

Brenna has been termed "one of the most deviant erotic minds in the publishing world...not for the weak." (Rachelle for Fallen Angels Reviews) She writes milieu-heavy dark fiction, mainly science fiction, fantasy and horror (in 21 established worlds plus stand-alones), poetry, articles and essays. She teaches classes in everything from POV studies to advanced editing, networking to marketing. Brenna loves talking to readers and can be reached via her site at *http://www.brennalyons.com*.