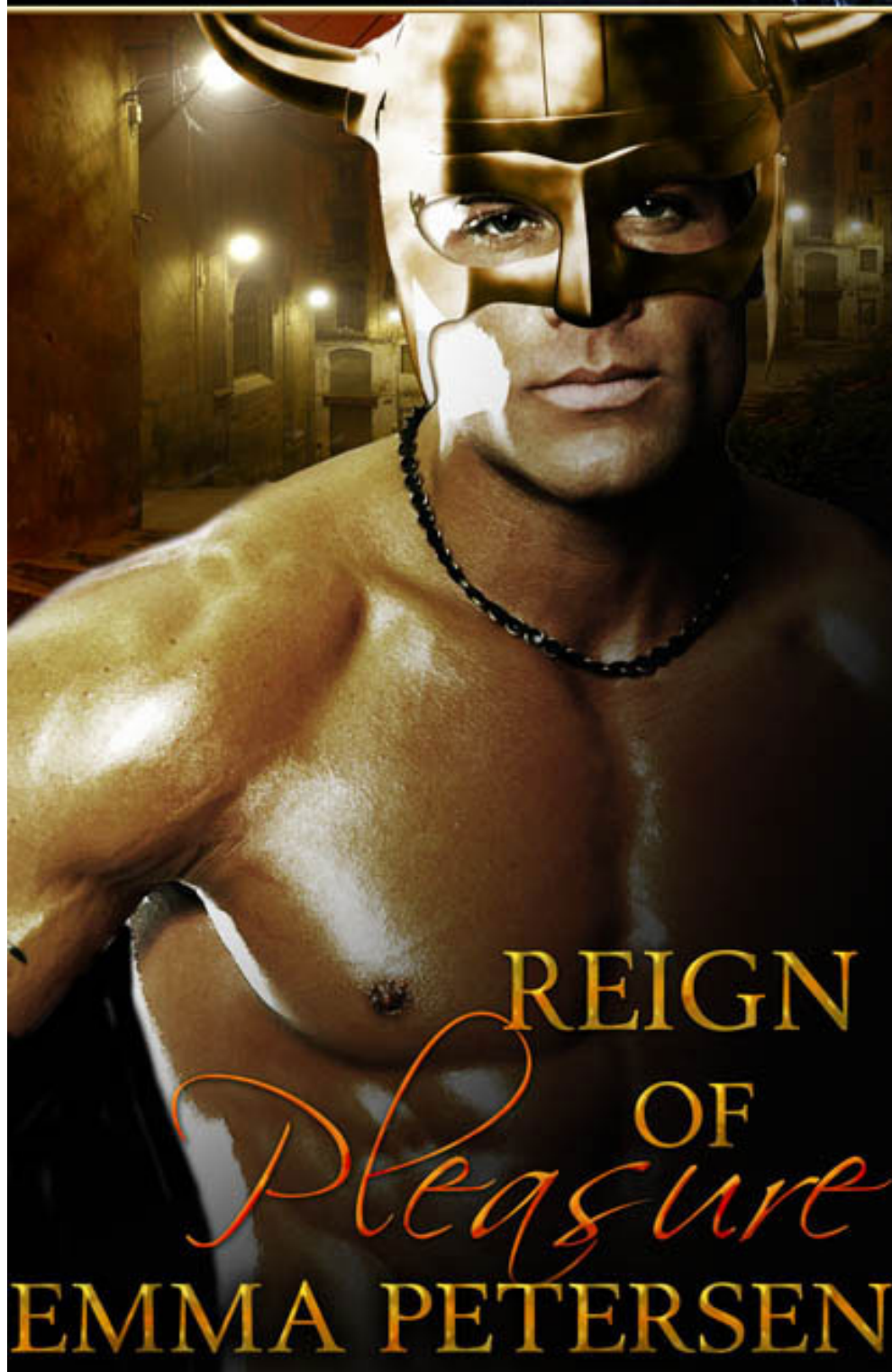


ELLORA'S CAVE TABOO



REIGN  
OF  
*Pleasure*  
EMMA PETERSEN

## **Reign of Pleasure**

*Emma Petersen*

Deposed queen Rhiannon's sexual proclivities have finally gotten her into trouble. After Rhiannon took a pleasure slave who didn't belong to her, the courtesan's master is asking the ultimate price for the trespass—not Rhiannon's life, but her body...and complete submission for three days. Rhiannon is determined to submit only her body, but Lord Ignus Sebastian, her new master, will settle for nothing less than her soul.

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Reign of Pleasure

ISBN 9781419927447

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Edited by Meghan M. Conrad

Cover art by Syneca

Electronic book publication January 2011

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# *REIGN OF PLEASURE*

Emma Petersen

## **Chapter One**

As a deposed queen used to the treachery that lay around every corner at court, you'd think I'd be a little more vigilant, a little more apt to look a gift whore in the mouth. But when I walked into my chambers to find a petite blonde in my sitting room, the last thing I thought about was intrigue.

If I had a type, she would be it. Since I was taller than most males at court, I'd always secretly envied diminutive ladies their statures. Small wasn't a word that could describe any part of me. Growing up, it was often said I had the hips, ass and tits of common stock. Of course, since I was heir apparent and could lop off the head of any who offended me, it was never said in my presence.

At court, however, nothing was secret, not even the covert whisperings of my detractors. As long as I could remember, I had cursed my ample hips and bosom. Not only because they were just one more reason I was different, but because it was damned difficult to wear the formal dress the ladies of court had favored for the past several hundred years. Though our kind tended not to emulate most modern human customs, the peerage did prefer the manner of dress mortals had worn during their eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—long, flowing dresses, corsets, petticoats and luxurious fabrics.

My uninvited guest had the perfect body for court fashion. Where I was plump and round, she was coltish and lissome. Everything about her was small, from her angular facial features and fragile fingers clasped in her lap to her breasts that my mouth could easily engulf.

I didn't need to know her name and, though I knew I should ask who sent her and why, I walked farther into my chamber and went directly to my toy chest. There would be time for idle chitchat later.

She was dressed in a gown so sheer it would probably melt in one's mouth. I knew she was sent for my use, and use her I would. I needed something to break the tension that had been riding me harder than a two-dollar harlot at a poor man's convention.

And this lovely piece would do just fine.

A present one of my many unwanted suitors had sent me last week was the first thing that caught my eye when I opened the closet. My little treasure chest held all the paraphernalia that a pleasure junkie like me would need. Dildos and vibes of every imaginable color and shape, along with kinkier accoutrement like nipple clamps, Wartenberg wheels and riding crops.

All manner of beings have vices, things that make them do things they would not normally do. Sell their bodies, rob, kill, and I was no different. To feed my addiction, I did kill. But in a subtler, more exquisite, less permanent way, secretly draining my lover of her life force as she writhed and cried out against me.

*La petite mort.*

The tiny death was my addiction and I knew this porcelain doll had been sent here to feed it. I'd never ended a donor's life, merely taken a little taste to satisfy my sometimes ceaseless hunger.

I picked up the box that originally caught my eye, closed the closet door and went to sit next to my visitor. Perched on the edge of the settee, she watched me open the sealed package and unwrap a pink jelly vibrator. For the first time since I entered the room, her head lifted and our eyes met. Her eyes grew wide, her pupils dilating and nearly drowning out the silver-blue of her irises. A look of apprehension covered her face as she looked down at the device I held in my hands.

From the way her body tensed, if I didn't know any better, I'd think my little courtesan was nervous. I caressed the shaft of the toy, running my hand over its bulbous tip and imposing length to the faux testicles that hid the electronic device that would make the apparatus pulse and rotate.

A smile curved my lips as she swallowed audibly, the middle of the device with its bulging beads no doubt making her anxious.

"You have to make sure you have it on the right setting and then work your way up, or the pleasure will be too much too fast. We don't want that, now, do we?"

Worrying her lip between her teeth, she began to nod but stopped herself.

I couldn't help but laugh. The scent of her arousal perfumed the room even though I had yet to touch her. Her eyes were still wide and her back tense, but from the heat radiating from her body and the slight nod of her head, I knew she was ready.

"Come here," I whispered, encouraging her to straddle my lap. She shivered as she leaned over me, a knee braced on either side of my thighs. I reached down and pushed aside the tiny sliver of fabric that covered her hairless sex. "We're gonna start off slow. Okay?"

She nodded again and bit back a moan as the toy buzzed to life. I pressed it against her clit and the floodgates opened. As her pleasure echoed through me, I was barely able to stop the cry that almost escaped my lips.

My people, the *Clarsensus*, were telepaths, could read the thoughts and feelings of others. My gift though was most powerful during sexual encounters. When I touched my partners sexually, their thoughts and feelings slid effortlessly into my mind and this time was no different. I couldn't read her then word for word, but I could see the shape of them as they filtered through. Her pleasure, on the other hand, was as intense as if it were my own. When she came, so would I.

"Mmm." She moaned as the toy vibrated against her clit. She held her chest stiff against mine, as if she was afraid to lean against me. Or as if she was trying to stop the natural movements of her hips but couldn't. That would never do. The high I got from pleasure was always sharper if the unwitting donor surrendered fully, so I worked the vibrator harder against her.

Sighing, she slumped against me, grinding against my hand as her cries filled the room.

She was on the verge. The first wave of her orgasm blossomed over me, charging through my veins like a hit of heroin, raising the hair on my arms, heating my blood as the pleasure built immense and deep in my belly.

“Ah, ah, ah. Not quite yet,” I chided. The pleasure was good, but I knew of a way to make it better.

The feel her stroking my back and shoulders made my hips rise against hers, and for a mere fraction of a second I wished to be the one to submit instead of dominate. That the body I arched into was hard instead of soft.

I concentrated on the pleasure of her writhing against me and all my other thoughts dissipated like a wisp of smoke. Ecstasy more insidious and drugging than the finest purple *kush* rolled me under, taking me deeper into the sensations that pulsed through her.

She leaned down, hesitating before pressing her lips against mine. I licked the seam before pressing my tongue between them. Her mouth opened under mine, her sweet breath shuddering out as I ran the bulbous tip of the toy back and forth over her drenched slit, shivering as the sound of her wetness pushed me harder.

Her thighs tightened against my hand as I pressed the tip of the toy up and inside her. It didn't penetrate easily, her cunt tighter than any concubine's had the right to be. She bore down, gasping as she slid over the jelly cock. I tore my mouth from hers, panting as the sensation of it stretching her splintered through me and more concrete fragments of her thoughts filled my mind.

*Surprise.*

*Ecstasy.*

*Triumph.*

The ecstasy and surprise I understood easily, because every pulse of her pleasure reverberated through me, taunting my own empty sex, but the feeling of triumph puzzled me.

Not enough, however, to stop what I was doing.



"That's it," I encouraged, desperately craving more as she ground against my hand. "Help me fuck your juicy little pussy." Her hips rocked faster and her breath feathered against the crease of my neck. She ran her tongue over my collarbone, over my breasts, until she reached my nipples poking against the fabric of my dress.

The movements of my hand sped up until I was ramming the cock into her flooded cunt, fucking her hard and fast. The climax that had gathered in her belly earlier returned, deeper, intense. It burst over us both as she bit my nipple and then sucked it into her mouth through the fabric.

We held each other as we shuddered, the toy lodged deep inside her as she whispered, "Got you."

\* \* \* \* \*

I knew what most of the lords and ladies of court said about me. None respected me, even though I was the true queen, the last of the exalted royal *Clarsensus* bloodline that spanned more than a millennium. To them, I was nothing more than a selfish, willful child, even though I'd seen my three hundredth birthday four years ago.

I didn't begrudge them their opinions. Neither did I expect them to understand. I had done my best to fulfill my duty to the kingdom during my marriage, yet my womb had remained as barren as our lands to the north. No one understood better than I how disappointing it was that my husband had died without leaving behind a child. Though my disappointment had nothing to do with my obligation to the crown and more with a wish to have a small piece of my fragile, mortal lover to keep with me forever.

Having married a human was just another reason for the court and council to despise me. Never, in all the years that the *Clarsensus* had ruled had anyone diluted the bloodline with human blood. And even though I had failed to do so, the scorn still existed because I'd had the audacity to try.

I was staring out of the window when the door to my chamber opened. It was becoming a habit for persons to come into my presence unannounced.

Turning to chastise the trespasser, I stopped when I saw the look on my attendant's face. Not many things perturbed Karena, so whatever news she brought, it was not good.

"Your Highness, the council has sent for you." Karena insisted on addressing me as if I were still queen.

I frowned. I had finished my business with the council the same day I found the blonde in my room and had made it clear I had nothing else to say to them until a week after my husband's birthday. But as many of my wishes, they'd ignored this one as well.

"Remind them Soren's birthday is less than a week away and I will not be bothered until it is over." I turned back to the window.

"Highness, it is not a request." Her voice lowered. "They have sent armed guards to escort you if necessary."

Armed guards?

Even though the council had made it clear on more than one occasion the only way I'd be reinstated to the throne was to remarry and produce a suitable heir, not once had they threatened me with violence.

I turned to face Karena again and was surprised to see two council guards standing in my doorway behind her. Out of curiosity more than fear, I followed them out of my suite to the assembly chamber, where the council sat waiting.

Before the three gathered could speak, I raised my hand. "I know, even though we all do not share the same blood, we all do speak the same language. I have put up with a lot from this council, but I will not put up with the disrespect of my husband's memory."

Silence followed in the wake of my statement and I took advantage of it by sending out feelers. Though it was unlikely I'd pick up a thought or emotion, I tried anyway.

As suspected, I got nothing. I stood facing the bane of my existence, The Council of Three: the oldest of all the *Clarsensus*, *Ignmotus* and *Beoprocul* lines.

My hands were clenched so hard in front of me they grew numb. What could they want now that they hadn't demanded from me my entire life?

"For thousands of years, the inhabitants of the *Ether* Realm have existed and thrived where the mortals have bred war, famine and violence. A near parallel of the human plane, we have survived because we have rules and laws to prevent chaos. Without them, we are nothing more than *humans*." He said the last word as the curse he meant it to be. "You do understand this, don't you, Rhiannon?"

I stifled a sigh.

It was not the council who addressed me, but their lap dog William. I looked away from the council to the petty little man who made plotting my downfall his favorite pastime and held my tongue.

*William, William, William.* The only thing he hated more than the humans was me. Saying he looked like a troll was an insult to trolls everywhere. He was my biggest critic and, if the rumors were true, the proud owner of a penis so small it would make Michelangelo's *David* point and laugh.

Poor William, I should have felt sorry for him, but I didn't. If I had been of the *Ignmotus* line, he would have been a pile of ash by now.

"Come now, Rhiannon. Please don't tell me that sharp tongue has finally failed you."

I wouldn't let him bait me. Until they told me what this farce was about, I'd stay silent.

"Do you know why you are here, Rhiannon?"

If he called me by my birth name one more time...

*Get a hold of yourself. That is exactly what he wants. Any reason to see you punished.*

William continued as if he hadn't expected me to answer. Walking toward me, he stopped when less than a foot separated us, leaned closer and whispered, "Has someone been caught with their hand in the wrong cookie pot?" He laughed and stepped back. "Send in the petitioner."

Petitioner? The summoning of a petitioner meant that I was to be tried for a crime, which was preposterous. What trumped-up crime could they think to charge me with?

I turned toward the entrance and watched as the glue that sealed my fate walked in.

"*Domna* Eve, welcome," William greeted, ushering in the woman who had writhed and cried out in my lap less than forty-eight hours ago. She looked just as small and delicate as she had then, but the smile she gave me was neither. It was exultant and suddenly I knew why ecstasy hadn't been the only thing quivering through her deceitful body during our encounter.

William's face was gleeful as he turned to look at me. "Rhiannon, you know *Domna* Eve, don't you?"

I now knew that she was a pleasure slave and I had taken her without permission, a transgression so serious, depending on her Sire's needs, that the possible consequences could include death.

What had I done? How could I have been so stupid?

"*Domna* Eve, I know that these past few days have been very trying for you, but do you mind telling the council the harm you suffered at Rhiannon's hands?"

My Trojan whore ducked her head, but not before making sure everyone in the room saw the unshed tears in her eyes. "I had been sent with a message for our Lady Queen and was waiting in her sitting room as her attendant had instructed me when she—" Her voice caught and she covered her face with her hands, pretending to be overcome with emotion.

And yes, she pretended. The perfidy practically seeped from her pores. I turned to the only other *Clarsensus* in the room, a member of the council and my father's great-

great-, great-uncle. Like me, he was of royal blood and so powerful that, unlike me, he could read anyone. I waited for him to call Eve on her subterfuge.

He didn't.

And why should he? For years, the council had wanted the means to rid themselves of me. Why shouldn't he take advantage of the perfect opportunity I'd handed him?

I turned back to find William comforting my accuser as she wept prettily.

"Shh...it's okay, dear. She'll never be able to hurt you again," he said, patting her back. "Can you continue?"

Eve sniffled into the handkerchief she had accepted from William and nodded demurely.

She was named incorrectly. Her name should have been Lucifer, for she was more treacherous and cunning than the snake that had tricked her namesake out of paradise.

"Our Lady Queen hadn't given me permission to speak, so I wasn't able to give her the message I was sent to deliver—" Her voice broke and she lifted her chin as if she were trying to be brave. "Or ask her to stop without risk of punishment."

Damn it. That part, at least, was true. I *hadn't* given her permission to speak, but why would I when I had mistaken why she was there? And who sends a half-naked messenger anyway?

He gave me a censorious look, but the smile on his face ruined the effort. "Rhiannon, do you deny these allegations?"

I resisted the urge to slap the satisfied smirk off his face. "It's hard to deny anything when I still have the complainant's moans ringing in my ears."

William opened his mouth to speak, but I held up my hand. "Or did you forget I'm a *Clarsensus*, William? I feed off pleasure and not pain?"

William shook his head sadly and turned to look at the council. "So, you admit her pain was your pleasure?"

The crowd that had gathered in the assembly room murmured and this time I couldn't hold back my cry of frustration. "You can't be serious."

Eve flinched at my outburst and huddled closer to William. I applauded. Her performance could win awards.

"I've had enough." My exit was cut short by guards blocking my path.

"Sorry, Rhiannon, but you won't be going anywhere until the council decides your punishment." William grabbed my arm and tried to escort me back to the dais on which the council members sat.

A crack sounded in the room. Only the shock and glowing red handprint on William's face told me I had slapped him.

He raised his hand to strike me back when the *Clarsensus* member of the council cleared his throat. "William, I know you are not about to strike a member of the royal family." It wasn't a question. The council member stepped down from the platform and walked to where William and I stood.

William's hand dropped as if it were leaden and he stepped back from me, bowing to the approaching assembly member the entire time. "Of course not, sir." William scurried to kneel next to the other council members.

"Lady Rhiannon," the council member greeted.

"*Consilium Claris*." I did not call him uncle because the blood between us was so thin. I dropped into a curtsy when the touch of his hand on my arm stopped me.

"We don't have time for such formalities, child."

I didn't know how to respond. If I were still queen, no formality would be needed. I wouldn't have to bow to anyone. Stripped as I was now, I was little better than a pauper on the street, only I didn't have to grovel for crumbs of bread...yet.

"William, who has bought the charges against *Lady Rhiannon*?"

I turned to look at the council's servant and watched as the cheek I hadn't slapped became as bright as the marred one. *Consilium* Claris' use of my formal title was an admonishment that was not lost on the weasel.

"Lord Ignius Sebastian, *Consilium*," he said and bowed his head, but not before I saw the smirk return to his odious little face.

Lord Ignius Sebastian? The name sounded familiar...

I turned to face *Consilium* Claris again, who looked at me expectantly. As if I *should* know the man who brought the charges against me.

I shrugged. I didn't but I'd find out soon enough.

*Consilium* Claris shook his head in pity. I didn't know. "Guards, please show Lord Sebastian in."

The crowd in the assembly chamber, which had been relatively silent throughout the proceedings, murmured again among themselves. Most of what they said was too low for me to catch.

Just as someone whispered the words, "Death comes," a shadow fell over the entrance to the council and it was then I remembered where I had heard the name Lord Sebastian. *And* I remembered his attempt to court me before I married Soren.

Lord Sebastian had taken it as a personal insult that I had chosen a human over him, but that had been no concern of mine. I had loved my husband and that was why I had married him. But even if I hadn't, if the choice had been between him and Lord Sebastian, who probably made the very hounds of hell nervous, I would have chosen Soren.

Lord Ignius Sebastian had been huge and intimidating then. Nothing had changed about him. Panic, fear and that peculiar heat suffused my body as I watched him duck his head in order to pass through the doorway into the room. He was dressed in all black and wore leather pants that molded over his long legs and thighs.

He didn't bother pretending to be a gentleman in formal court wear but dressed as the warrior he was. A bone and steel breastplate covered his massive chest while leaving his shoulders and neck bare. Were they human bones? Nausea made my stomach bubble. Even if some of the inhabitants of *Ether* didn't care for lesser beings, it was still barbaric to use them as accessories.

No wonder he had to duck to get through the room. A fire-scorched metal helmet covered his head. Two thick ebony horns twisted up the sides and ended on knife-sharp tips, adding a foot to his already impossible height.

Wind seemed to follow him—or maybe it was the tangible fear of the room's occupants that stirred his hair. Blue-black, it fell in a wave down his back to his waist.

Those gathered nearest the door sidled away from him like stirred-up prey. He didn't acknowledge them, just walked farther into the room, his gaze never leaving mine. I reminded myself I was his queen now, not the girl he had once intimidated, but the look in his eyes told me who he was and what he was capable of.

He removed his helmet and tucked it under one massive arm. I used the movement as an excuse to end our staring contest and drop my gaze. I scoffed silently. In order for something to be a contest, didn't there have to be two contestants?

"Lord Death," some brave soul dared to whisper. He had come by the name honestly. He'd been to hell and back, literally, escorting the spirits of the most dangerous supernaturals and other lesser beings to the gates of *Abyssus*. He was the only one of our world who had seen hell and not only lived to speak of it but—if the rumors were true—moonlighted as one of Hades' highest-ranking commanders and had a vacation home there.

He had once been my father's general and a warrior without peer. Campaigns had been won just by him doing nothing more than showing up on the battlefield but he had "retired" when his suit for my hand was rejected.

I had mistaken his quiet acceptance of my rejection. Had he waited this long for revenge?



Spots appeared before my eyes, blurring my vision. Heat rolled through the room in waves, stealing the oxygen. I struggled to breathe, but couldn't seem to draw air into my lungs fast enough.

I was good as dead.

"Lord Sebastian," *Consilium* Claris greeted warmly. A little too warmly. He clasped the much larger man's hand in his own and a collective gasped sounded in the room.

"*Consilium* Claris," Lord Sebastian responded with a deferential nod.

"It's been too long, my boy. Too long indeed and, while I am happy to see you, it's unfortunate we meet again under such regrettable circumstances," *Consilium* Claris responded.

*Boy? Regrettable?* Both were understatements of the most obscene kind. The huge, hulking beast of a man towering over the councilman was as much a boy as I was. *Regrettable* didn't begin to describe this situation.

The room was so quiet I knew everyone could hear the frantic beating of my heart. It skipped when Lord Sebastian turned those unnatural green eyes on me and nodded. "*Regrettable indeed, Consilium* Claris."

"I'm sure this is nothing more than a deplorable misunderstanding and our Lady Queen did not mean to deliver such an insult." *Consilium* Claris' smile and words helped to slow the frenzied pace of my heart. For more than a minute, I'd thought he'd deliver me to Lord Ignius. It would be a way for the council to get rid of me.

Suddenly, I regretted how stubborn I'd been during the previous week's summits. I could have bent on some issues. Like me, *Consilium* Claris and the other council members only wanted what was best for our realm.

After this situation was behind us and the summits were back in session, I'd bring a more flexible attitude to the meetings.

"Misunderstanding or not, I've been wronged."

More than once I opened my mouth, but no words came out. I looked at *Consilium* Claris, hoping, praying he would speak up. Would tell Lord Sebastian that he knew this was just some heinous plot and the council would have no part of the farce.

He didn't.

"Lord Sebastian, you are aware of the punishment for taking another's pleasure slave without permission?"

Lord Sebastian nodded but said no more.

"And you'd see this punishment meted out?" *Consilium* Claris paused. "You'd see the last of our royal bloodline put to death because of a misunderstanding?"

Lord Sebastian looked at *Consilium* Claris for a long moment. In that brief span of time, I knew that whatever he said or did, my life would never be the same.

"*Consilium*, you mistake me. I would never ask for our queen's beautiful head."

*Consilium* Claris clapped his hands and heaved a sigh of relief. "I knew it all along, boy. I knew you'd never hurt the queen. So the matter is settled. The queen can either provide you with another pleasure slave or the monies to procure another at your discretion."

Relieved, I waited for the council to conclude the session, but my relief was short-lived. Despite the councilman's nervous prattle, there was a look on Lord Sebastian's face that didn't bode well for me. He held up a hand, silencing *Consilium* Claris before he could speak again.

"*Consilium*, I would rather suffer a million wounds than disappoint you, but I don't want my pleasure slave to be replaced, nor do I want money."

*Consilium* Claris turned to look at Lord Sebastian, confusion clear on his face.

"Lord Sebastian, I don't understand. You said you *wouldn't* ask for Lady Rhiannon's life, yet you won't accept her recompense. What else could you possibly want?"

Lord Sebastian's full mouth stretched in what could only be described in the loosest of terms as a smile. The long slits of his pupils dilated until they nearly swallowed the green of his irises. "I want the queen."

*I want the queen.*

A roaring sound rushed through my ears as if I had been standing on a deserted shore and was slapped down by an unexpected giant wave. Frozen in place, I couldn't run. Couldn't speak. Could do nothing as it crushed me and, in front of the court, the council and a man who had waited more than two centuries for revenge, I humiliated myself by fainting.

\* \* \* \* \*

When I awoke, the softness beneath me almost convinced me that I was in my own bed and had been dreaming. Until I heard the raised voices.

"You cannot mean to give our queen to him," *Consilium* Claris said.

"Claris, Lady Rhiannon stopped being our queen the day she made it clear her own wants and needs were more important than her obligation to the crown. Besides, *you* seemed rather fond of him until he asked for her."

I didn't know who was speaking to *Consilium* Claris, but I assumed it was one of the two other council members since they appeared to be on a first name basis.

Another man's voice chimed in to disagree with *Consilium* Claris.

"Aspicio, I am exceedingly surprised that you would be the one to protest. After all, you are not all that fond of the girl."

"I may not be fond of her, but there is no way I would see her given over to be brutalized by a man who is little more than an *adnihilo*."

"A demon? Ha! Please, Aspicio, you are no better than the clucking hens that masquerade as the ladies of our court. We both know the rumors are unfounded. And if you really think brutalizing the queen is what Ignius has in mind, it's been too long since *you've* been out amongst our noblesse. It's not her body he wants, it's her

kingdom. Do you really think that *domna* was in Lady Rhiannon's room to deliver a message? The only thing she was there to deliver was a trap and our stupid, arrogant girl fell for it. We all know her entire story was as contrived as those tears she squeezed out. Trap or no trap, look at the big picture. It's been two hundred years and nothing we have said or done has compelled the girl to remarry and reproduce."

"Ignarius, are we so desperate to carry on the royal line that we'd accept one made of his seed, his line?"

"Aspicio, I'd have you remember that *his* line is also mine."

"You know what I mean, Ignarius. His mother may have been *Ignmotus*, but his father was not. And you forget – if he gets her with child, the crown is his. Do you want a man who not only consorts with the denizens of the underworld but also has a private army that rivals our own to be sovereign?"

Placing my hands over my ears, I blotted out the rest of the council's conversation. I shouldn't have been surprised or hurt by their words. I had always known they didn't approve of me, but hearing them say such harsh and mercenary things about me along with their willingness to jeopardize my safety for the sake of the crown wounded me. More than I thought it would.

For the millionth time, I wished my father had not left me so soon. No matter what the court and council had said about him overindulging me, I had always known my papa would never let harm befall me. My father had rejected Lord Sebastian when he had asked for my hand despite the cost and if he were here now, he'd do the same again.

But he wasn't. And if the council agreed to Lord Sebastian's request, there would be no escaping him this time.

\* \* \* \* \*

As an attendant led me back into the assembly chamber, I regretted not listening to the last of the council's conversation. At least then I would have known my fate and not felt as if I were waiting on the chopping block for the axe to fall.

The council, including *Consilium* Claris, sat on the dais, none showing a hint of emotion on their faces. Whatever their decision, I'd not learn it before they were ready.

*Consilium* Claris cleared his throat and spoke. "Lord Sebastian, the council has come to a decision. We grant your request. You may have Lady Rhiannon at your disposal for five days. During that time, she is yours to do with as you wish, but you may not injure, maim or otherwise cause her any permanent bodily harm."

I swayed, on the verge of fainting again, but I'd be damned before I'd let them see how their betrayal affected me. I turned to the council, wanting to memorize how each of them looked, because the next time I'd see them, they'd be headless.

Deposed or not, I was queen. How dare they give me away as if I was some whore to be borrowed or bartered? I'd kill each of them even if I had to soil my own hands to see it done.

"Lady Rhiannon, you will go from this room and into the care of Lord Sebastian. You will do any and everything he asks."

My tongue thick, as if I hadn't tasted water in years, I finally got my mouth open, but *Consilium* Claris held his hand up before I could speak.

"Every time you protest, every time you do not do what is requested of you, another five days will be added. If you are not careful, you may find your service to Lord Sebastian to be unending. The council has spoken."

I watched in horror as the council members stepped down from the dais and departed for their private chamber. They had really done it. They had given me to him, even though they knew the entire thing from the beginning was a setup.

"Come, Rhiannon."

Rage replaced my fear as I whipped around to face the man who would hold rule over my life and will for the next five days and snarled, “My name is not Rhiannon to the likes of you.”

“Ah, ah, ah,” William said from behind me. “Are you protesting already, *Rhiannon*? If he wants to call you Rhiannon, Rhi or even whore, that is his right for the next five days. I know the council made that clear.”

It was all I could do not to slap the smirk off his face—*again*—but instead I said, from between clenched teeth, “Crystal.”

## **Chapter Two**

The journey to Lord Sebastian's holdings took forever. Trapped in the backseat of a human contraption—a long, four-wheel-drive vehicle that had been altered with more luxury accoutrements than a palace suite—I sat, spine straight, across from a man bent on revenge and the woman who had assisted him.

Rage still consumed me and I embraced it because it kept me going. If this had happened two hundred years ago, I probably would have died of fright.

The car and Lord Sebastian had much in common. Both were huge and sleek. Both moved with the speed of a marauder tearing through paths without regard for those around them. And by the end of the day, I'd no doubt have taken a ride on both.

Before my eyes, Eve changed from the untried innocent who had sat, nervous and expectant under the council's watchful eye, into her true persona—a seasoned, cunning pleasure slave. Setting me up was probably not her idea, but she had carried it out nonetheless. I could only wonder what she had been promised if Lord Sebastian became king.

Now she sat next to her Sire and eyed him hungrily as he looked out the window, his elongated pupils sliver thin.

"Sire," she purred, huddling closer to him, "can I have her?"

Have whom? I knew the answer. I just wanted to live in the land of denial for a little longer.

"Have her?" Ignus' words echoed my question as he looked from the tartlet who was now almost in his lap to me. "Have her how, pet?" He helped her straddle his thighs and a memory of me doing the same with her flashed through my mind.

The car no doubt had the latest advances in climate control, yet heat suffused my skin. I dismissed it as an aftereffect of fear and stress rather than the scene playing out before me.

Mouth dry, I watched as Eve gripped his broad shoulders and undulated her slim hips against him. He grabbed handfuls of her ass. At first I couldn't tell if he was trying to stop or encourage her movements.

I clenched my thighs together and ignored the way my nipples hardened against the material of my dress. I was not aroused.

Much.

"Is that the way you ask for something, pet?"

*Pet. How degrading.* Although the way the little treacherous bitch was panting, it was kind of appropriate.

"*Please*, may I have her, Sire, and prepare her for you? Her pussy's probably really tight. I've heard she hasn't been with a man since her meat puppet died nearly two centuries ago." Eve's words ended on a moan as his hands tightened on her ass. "Your cock is too big. She's not going to be able to take you until she's warmed up."

*Meat puppet? Did this whore just call my husband a meat puppet?*

"And, of course, you want to warm her up for me, don't you, pet?"

Eve whimpered. "Yes, Sire. So very badly."

Ignius' eyes met mine over Eve's shoulder. They never left me as Eve's cries escalated and the grinding movement of her hips became frenzied.

I didn't know what was more disturbing—the fact that the little slut was going to come in front of me and I wouldn't benefit, or that Ignius' face was near expressionless as a woman rode herself to orgasm on his lap.

I flinched as Eve gave a sharp cry. She stiffened, buried her head in the curve of his neck and trembled as he continued to work her against him through her climax.

The entire time, his eyes bore into mine. As if he dared me to look away.



I didn't. I couldn't. It wasn't only the sounds of her pleasure that had me transfixed, but also the promise I could see in Ignius' eyes as he pounded her mound against his erection.

He wasn't gentle. And whether Eve was used to being ridden hard or not, the way he used her aroused me when by all rights it should have disgusted me. His hands spasmed on her ass and his eyes dropped to my chest where he could probably see my hardened nipples through the fabric of my shirtwaist.

As Eve's cries quieted, Ignius patted her back. The action reminded me more of something awkward done to comfort an acquaintance, not something a man would do with his lover who had just come all over his lap.

I couldn't take any more. Closing my eyes, I attempted to block them both out as I leaned my head back against the seat. This ride in an automobile was a rare occurrence for even me, so I might as well enjoy it—who knew when it would happen again? The council had long ago decided what we could and could not bring over from the mortal plane and cars were at the top of the couldn't list. To control the numbers, an obscene tax was put on them, making them unaffordable even to the noblesse. Ignius was rich and powerful. That power wasn't just in what he owned, it was also in his very being, and that was what worried me.

There had always been something about him that drew me to him, even though he scared me. Though I wouldn't admit it, even upon torture, I was curious about him. Images flashed through my mind—of Ignius over me, inside me, working me—and I attempted to ignore them.

I wouldn't think about it. I'd let the smooth ride of the car lull me and I would find solace in sleep because when we arrived at our destination, I'd have more than enough time to deal with my new lot.

Minutes later, half asleep, I was startled awake by someone's hands lifting my skirts. I opened my eyes to find Eve kneeling before me, my dress and petticoats already well above my knees. Trying to scoot away from her, I batted at her hands.

"Uh-uh, Rhi Rhi." She smiled at me and it was not an innocent, bat-her-eyelashes, *please take care of me because I'm so vulnerable and fragile* smile. "There'll be none of that. Remember. No protesting or you'll get more time. Not that I would mind." She looked back at Ignius. "Maybe after Sire is done with you, he'll give you to me. And I'll be able to pound your pussy the way you pounded mine."

*Rhi Rhi?* This bitch was mad. I looked at Ignius, hoping for salvation in the most unlikely of places, and found none. He merely arched an eyebrow as if daring me to object.

*It's only five days, Rhiannon. Don't make this worse by picking the wrong battles. What's the worst she can do? Make you come? You've already come with her once. What's one more time? Just be satisfied that every time she touches you sexually, you're sucking a little more of her life away. Let the bitch pound that.*

Eve chuckled as I settled back against the seat with a deflated sigh. How the hell had I ever mistaken this vicious harlot for anything other than what she was?

I closed my eyes as her hands worked my skirts up higher. I ignored the fluttering in my chest and the dull ache between my thighs that turned into a persistent throb. Clenching my eyes shut, I tried not to tremble as Eve's breath feathered against my sex.

"Sire, she has hair." Eve sounded truly surprised. I opened my eyes to find her looking at me in wonder, as if pubic hair were a novelty. My face heated. She was eye level with my sex, close the way only one other person had ever been.

"Does she?" Ignius voice was deeper, rougher, and it came out more of a rumble.

"Yes, Sire," Eve confirmed as she ran her finger along my sex. She dipped between the lips and chuckled. The sound was at the same time knowing and mocking, as if the wetness she found there was no surprise, but she enjoyed being proven right anyway. "She's wet."

Her fingertip glanced over my clit and I shook with the need to arch into the touch and make it harder, deeper. I hadn't been touched so intimately in a very long time and, despite my propensity for female lovers after my husband died, never by a woman. I

had always been the one to give pleasure and to take it vicariously by tapping into my host's feelings. I was wholly unprepared for the type of encounter Eve had in mind.

When her tongue flicked out following the trail of heat her fingers created, I had to bite down on my lip to stop the moan of pleasure that bubbled up from my chest. The hot, wet drag made my cunt spasm and clench as if it knew that the blunt pleasure it was used to was nothing more than a method to pacify my stronger needs. I counted to ten, each number a prayer that I wouldn't betray myself and ask her to lick me again.

A sigh escaped me as she pinched my clit between her lips. I spread my legs wide to give her better access as heat roared to life in my belly. Whether the woman between my thighs was my idea or not, I had to admit she was better than anything I had experienced in a long time.

Unbidden, an image of Ignius in Eve's place slithered treacherously into my mind and stoked the flames consuming me. Behind my closed eyes, it was his tongue, teeth and fingers that pushed me up the hill I hadn't climbed firsthand in more than two hundred years.

I flinched as Eve pushed two fingers into my cunt. A waterfall of arousal seeped from me, but still she had to push insistently to get in.

I didn't open my eyes. I could hear the breathing in the cab deepen and at first I couldn't determine whether it was Eve's or mine. It was her, every breath feathering against my cunt as she alternatively licked and sucked.

"Help me fuck your juicy little pussy."

The moan I was about to emit died in my throat and all at once I remembered where I was and *why*. Eve's echo of the same words I'd said to her was a potent reminder that pleasure at the hands of this scheming bitch was no different than lying with a venomous snake.

I placed my hands on her head, intending to push her away. Her fingers dug into the soft flesh of my hips as she ignored me and buried her face deeper into my cunt.

Looking at Ignius, I waited for him to intercede. Where I had once been willing, there was no doubt I was no longer, if that would even matter to him.

Pulling Eve's hair, I squirmed away from her grasp, but she moaned and sped up the movements of her mouth. She was getting off on this. I didn't know if she knew I was no longer into it or if she even cared, but if she didn't get the fuck off me, I was going to end up with another five days.

"That's enough, Eve."

Startled, I looked up. Ignius had finally intervened.

About damn time.

Reluctantly, Eve pulled her face from between my thighs, her lips and chin wet with my arousal. She looked at me and smiled as she licked her lips and fingers. "Sire, she was close. I know it."

"Yes, pet," he assured her. "She was very close. We're home. Go tell Dominique to prepare a bath for our *guest*."

Eve looked as if she wanted to protest. Glancing from me to Ignius, she reluctantly got up and left the car.

"Are all your whores so biddable?" I didn't bother to keep the scorn from my voice as I righted my clothing.

"No." He leaned back, settling deeper into the seat. "I have one who doesn't know her place yet. She keeps fighting her destiny and it makes me want to ride her all the harder. Besides, Eve isn't a pleasure slave. She's my enforcer."

Enforcer of what? Schemes? I refused to ask. Neither did I bother to remind him that Eve's common blood made it illegal for her to hold such a title. As long as I never had to see her again after the five days were up, she could be his general for all I cared.

"You will never be my king." It wasn't what I'd meant to say. In my mind, I had a long speech about how treachery and machinations never got their patrons anywhere.

His pupils expanded until they blotted out the color of his irises and made his eyes appear black. I didn't know if the change in his eyes were an indication of emotion but as soon as I had said the words, I wished I could call them back.

"Wh—what I meant was—" I didn't get a chance to finish my sentence. He moved quicker than the viper I likened Eve to earlier and snatched me from my seat. Off balance, I collapsed against his chest, our faces less than an inch apart.

"You are so fond of using that mouth of yours, aren't you? Maybe I should show you a better use for it."

I trembled. I told myself it was out of fear and not because his hard, biting grip didn't hurt the way it should. Instead, it sent spirals of heat to rest directly in my cunt. Hotter and stronger from this non-sexual touch than the sensations Eve provoked with her tongue buried inside me.

Swallowing hard, I waited for him to free himself from his pants. Would I fight him if he expected me to pleasure him with my mouth the way Eve had done to me? I'd never had a man in my mouth. My eyes dropped to the bulge between his thighs. Would I be able to even fit him in my mouth?

"Please," I said, even though I knew being polite wouldn't get me any mercy from this merciless man.

"You *will* respect me. You will remember, during the time you are with me, you are *mine*. To use any way I see fit." He punctuated each sentence with a light shake. "And just so you don't forget, you are to call me Master."

I nodded automatically, cowed in the face of his unyielding tone.

He flattened a hand against my side and pushed me down.

*Oh God. He is really going to make me do this.*

What if I disappointed him? I didn't know what to do. I was so caught up in my own thoughts that it took me a moment to realize he wasn't pushing my head toward

his groin. He was pushing it to rest against the heated leather seat so he could swing my lower body until I was draped bottom-up over his lap.

I held my body stiff as he pushed my dress and petticoats up. Cool air kissed the skin of my buttocks as he bunched my skirts around my waist. I concentrated on keeping my breathing even as my heart jackhammered. It wasn't fear that spiked through me. Well, it was, but it was more of the unknown, of wondering what he planned to do to me.

I flinched as his large, calloused palm cupped one of my cheeks, massaging it before doing the same to the other. He rubbed his hand over both of them and the combination of the heat radiating off his body and the gentleness of his touch lulled me. My head drooped against the seat and I allowed my body to relax against his.

When the first blow fell, it was so unexpected my mind took a minute to process what happened. By the time I identified the sound of his palm hitting my skin and the resulting sting in my buttocks, his hand had fallen a second time.

"For the next five days, whose pussy is this?" I guess I didn't answer quickly enough, because he brought his hand down again, harder than the last time.

My head lifted and I thought of scrambling off his lap, but before I could act, he pressed his other hand into the flat of my back to hold me down. Over and over his hand fell, warming the flesh of my buttocks and pooling a curious heat between my thighs.

I was confused. Hitting should not feel good. Should not make me want to grind into the erection growing and stabbing into my belly. My sex shouldn't be tingling, dampening and throbbing in time with the blows to my ass.

Biting my lip, I lost count of how many times he brought his hand down. I concentrated on keeping my body still and not giving voice to the bewildering pleasure he gave me.

I fought it, reminding myself that deposed or not, a queen did not enjoy being spanked as if she were a mischievous child. But my bloodline or title mattered not one bit to my disloyal flesh.

“Spread your legs.”

Eyes clenched shut, I obeyed the command before I realized he had stopped smacking my ass, and was immediately ashamed of how easily I capitulated.

I stiffened as he touched the wetness that coated my thighs. He followed the trail of arousal until it ended between my legs. The first touch of his blunt fingertips against my sex startled a gasp from me. I couldn't help but compare his touch to Eve's. After all, theirs were the only ones I'd experienced in centuries. He removed his hand from the small of my back and used it to part the lips of my cunt.

The sound of my own wetness met my ears as he slowly worked one finger inside me.

“Eve was right.”

The sound of her name should have sent ice water through my veins and cooled the ardor incinerating me, but as he glided his fingers over the sensitive walls of my cunt, I couldn't think beyond of the sparks of sensation pulsing through my sex. He added another finger and the good burn turned bad for a fraction of a second as he tunneled deeper, stretching me. I swallowed a moan as his digits brushed nerve endings I didn't realize I had.

He set a rhythm and it built until his fingers fucked me, dipping in and out faster and faster, each time brushing against something inside me that made lights explode behind my closed eyes. I gave up the battle and let my hips rock against his hand, hoping to get more pressure on the place his thrusting fingers had glanced.

I writhed against him, his erection prodding my belly. It was so hard and it was *me* who made it that way. It was a wondrous thought that *I*, with my unfashionable body size, had done this to him. The thought disappeared as quickly as it formed as he curved his fingers up and pressed directly against a very sweet spot.

"Oh God," I cried out, pussy spasming and clamping down on his fingers. Thrusting in and out, he continued to stroke the walls of my cunt, pushing the tension higher with each movement until it was so acute I couldn't distinguish whether it was pain or pleasure.

"What is my name?"

The question came out of nowhere and I was too focused on the sensations his fingers were wreaking inside me. His hand stilled and I cried out.

"Ignius."

Wrong answer.

He didn't move. I needed him to move. I was so close...so very close. "Please," I begged, sobbing. I had a tiny taste of what was just beyond my reach and I wanted it badly. Bad enough to... "Master," I whispered and nearly cried with relief when he pumped his fingers in and out of me again.

"Come for me, mine. Come for me now."

The words were unnecessary. The spasms started deep and spread out over my body in waves, jerking guttural cries from me as he fucked me harder until liquid gushed from my cunt.

\* \* \* \* \*

My eyes were still closed as my heartbeat and breathing slowly returned to normal. I was hot, my body flushed not only from the orgasm but also from the humiliation burning through me.

I called him Master. And I'd begged. Begged for him to push his fingers deeper, harder...

I wasn't married. What I had done was not cheating, but that didn't stop the guilt and shame from assaulting me for taking so easily the pleasure he offered. A tear leaked out of the corner of my eye and I quickly dashed it away. His hand came up to stroke my hair back from my face and I shied away from the touch.



“Stubborn.” He said the word as if it was an endearment.

I was, but not as stubborn as I’d wanted to be. If I had been, I would have been able to deny him the satisfaction of making me come.

“Are you going to obey me?”

*Obey?* What was I, a dog? Sit, stay, come?

His hand caressed my bottom. “What do you say, mine?”

“Ye-yes, Master.”

He pushed me off his lap and I landed in a heap at his feet. Yesterday, I would have jumped up and launched myself at him in an attempt to scratch his eyes, but it was hard to fight someone when your legs were still shaky from the orgasm they’d just given you.

A sick part of me had wanted to ignore him, to deny him the words he wanted to hear in hopes he would spank me again, but I needed to avoid his touch until I got my traitorous emotions under control.

I looked at him, hoping to gauge his mood. My eyes got as far as his groin and the intimidating bulge that strained against his leathers in a way it hadn’t after he had made Eve come. Did I turn him on more than she did? I hoped I did.

My breath quickened and I tried to ignore the seditious thought the sight inspired in me. As I continued to stare, I noticed the area was damp. He hadn’t come. Even though I had been half out of my body and mind when I had, I knew with certainty he had not come. Heat suffused my body with an odd mixture of embarrassment and arousal as I realized the wetness had come from me.

My heart thumped and my stomach fluttered as I remembered the rush of liquid gushing from me as he worked his fingers inside my cunt. Face hot, I longed to ask him what happened, how he had coached such a response from my body, but I wouldn’t.

He had been victorious in our first skirmish, but I refused to give him ammunition that would help him win the war. Tears welled in my eyes again and I fought them. My cries echoed through my mind. I had never acted so...wild, so uninhibited.

Never had I known such violent, agonizing pleasure. Never writhed, begged and cried out the way I had. Not even with my beloved husband, who had always been a patient and gentle lover. For two hundred years, I had kept myself aloof, never accepting the touch of another for fear it would diminish Soren's memory.

Ignius' touch had not merely lessened that memory, but exterminated it. I thought of my husband, conjured an image of his face and waited for the longing to follow, but it didn't. Instead, the mental picture shattered easily as glass when Ignius' voice cut through it.

"Get up, mine. I have no intention of spending the rest of our first day in this car."

*Arrogant bastard.*

Despite the orgasm that had nearly rattled my teeth from my skull, I was wet again and my nipples hardened when I thought of the night ahead. I hated him for it. But I hated myself even more.

Ignius got out of the vehicle and didn't bother to reach back a hand to assist me down, even though the car sat a good two feet off the ground. Gathering my skirts in hand, I gingerly climbed down from the car, aware of Ignius' eyes upon me the entire time.

As soon as my feet touched the ground, he turned and walked toward a set of doors. I practically had to run to keep up as his long-legged stride consumed the distance. My skirts still in hand, I was so busy watching my feet so I didn't trip on the slippery cobblestone walkway that I didn't notice Ignius had stopped at the entrance.

"Ooompf!" I tried to stop myself from falling but couldn't. Just as my posterior was about to meet the cement, Ignius swooped down and wrapped his arm around my waist. His touch burned through the many layers of clothing right to my skin and beneath it, I imagined.

"Th-thank you, Ig—Master," I stammered, catching myself before I accidentally called him by his first name.

His arm tightened around my waist and I didn't know if my sudden loss of breath was because he was cutting off my air supply or because of his close proximity. I let myself bathe in the warm waters of denial and told myself the reason my heart slammed against my rib cage was because I was scared. And the forceful, less than gentle arm around me was the cause.

"No need to throw yourself at my feet." He leaned his head closer to mine. "Yet."

My eyes fluttered shut and for a moment, I thought he would kiss me.

"There'll be enough time for that later." His arm loosened abruptly and fearful of falling, I held on.

Chuckling, he let me slide down the length of his body. As I got my footing, he didn't let go immediately. He took his time before he removed his arm.

For the first time since the ordeal began, I stood toe to toe with him and noticed he was a good deal taller than me, my head barely coming up to his shoulder. I dropped my gaze and let it fall level with his chest. I had the most absurd need to rest my head against it. If I did, would I hear his heartbeat?

Probably—*if* he had one.

Raising my head, I looked up to find him studying me with the same remote expression he had worn when he got Eve off in the car. I didn't flinch from his scrutiny. I raised my chin, straightened my back and met his eyes.

Hands still clutching his forearms, I sent out a feeler, hoping I'd be able to pick up his thoughts or emotions. A frown creased his brow and his hold tightened.

"Stop trying to read me."

I opened my mouth, denial automatically springing to my lips.

"Don't bother to lie. I felt it."

Mouth slightly ajar, I shook my head. There was no way he should be able to know when I was trying to read him. Eve hadn't known and I was not only able to read her but also feed off my encounter with her.

Was it even possible for him to know? I knew he was *Ignmotus* even before I heard *Consilium* Ignarius tell the council they were of the same line. Calling and controlling fire was all he should be able to do. It was what made his frequent journeys into the underworld possible.

"Don't look so stunned. You aren't the only one with special talents." His eyes hardened. "Don't do it again."

Before I could give into the urge and ask him what special talents he referred to, a servant cleared his throat behind us.

"Pardon the interruption, Master, but the *domnatoso* is ready for the queen."

I waited for Ignius to correct his servant, to tell him that here, in his home, I was not queen, that I was nothing more than another one of many whose only purpose was to see to his pleasure, but he didn't.

Nodding, Ignius walked away and left me with the attendant who would take me to the pleasure slave quarters and bathing chamber.

As I watched Ignius walk away, I thought about how much my life had changed in so little time. Never had I thought I'd be in the home of such a notorious man, let alone completely at his will, his mercy.

"Your Highness, if you'll please follow me."

Tearing myself away from staring at my soon-to-be lover's retreating back, I turned to face the man who offered me the tiniest bit of kindness in what I assumed would be a hostile place.

He was nearly as tall as his Sire but not as broad in shoulder. The lines of his face were not as harsh either. They were softer, more inviting, without being feminine. Still, he was beautiful in a way no man had a right to be.

Besides his height, the only other thing he had in common with Ignius was his hair color. It was same the unrelenting, cruel black, but he didn't have Ignius' golden skin to stave off the harshness. His skin was a pale, translucent cream that most women, including me, would kill for and his hair made for the perfect backdrop against such sheer, pearlescent beauty.

Instead of cat-green eyes, his were amber gold but, like Ignius', missed nothing. I realized I had been staring at him for more than a couple of minutes. Yet he had said nothing, which in my new situation would have been his right.

His plump bottom lip twitched and I had a feeling he resisted a smile. Heat raced up my cheeks and I thought of a way to apologize for staring without saying the actual words.

I opened my mouth, unsure of what I was going to say, when he shook his head.

"Come, your Highness. Your bath awaits."

He turned, walking the same direction Ignius had.

I followed, somewhat chastised and not knowing why. As queen, there had almost never been a time where someone had corrected my behavior. I was regent. Even if I had committed some accidental faux pas, most of the time by the next day my gaffe was the new "in" thing to do. Such was the peerage.

As I followed the servant deeper into Ignius' home, I realized he had not introduced himself, so I had no idea how to address him. His name wasn't the only question I refrained from asking. What I really wanted to know was what other ways he served his Sire.

It was not uncommon for lords to have a stable full of both male and female pleasure slaves. And while Ignius didn't strike me as a receiver, that didn't mean he wasn't a giver.

So caught up in my thoughts, I almost didn't notice the opulent surroundings, which rivaled even the royal estate's grandeur. There were rumors of Ignius

moonlighting as a commander in the underworld, which would explain how he'd not only be able to live away from court but also have a home comparable to my own.

Just as I had worked up the courage to ask my guide a few questions, we stopped in front of two huge doors.

Unfamiliar etchings spanned the length of the doors and I didn't get a chance to study them before he pushed them open. Billows of fragrant steam poured over us as he gestured for me to pass the doors into the bathing chamber. I looked back at him as I walked forward and waited for him to follow. He shook his head and made a motion with his hand. "I'll leave you in Dominique's capable hands."

I had an answer to one of my questions since he would not enter the *domnatoso*. He was not a pleasure slave or a eunuch. The only men allowed around a lord's *domnas* were either slaves themselves or the castrated warriors who guarded them.

Reluctantly, I walked farther into the chamber. A large pool took up the majority of the space in the room. Blood-red rose petals floated on the water and the bath's surface seemed to multiply the number of the immense crystal chandeliers hanging above.

The opulence of the room nearly shamed even my royal bathing chamber. I tried not to gawk like a camp follower allowed in the royal stable for the first time. As I took in my surroundings, I knew I'd have to settle on making sure my mouth wasn't gaping open.

"Your Majesty, allow me to introduce myself. I am Dominique, Lord Ignius' *matridomna*."

Just as the house servant who had left me at the door, the head stable attendant was tall and gorgeous. Long, dark red hair flowed to her waist and luminous peaches-and-cream skin complimented her golden brown eyes.

A white shift, similar to the one Eve had worn while "visiting" me, draped her generous curves and gave her skin a glowing appearance.

I was halfway into a curtsy before I realized what I was doing. I could blame it on my surroundings, but I had almost bowed to a commoner. Sure, she was a high-ranking

one, or as high ranking as a person not born into court could possibly be. Still, bowing to her was tantamount to a lion bowing to a house cat. It just wasn't done.

Before the door was closed, the *matridomna's* hands were already on the buttons of my shirtwaist. I let her undress me, wondering if in less than an hour I'd already lost all my will to fight.

It was true I didn't want to be here, but what choice did I have? I could either bide my time and hope the five days passed quickly or aggravate the situation and be stuck here until Ignius impregnated me six or seven times.

As the caretaker's gentle hands finished removing my clothes, I closed my eyes and thought of how it would be to be heavy with her Sire's child. After my husband's death, I'd vowed never to take another lover, so the thought of children was not one I'd entertained. After all, even in our world, there was no conception without intercourse.

I had been so young when I married Soren and so in love, I was ready to take on the world, mortal and otherworldly, to be with a man not of my kind. Sure, we had faced adversity, but it had been worth it.

Looking up, I searched for the source of moisture on my cheeks before I realized I was crying. Dominique ignored my tears and I liked her just a little more for it. My heart ached and I didn't want to examine why.

After one encounter with a man whose main goal in wanting me was my kingdom, there was no way I was beginning to develop feelings for him, especially so quickly.

He was so different than my Soren and so were the feelings he inspired in me. *Everything* about the man was the total opposite of what I had experienced with the only man I'd been with. On my wedding night, I hadn't had this strange feeling of dread and anticipation.

I had been at peace and resigned. I knew what would happen in the bedchamber with my new husband and the only reason in my mind for it to happen was to benefit the kingdom. There had been no limb-trembling, heart-pounding, mouth-drying fear or lust.

While I had loved my new king, I could have easily lived without the physical part of our marriage. The thought made me cry harder. There had been nothing wrong with my love life with Soren. It was only the wicked things Ignius had done to me that would make me think such disloyal thoughts.

“Shh...” Dominique soothed as she, now naked, too, led me into the steaming water. “Your Highness, don’t be afraid, our Sire doesn’t bite.” She laughed softly. “Well, he does but it is pleasurable, I promise.”

Through blurry eyes, I looked at the *matridomna*, realizing she thought I cried because I was afraid of Ignius and what the forthcoming night would bring. I didn’t correct her. How could I? I had just barely admitted to myself that he made me feel things my husband never had. I could never say the words aloud.

Another *domna* joined us in the pool. She and Dominique scrubbed me from head to toe, leaving no part of me untouched. Soon another emotion—embarrassment—replaced my tears as the two led me from the water.



## Chapter Three

After Ignius' *domna* and *matridomna* bathed, moisturized and shaved me, I waited for them to put me in the oven. After all, I was as plucked and prepared as a Christmas goose. Their ministrations had taken my mind off things, so I had let them fuss over and pamper me.

Dominique led me naked from the bathing chamber into a massive room that I assumed belonged to Ignius. I didn't have to worry about running into anyone in my unclothed state. A door led there directly from the *domnatoso*. Mighty convenient.

Every nerve in my body hummed as if each square inch of my skin had a life and heartbeat of its own and every one of them pulsed. I tried not to think about what was soon to happen. Neither did I bother to pray for a miracle, to be delivered from my current predicament. I told myself it was because in this situation it was useless, not because I wanted Ignius.

I didn't want him. My *body* did. Craved him as if he was sustenance and I hadn't had a meal in weeks. I had no doubt he'd know how to feed it. He had given me a taste in the car and I wanted more.

Not because he coerced me, but because for once in my life I could give in to the side of me that liked being on the bottom, who enjoyed a man being a little rougher than he had to be. I could surrender to my inner self and not feel the guilt associated with being a queen who didn't always want to be strong.

Dominique smiled, giving me an encouraging nod and gentle nudge before she left the room, closing the door behind her. The room only held two pieces of furniture. A thronelike chair in which Ignius lounged and a bed big enough to sleep a small army.

I didn't look at him. Purposely, I let my gaze wander around the room, taking in the effortless magnificence. I had expected the entire room to be done in warrior black as

bleak as the clothes he had worn, but just like the rest of the house, it was tastefully done in rich woods and dark, lavish fabrics.

An image of myself reclined on the bed, a child with Ignius' eyes at my breast, flashed through my mind. I quickly squelched the fantasy and the emotions that accompanied it. Even if a child did result from the situation, there would be no doting father or loving husband. It had been made clear from the beginning Ignius wanted me for one reason and one reason only. I was his key to the throne. I might hate his method of gaining what he wanted, but I could still admire his ruthless ambition.

Pregnancy wasn't something I knew how to prevent. Birth control was never an issue I had to contend with. While in the *domnatoso*, I had thought to ask Dominique. As a *matridomna*, surely she knew how to protect herself and the stable, or Ignius' home would be full to the gills with his offspring.

But I never found the courage to ask. Dominique had been kind and respectful to me and I didn't want to do anything that would get her in trouble with her Sire. After all, I didn't doubt the entire house knew of their Sire's plans.

There'd be no thwarting him. While I could survive five days, I couldn't fathom spending the rest of my life tied to a man who saw my children and me as nothing more than a means to an end.

Logic still contended with the part of me that craved submission. Craved the five days of freedom, of surrender. Was five days with this man worth the sacrifice I might later have to make?

I had no answers. I didn't truly know anything except for the way he made me feel. As if it were okay to give in. Okay to be something other than breeding stock for the crown. Which was rather ironic, all things considered.

Despite the circumstance, I wanted him, but I knew I would have to fight to make sure my body was the only thing I surrendered to him. If only I could have the time without the possible lifetime of consequences.

Hyperaware of every inch of my body, I dropped my head and took a step closer to him.

“Mas—Master.” The word still stuck in my throat. “I understand that I have wronged you,” I said, even though I now knew for certain Eve had been a plant. “I took what was yours without permission and I am more than willing to make amends.” Swallowing hard, I looked up to find him watching me the same way a jungle cat might watch its prey. “I know I have no right to ask, but I beg of you, please do not spill your seed inside me.”

I flinched and took a step back when he uncoiled the length of his body from the chair. As he walked closer, I resisted the urge to cross my arms over my bare breasts.

Silent, he stood in front of me and I dropped my eyes again. I trembled but I couldn’t blame it on the cold.

No, my body was confused. *I* was confused. I had never considered myself a person who gave in easily, yet with him, the giving in was innate and the oddest part was that it felt natural.

And there lay the danger.

“Look at me.”

I took my time raising my head, a tiny act of rebellion.

Our eyes met and immediately I wanted to drop mine again. It was if his gaze seared and he could see into me to my very soul. Could see the resistance, the reluctance was nothing more than a façade.

“I will come wherever I please, mine.”

It wasn’t the answer I wanted to hear and I chastised myself for the fluttering in my stomach and increased ache between my legs.

His voice dropped an octave and it raised goose flesh on my arms. “In your lovely mouth. Your cunt.” He leaned down until our faces were inches apart. “Your ass.”

I swallowed and kept his gaze, knowing if I backed down now, the remainder of my time here would be unbearable.

“Do what you will.” Lifting my chin, I whispered, “And I will also. Just because you plant your seed in my belly doesn’t mean I have to leave it there.” It was an idle threat, but one I hoped he’d take seriously since he had no way of knowing I’d never harm my child.

A growl sounded deep in his throat and I took a step back.

“You forget. I don’t have to return you to the council. Do you think they would risk the decimation of the royal military for a willful brat?” He grabbed my arms, swung me around and backed me up until my knees hit the bed. When he pushed my shoulder, I closed my eyes, allowed myself to fall and waited for him to follow me down.

I couldn’t stop the shivering in my limbs. Fear fed my arousal.

When he didn’t immediately climb atop me, I opened my eyes to find him staring at me. I thought he looked how I felt, conflicted and confused.

“Did Dominique make you come while you were in the bathing chamber?”

I shook my head. I didn’t ask if she was supposed to. I didn’t know if I would have been able to even if she had tried. Her sire’s touch had been burned into my skin and I didn’t think Dominique’s softer touch would do.

“Dominique isn’t as fond of women as Eve is.” He sighed as if it was some huge tragedy that a woman I barely met hadn’t got me off. “And you aren’t fond of Eve, are you?”

I shook my head again, unable to gather my thoughts enough to form a two-letter syllable with him this close to me.

“Get all the way on the bed and open your legs.”

Swallowing hard, I did as he asked. Feet planted on the surface of the bed, I spread my legs wide. My body heated, a blush rising and spreading upward over my stomach and breasts until it bloomed on my cheeks. I’d had more than my fair share of sexual

encounters, but never had I been so exposed. Even in my marriage bed, my husband had never asked me to uncover myself in such a manner.

The bed dipped as he climbed onto it and made a place for himself between my splayed knees.

“I don’t know which way I like you better. Bare or...”

He liked something about me? Before I realized it, my mouth curved into a smile. It was ridiculous, but the statement, which in all intents wasn’t even about me, pleased me nonetheless.

Not finishing his sentence, he ducked his head and something warm and wet dragged the length of my labia.

“Oh!” The pathetic warm and fuzzy emotions I entertained vanished as a more tangible one took its place. I stiffened as I realized what he was doing and cried out as his tongue dipped between my cunt lips to press against my clit. His mouth was hotter than Eve’s had been, his tongue harder, broader and more agile. He licked, nipped, sucked and soon I didn’t bother to swallow my cries as he devoured me.

Writhing on the bed, I clenched my hands in the sheets and dug the soles of my feet into the mattress to give me leverage. My hips did a dance of advance and retreat as the pleasure teetered on the threshold of pain.

His large, calloused hands clenched my hips, holding them still as he stabbed his tongue into my opening.

I fought the orgasm tightening my insides, unsure if I’d be able to endure it, but relentlessly he pushed. Lash after tantalizing lash, he drove me on.

He lifted his head from between my thighs. “Give in.”

Panting, I shook my head and he smiled in response, his lips wet with my arousal.

“Have it your way.”

The words were the softest he’d spoken to me since we’d left court and shouldn’t have sounded ominous, but they did.

He returned to his place between my thighs but didn't immediately bury his tongue back in my cunt. Instead, he tunneled two blunt fingers inside me, teasing the place deep inside me he'd introduced me to earlier.

Trembling, I resisted the searing pleasure as it washed over me. He sucked my clit into his mouth and a flash of light burst behind my eyes. I cried out as the orgasm plowed into me with the force of a speeding train. I couldn't hear what he was saying, but I knew he talked because of the vibrations against my cunt as he continued to lick and finger-fuck me.

Spasms shook my frame and liquid gushed from my body. He lifted his head but didn't still the motions of his hands. "Come again."

I opened my mouth to beg him to stop, to tell him there was no way I'd be able to come again so soon, when my body made a liar out of me.

Harder and harder he stroked me until all I could do was convulse and whimper. I was still coming, my pussy still contracting, pulsing, when he flipped me onto my stomach. Jamming a pillow beneath me, he tilted my hips at an angle. Shivers still racked my body and I buried my hands in the duvet as I caught my breath.

I didn't understand why I was on my stomach with my ass practically in the air. With the orgasm still throbbing through me, I couldn't concentrate enough to be embarrassed about him seeing my less than slim hips and bottom.

His hands pulled apart my thighs, guiding me until I rested my weight on my elbows, knees and the pillow beneath me.

Turning my head to the side, I closed my eyes, tensing as I waited for him to make his next move.

Ignius' hand slid between my legs to touch the arousal on my thighs and pussy, rubbing it into my skin, working it upward until he reached the cleft of my ass. Dipping between my cheeks, he touched the puckered flesh there and I stiffened, remembering his earlier spoken words.

I will come wherever I please. In your lovely mouth. Your cunt. Your ass.

Surely he wouldn't.

My body wound tight and my thighs trembled as he pushed into me. "If I fucked your ass, there'd be no worries about a pregnancy, would there?"

He slipped his other hand beneath me, rubbing my clit, taking my mind away from the possible invasion of my ass.

"You aren't scared, are you, princess? Not with all this juice flowing the way it is."

He continued to work his finger against my back entrance. The dual sensations bewildered me as they coalesced into one that throbbed deep in my cunt.

"I'm going to fuck this ass. I'm going to fuck it hard, but first..."

I cried out as both of his hands left me.

"But first I'm going fuck this tight little pussy. Do you know how long I've waited to get inside you?"

Finally, a question I could answer. I opened my mouth, a snide retort on the tip of my tongue, when his cock pushed against my opening and snatched the words right out of my mouth.

My stomach tightened, heart slamming in my chest as his hips flexed against my ass and his cock slid a fraction inside.

Oh God, he was huge.

Someone gasped. I was too busy concentrating on the stinging pressure between my legs to know if the sound came from me or Ignius.

Panting, I dropped my head against the covers, my knuckles turning white as I held on. Here was the virgin's fear that had been missing so long ago on my wedding night. I could feel every agonizing inch of Ignius' cock as he worked himself inside me. If I were able to talk, I'd tell him he wasn't going to fit, that he was entirely too big. And after this, I wanted to be able to walk again.

His hands clenched on my waist as he pulled me closer to him and tunneled deeper. Even as it protested, my flesh clenched on him in a series of tiny caresses.

"That's it, princess. Let me all the way in." His body covered mine, the weight of him pressing me deeper into the mattress.

I had been so busy concentrating on the pressure of his entrance, I hadn't realized somewhere along the line my muscles had begun to give against thickness of his cock.

The stinging pressure slowly turned into a throbbing ache. Every inch of him was inside me as he held still, giving my body time to adjust to his presence.

He wrapped his arm around my neck, pulling my head back until his cheek nearly pressed into mine.

"Oh..."

His tongue traced the shell of my ear, sucking the lobe into his mouth, nibbling on it before biting down, his tongue and teeth alternatively causing and soothing the tiny pain as heat splintered through me.

"That's it." His tone was encouraging. He was lodged deep inside me, completely still, yet almost unconsciously, I moved my lower body beneath his.

I turned my head and his lips covered mine, his tongue stabbing into my mouth to spar with mine. I moaned as I tasted myself, surprised how much it turned me on.

He pulled away. "God, princess. You're killing me."

Princess was probably as close to my title as he was going to get. "How?" I asked, finally able to find my voice enough to speak.

He didn't answer, though I thought I heard him chuckle. A shiver went through me as he buried his face in the crook of my neck and licked my pulse point.

There had to be a nerve that connected my pussy to the vein in my neck, because I could feel every stroke of his tongue inside me where he was lodged.

The throbbing ache was still there, but it was different. Deeper, darker and it made my nipples tighten. My cunt spasmed and this time when I heard the gasp, I knew who it came from because it was followed by a deep, masculine groan.

"Fuck."



His hips flexed and his cock glided over that hot spot that made my sanity flee. Whimpering, I bucked my hips back at him, needing more. He pulled out, then tunneled back into me just as quickly. One thrust blurring into another, his heavy breath in my ear made my pussy ache as he worked over me.

Fucking me fast and hard, he pounded into me, hitting my spot over and over again until the pleasure-pain of it reduced me to unintelligible, pleading whimpers.

“Come for me, princess. Let me feel this tight little pussy come.”

It was as if he could control my body with his words. The orgasm hit me and I tried to scream but could only manage a moan as he tightened his hold and fucked me through it.

Boneless, I collapsed against the bed, Ignius’ cock still lodged hard and deep inside me.

His thrusts slowed and he rested his weight on me a moment, his breath sharp and unsteady.

“We’re not done quite yet, princess,” he promised as his weight lifted and he pulled out of me.

I groaned as my overworked muscles protested the movement.

He removed the pillow, rolled me over onto my back and pushed my knees back until the soles of my feet were flat on the bed.

“Don’t move,” he instructed as he got up.

As if I could. The only thought in my mind was of sleep. I was sated in every way imaginable and would probably sleep for days if he’d let me. My pussy still pulsed with mini-aftershocks and I was a little sore.

My lids were so heavy I couldn’t keep them open and sleep pulled at my consciousness, when the bed dipped.

“She’s asleep, Sire.”

The voice was feminine and curious. I opened my eyes to find Dominique standing next to the bed.

Ignius' hand caressed my belly. "Almost, but not yet. Wake up, mine."

He was back to calling me *mine*. I wondered what had changed.

I looked from Dominique's blank face to where Ignius lounged naked on the bed, his cock still hard and glistening with my wetness.

Too exhausted to be embarrassed, I didn't move as Dominique opened a black lacquered box with red and silver inlay. She pulled out two metal objects connected by a linked chain.

Nipple clamps.

She looked at Ignius and, at his nod, stepped closer to the bed.

Setting the box down, she leaned over and licked my nipple. Startled, I inhaled a sharp breath. Her warm, wet mouth closed over the crest and she began a strong suckling that echoed in my cunt.

My hand clenched in the bed sheets, when what I wanted to do was pull her head closer as she raised it so she'd never stop what she was doing.

Licking my other nipple, she nipped it, biting down hard enough to hurt before sucking it back into her mouth to soothe. I cried out when she pulled her mouth away after giving me one last lick.

"Majesty, this may hurt just a bit, but the key is not to fight the pain." She pinched the object she had taken out of the box between two fingers and the part covered in black rubber opened. Holding my breast, she let the two parts of it clamp down on my nipple.

I gasped, the pain immediate and intense.

She ignored me and placed the device on my other breast. "Sire, will there be anything else?"

Closing my eyes, I took a deep breath and remembered what Dominique said about fighting the pain. It wasn't as bad. It was more of a dull, consistent ache now.

I settled against the bed, burying my hands in the sheets so I wouldn't try to remove the clamps.

"No, Dominique. That will be all."

"Thank you, Sire. Good evening, your Highness."

I waited until I heard the door close behind Dominique and said, "I thought the council said you could not maim me."

Ignius' husky laughter made the muscles in my stomach clench. "Do you feel maimed, mine?"

"Yes. Yes, I do." It was a statement, not resistance.

"Hmmm... I wonder if you lie on purpose or if you just don't realize you're not telling the truth."

Lie about what, the fiery pain licking my nipples? Besides, what would he know about the truth?

"The truth about what? That I have suffered ill treatment more than once at your hands? At your servants' hands?" It was a bit of an exaggeration.

"Open your eyes." His tone of voice had changed.

I did, but I took my sweet time about it. Ignius leaned over me, his cock brushing my thigh. "Do you know how wet you were at that very first thrust?"

"I am here against my will." My heart thudded as Ignius laid his palm flat against my belly.

"How your pussy clamped down on my cock."

My breathing sped up and the ache in my cunt intensified as his hand trailed upward to my bound breasts. I cried out as he picked up the chain and gently pulled.

"Whether or not I get you pregnant, I can guarantee your body will never forget me."

I wanted to call him arrogant, to dismiss his words, but fear kept my mouth shut. He was right. My body would never forget him and neither would I.

Tears welled in my eyes. How the hell was I going to survive this if already, before the twenty-fourth hour had ended, he had seemed to have seeped into my very being?

I clenched my eyes shut, trying to prevent the tears from falling, and attempted to block him out. But the tactic didn't work. My other senses were still full of him and cutting off one only intensified the others.

It was hard not to feel sorry for myself. I didn't deserve this, but would I truly change a moment of it even suspecting the outcome as I did? I was tired of the questions and refused to examine it any further than I had to.

"Did I say you could close your eyes, mine?" His fingers traced the metal chain links resting between my breasts. "I tire of you always trying to block me out."

I bit my lip, holding back a moan of pleasure, pain, want and regret as he leaned down and licked my nipple.

The combination of the dull ache and liquid caress slid downward and wetness seeped from my body. I held tight to the sensation, letting it drive away the emotional turmoil that churned in my gut.

"Did I?" Ignus' hands spread my thighs wide as he settled between them, his cock brushing my swollen folds once, twice.

My eyes opened and I gasped as he slid deep, my essence making his entrance easier.

"You are *mine*." His hands cupped my ass, bringing our lower bodies impossibly closer. His cock tunneled in until it nudged the mouth of my womb. "Mine." He thrust again, his back bowing as he held my hips still.

Dropping his head, he met and held my gaze before taking the chain between his teeth, pulling one side then the other.

I yelped as the blood flooded back into my nipples and caused a flash tide of fire to blaze in my breasts before traveling to my groin. Squirming against him, I moaned, unsure and on the edge.

A groan rumbled his chest against mine as my cunt contracted. Sweat glistened on his skin and between clenched teeth he whispered, "Don't come."

Was he talking to himself or me?

Did I care? No, not one bit.

Panting, I writhed against his grip on my hips, needing to move. The only thing that mattered at that moment *was* coming. I wanted, needed to, so badly.

"Please." If I only said it once, it wasn't begging. It was a polite request. Only I repeated it over and over again, as if it had the power to make him move.

The first thrust was so sudden and hard it startled a cry out of me. His hands clenched so tight as he slid out only to plunge back in that I knew I'd bear his marks tomorrow.

His head dropped and he sucked my nipple into his mouth, suckling so hard it was near painful as he thrust into me, his pubic bone grinding against my clit.

The orgasm built agonizingly slow. Redoubling, expanding, until my body shook with the need of it. I could feel it in every pore of my body, right beyond my reach, and I couldn't get to it.

"Oh God, Ignius, *please*." That was begging. And if my legs weren't currently locked around his waist, I would have gotten down on my knees to say the words if it meant he'd let me come.

He lifted his head and his mouth made a popping sound when he released my nipple. Angling his hips upward, he hit my spot. Sinking his teeth into my shoulder, he rode me hard, galloping my body under his. The sound of my wet flesh meeting his skin could barely be heard over my sharp cries.

"Do you want to come, princess?"

I moaned as the first ripple hit, praying he wouldn't notice, terrified he'd stop if he knew I was about to come without permission.

He thrust harder. "Do you?"

"Yes. Oh God, *yes*."

"Then come for me."

The words were a second too late. As soon as the word "then" left his mouth, it hit me with the force of hurricane winds. Tossing my head back, I moaned as it hammered through me and Ignius did too, driving it higher until darkness glittered behind my eyes.

It seemed as if it would never end, my body tightening again and again. He was still hard inside me and my cunt milked him, throwing off his rhythm. Yet still he ground against me, thrusting, pounding until he grunted and his cock jerked inside me. Throwing back his head, he groaned as he came inside me.

Regret didn't set in immediately. It was more a creeping, insidious thing that overtook me before I even knew it was on its way. I fell asleep before Ignius had left my body. My last memory was of his deep groan against the crook where my shoulder and neck meet and the feel of him coming inside me.

I don't know what awakened me. One minute I slept and the next I was wide-awake. I was lying on my side with Ignius' heavy arm around waist and my backside tucked into his groin. His cock prodded my bottom even as his steady breaths feathered against my ear.

Carefully, I inhaled, not wanting to awaken or face the man who had reduced me lower than a two-bit slattern who took it anyhow or anyway and begged for more as long as her price was met.

What was my price? What had I sold my pride and resolve for? An orgasm. I ignored the mocking voice in my head that said it wasn't just *any* orgasm. I didn't need the reminder my cunt still throbbed hours later. Slowly, I slipped from under Ignius' arm and tiptoed to the doorway that led to the *domnatoso*. I had to use the facilities, but I

also wanted to wash the stickiness from between my thighs, a damning reminder of my fall.

I squinted against the bright lights of the bathing chamber and quickly shut the door behind me so they wouldn't wake Ignius. The massive room was empty, steam billowing from the pool.

I was coming out of the privacy when I almost ran into Eve.

She smiled and walked a circle around me. I was amazed that after what occurred in the room feet from us I could still blush.

"Ahh. The look of the well fucked." She stopped behind me and put her hands on my hips and I looked down to see Ignius' handprints peeking from beneath her much smaller hands. "I can smell him on you." She lifted my hair and sniffed my skin. "I see his marks all over you." Her hand slipped around to flatten against my stomach. "Does his seed already quicken in your belly?"

Her voice sounded odd, not the usual demented Eve I had come to know and despise. She pulled away from me and walked back around to face me. "Look at that swollen pussy."

I stepped back when I thought she would reach out to touch me.

She made a sound that couldn't pass for laughter if it was labeled, since it was so full of bitterness. "It's already happened, eh? I bet you can't stand the thought of anyone else touching you." She stepped closer and whispered as if she told a secret. "The thought of any other dick besides his stretching you apart, making you beg and pant for permission to come."

Heat raced up my cheeks as the scenes she described replayed in my mind. Had she watched us? The thought nauseated me.

"I didn't watch you," she said, as if she had read my mind. "I've been there myself. I thought you smarter than this, Rhi Rhi. Even though you know you are nothing more than a pawn to him, still you wear that heart of yours for everyone to see. I guess it will make it so much easier for him to rip it out. And he will, you know." She turned and

walked toward the front entrance of the *domnatoso*. “And they say the aristocracy is smarter than us common folk.”

A tear spilled down my cheek and I quickly wiped it away. What the fuck was wrong with me? I wasn’t crying because Eve had admitted to being intimate with Ignius even though she wasn’t his pleasure slave. I already knew that, had witnessed it firsthand on the journey here.

Then why was I crying? Because she couldn’t have read me any clearer if I wrote Ignius’ and my name on a piece of paper and circled it in a heart as if some hormonal halfwit girl?

I knew the reason I *wasn’t* crying and it left a hollow ache in my chest. I had made a vow to myself and after less than twenty-four hours in Ignius’ presence, it was as if the vow had never existed.

There’d be no changing the past. No taking back what had already been done. The tenderness between my thighs and the marks Ignius left on my skin would fade in time, but what about the one he’d left on my soul?

I stepped down into the water and swam to the area where a waterfall poured fresh water into the pool. As I bathed, I kept my mind blank and attempted to forget the delight that had swept through me when he had called me *princess*. The way his breath sounded in my ear, speeding up right before he came. Or the gentle press of his lips, I had to have imagined, as he shuddered against me, holding on to me as if I was the only thing that could keep him anchored as orgasm took him.

Stepping under the pounding spray of water, I gave in to the tears that nearly choked me. I cried for the situation I had accidentally put myself in and had no way to get out of. For betraying my first love and realizing that my husband could have lived a thousand years and in all that time I would have never felt the way about him that I did about Ignius.

But mostly because, right or wrong, Eve was right—I couldn’t imagine living without Ignius’ touch.



## **Chapter Four**

Getting out of the bath, I wrapped myself in a towel and curled up in one of the huge reclining chairs. I don't know how long I slept before the sound of raised voices awakened me.

"Search everywhere. I don't care if you have to tear this place apart. I want her found."

Ignius.

If I had the strength, I'd get up and tell him there was no need to release the hounds. That his shot at the monarchy hadn't escaped. The door to his chamber opened and a harried-looking Dominique walked in. She took a look at me then back at the door where Ignius' voice could still be heard barking orders and smiled.

I couldn't tell if her smile of relief was for herself or me. I sat up, wrapped the bath sheet closer to my body and waited for her to speak.

She took her time walking toward me, no longer in a hurry now that she knew the goose that would lay the golden heir hadn't been liberated.

"Majesty, you gave us quite a scare."

I bet I had.

She knelt next to where I sat and for a moment I thought she'd hug me. She was a beautiful woman, but when she smiled she was exquisite. She stood, her grin widening. "Let me tell Sire you're okay and I'll come back and help you get dressed."

I watched her scurry away. She was about a foot from the door when it burst open. Startled, she jumped back as Ignius' large framed filled the doorway.

"Where is she?" he growled.

"Sire, she was only sleeping. She hadn't tried to esc—" Dominique couldn't get the rest of the words out of her mouth before Ignius' cut her off.

"Out." The word was spoken so low I could barely hear it, but Dominique flinched as if he had shouted it.

"Si—Sire, please. There is no reason to be angry." She stood her ground, even though from where I sat I could see the blood had drained out of her face.

Ignius cursed, picked Dominique up, set her in his room and shut the door. He looked at me as he locked it.

He was angry. That was nice. I wished I could trade him places. At least anger wouldn't feel as pathetic and purposeless as the tears I had indulged in last night.

Reclining against the lounge, I watched as he approached. His chest was bare and he wore a pair of tight riding pants that accentuated the muscles of his legs.

I sucked in a deep breath in as I remembered the sensation of his skin against mine as his muscles bunched and contracted with every movement. Every thrust.

"Ignius," I greeted, surprised and grateful my voice hadn't given hint to my x-rated trip down memory lane. Nonchalance was the key. If I didn't escape with my heart intact, at least I'd have a smidgen of my pride.

He arched an eyebrow as color rode high across his cheekbones and his mouth slashed into a grim line.

A spark of satisfaction ran through me. He may not have gone through the emotional upheaval that I had last night, but at least he wasn't completely unaffected. He was feeling something and who cared why? As long as I wasn't the only miserable one, that was all that mattered.

His jaw clenched and I could tell he was trying to hold his temper. He closed his eyes and his lips moved, and it made me smile to imagine he was counting to ten.

"Why are you smiling?"

Caught up in my own thoughts, I hadn't realized he had opened his eyes.

Stretching, I shrugged. "Was I?" The towel slipped, exposing the slopes of my breasts, and his gaze homed in on it. He stared so hard I was surprised my skin didn't catch fire. Or maybe it had.

Suddenly the room was warmer. *I* was warmer. Swallowing hard, I stood up and took a step backward. "I don't know." Damn it. That didn't sound nonchalant. It sounded breathy and aroused. I tried again. "It's a beautiful morning. I slept better than the dead and I have less than four days left until I can leave this hellhole." I said the last part in a rush, as if I lingered over them, he'd be able to hear the subterfuge in them.

His pupils contracted, narrowing until they were nothing more than a slit. "You slept well." It wasn't a question. He stepped closer to me and I retreated as he advanced.

"Yes, I did." I continued to back up until I hit the wall behind me.

"I slept well too. Or at least I had until I woke...alone."

How did I reply to that? I knew I was his for an additional four days, but did it mean I had to be in his presence the entire time? I didn't think so. After all, he hadn't been with me when his *domna* and *matridomna* attended me yesterday.

It was a valid question, but one I didn't get a chance to ask, because he crowded my space.

"Did you forget that you are to be at my beck and call? There is no reason for my cock to be hard when you are here."

It took me a moment to realize the sound of panting came from me. Closing my mouth, I kept my eyes on his burnished-copper, battle-scarred chest. It was safer than looking into his eyes. Or at least I hoped it was.

My hand ached to trace the long-healed wounds, to feel the ridges underneath my fingertips and reassure myself he had survived the injuries.

"Princess."

I shook my head but didn't look up. "No, do not call me that."

His hand touched my chin and he lifted it up. I had a choice. I could either close my eyes or I could meet his gaze. I didn't want him to know his touch made my head pound, my mouth go dry and the soft places he had molded to fit his girth go wet, so I looked into his eyes.

"Please, there is no need to pretend this is anything else but what it is."

His jaw clenched again, but he didn't let go of me. "That's right. You wouldn't be here if you had a choice, would you?" He didn't give me a chance to answer. "Don't think I didn't hear your slip earlier. Forget to address me properly again and you will regret it." His hand dropped as if my flesh singed him and he took a step back. "Drop the towel."

"Uhh-uh," I stuttered, stalling. Oh God, I didn't know if I could handle another encounter and the effect it would have on me again so soon. It was bad enough I became wet at the sound of his voice.

"Drop. It."

Closing my eyes, I did as he asked, praying there'd be no telltale signs of my arousal, but I knew the effort was wasted. My nipples tightened and my thighs trembled and I could feel myself dampen.

"Open your eyes. And don't make me ask again."

My eyes fluttered open and I watched him methodically unbuckle his pants, barely resisting the urge to brush away his hands and do it myself. The metallic rasp of the zipper was obscenely loud over the water of the bathing pool.

He didn't bother to pull down his pants but let his cock spring forward through the opening.

Ignius backed me up against the wall and put his hands on both sides of my hips as he buried his face in the side of my neck. Shaking, I left my hands at my sides while he caressed my curves.

He breathed in deeply. His tongue touched my pulse point, sending a schism of longing through me. His cock nudged the softness of my stomach as his hands spanned my waist before moving back to my hips.

Instructions weren't necessary. He lifted me and I wrapped my legs and arms around him, my fingers digging into the muscles of his back and shoulders.

I expelled the air in my lungs on a half moan, half sigh. His stomach tensed as I ground my wet sex against it.

My consciousness narrowed until the only thing I could hear was our panting. His hands clenched on my hips as he raised me and sat me on his cock.

He slid deep with one measured thrust. He didn't withdraw but pressed deeper, nudging my cervix and driving me up against the wall. I sank my nails into his back.

Already, I was close to coming. The liquid rush of it gathered in my veins as he rocked into me slowly, stroking my sweet spot.

He pulled his head back and I attempted to hold his gaze, but it was all too much. Not physically, because I knew my body would never get enough him and what he could make it do. Looking into his eyes at the same time his cock glided along my sensitive nerve endings made the act seem more raw and real.

Yesterday, when he had me on my hands and knees, no matter how deep he was, I was still able to keep a little part of me distanced from him. But this close, with our gazes locked, there would be no distance, no denying him or this moment. It was as if we were the only two people on earth and everything else had ceased to exist. I bit my lip to stifle a moan of pleasure when my orgasm tightened my stomach. It was there, ripe for the plucking. The first wave hit me and my eyes fluttered shut.

"Open your eyes."

Oh God. I couldn't look at him while I came. I wanted to beg him to let me keep them shut.

I cried out as he stopped moving inside me, stopping the momentum toward orgasm quicker than a plunge into ice water. I obeyed, opening my eyes, and he resumed fucking me. Each hard motion brought him deeper and me closer to coming. My cries took on urgency. I moaned with every insistent press of his cock.

Oh God, it was so good, but it would be better if...

"Harder." I barely recognized my own voice. Heat flared in his eyes, dilating his pupils until no green remained. He pounded into me. Each slamming thrust wound the tension tighter until...

I cried out, spasm after spasm shaking me, jerking harsh cries from the depth of me. His eyes never left mine as he fucked me through it. Jaw clenched, Ignus groaned. The hands that held me trembled as he shoved deep once, twice, his chest heaving against mine as if he had run a race.

I couldn't look away. It was his turn. He was about to come and I was going to watch him. The thought of it made my insides clench, stoking the fire that my orgasm had doused.

"Come." Unbidden, the word slipped from my mouth, but I didn't hesitate saying it a second time. My hips ground against his as with movement and words I encouraged him to come for me.

Ignus eyes widened, his breath coming in huge gasps. He slammed into me one last time and propelled us both into orgasm. Weak, I sagged against him. My head buried in the crook of his neck, I savored the feel of his cock twitching inside me. He held me tight, as if he didn't want to let go, and for a moment I wish he wouldn't let me go. Ever.

The sharp contractions drawing my muscles tight hadn't stopped yet when he suddenly let go of me and pulled out. He put his cock back into his pants and left without saying a word.

Mouth open, I stopped fighting the trembling. My legs buckled and I slid down the wall and landed on the cool tile floor.

\* \* \* \* \*

After Ignius' abrupt departure, I sat stunned, staring at the door long after he exited. Dominique came rushing in, clucking and fussing worse than a mother hen until I assured her I was okay.

I was more than okay. The orgasm had been great, but what had really moved me was seeing another side of Ignius. The vulnerability he had accidentally let slip from behind that inflexible veneer as he rode out his orgasm inside my body left me bewildered and shaken.

Just as the first day I had arrived, Dominique and another *domna* attended me, their hands gentle as they bathed me. Dominique arranged for me to have a massage and afterward tucked me into bed as if I were three instead of twice her age.

Before she left, she made a point to tell me Ignius would be away for the rest of the day on business but would be back in time for dinner.

Cuddled in Ignius' bed, I fell into a deep, exhausted sleep. The sheets had been changed, but I could still smell him and the faint scent of sex in the room.

Darkness had fallen when Dominique woke me up so she could prepare me for dinner. Ignius' household dressed formally for the last meal of the day, the same as court did.

I wore a red velvet dress with tiny jet seed pearls Dominique produced. The color complimented my skin tone and the neckline revealed a good deal of my bosom. Dominique did my hair carefully, as if I was a debutante before her first presentation instead of a semi-unwilling guest who was to have dinner with her lover.

She handed me off to another nameless servant and he led me to the dining room where his Sire sat waiting. Ignius stood as my escort seated me in a chair opposite his.

I should have known the dining room would be just as grand as the rest of Ignius' home. He and I sat alone at either end of an ebony table large enough to seat twelve. Its burnished façade reflected the lavish chandeliers that hung above it, similar to the ones in the *domnatoso*.

The table was set with delicate bone china with blue etchings and gold inlay. The golden utensils shone as if they'd never seen a speck of food.

Ignius didn't speak. Instead, he paid attention to the snifter in his hand. I assumed it was brandy. Whatever it was, it couldn't have been a very good year, because he would look at it, take a sip and frown as if it offended him.

Settling back in my chair, too nervous to attempt conversation, I, too, kept silent as we were served.

After stocking the steaming platters of food in the side buffet, the servants didn't leave but stood unobtrusively, waiting until they were needed again.

Ignius continued to glare threateningly at the glass in his hand and I looked at my plate, wondering how I could eat when being in his presence dried the saliva in my mouth. Shrugging, I picked up my fork and pretended.

"You are well?"

The question came out of nowhere, startling me. The utensil in my hand clattered to my plate and I looked up to find Ignius staring at me over the length of the table.

"Yes, Ignius. I am well." I was at a loss. The only time I had dealt with the man was when he was inside me.

As all ladies of the peerage, I'd been taught the fine art of dinner conversation, but what the hell did I say to a man who I had begged to make me come on more than one occasion?

"What did you call me?" He set down the glass and stood.

Heat suffused my face as I realized my mistake. At least he was no longer scowling at his drink. He had turned the fierce look on me. Well, there was nothing to be done about it now. I watched him traverse the length of the table until he was nearly at my side.



Lifting my chin, I took a bite, holding his gaze as my lips wrapped slowly around the fork. I took my time chewing, dabbed my lips with a napkin and placed it back in my lap.

“What. Did. You. Call. Me?” A muscle ticked in his jaw as he appeared to fight some sort of emotion.

Heat simmered through my veins, settling between my thighs. “Ignius.” I drawled out every syllable of his name, my eyes never leaving his.

“Out.” The order was spoken softly, but the servants clambered to obey.

I stood, fully prepared to follow suit.

Ignius grabbed my shoulder. “Not you.”

My stomach clenched at his touch and the tone of his voice. I almost wished I hadn’t pushed him. *Almost.*

“What is my name?” he asked between clenched teeth as we stood toe to toe.

I don’t know what made me do it when I could see he barely held on to his temper. “Ignius.”

He sucked in a breath. With a powerful swipe of his arm, he swept my place setting to the floor, the shattering of glass and clattering of silverware extraordinarily loud in the silent room.

“What is my name?”

Even his display of temper couldn’t stop his given name from popping out of my mouth. “Ignius.”

Growling, he speared a hand through my hair, flattened the other against my back and turned me around and pushed me forward until I bent over the table at the waist.

Taking each one of my hands, he placed the palms flat against the table’s surface. “If you value your hide, you will not move.”

I attempted to control my breathing as he lifted my skirts. He bent over and picked something up off the floor, but I couldn’t see what. I gasped as the cold metal pressed

against my skin of my hip as he cut the material of one side of my panties and then the other before letting the knife clatter back to the floor.

“What is my name?”

Air kissed the bare flesh of my bottom and I knew what would happen if I answered the question incorrectly. Arousal slid down the insides of my thighs. My pussy empty and aching, I answered, “Ignius.”

I grunted as the first blow fell.

“What is my name?”

I braced my weight against the table and resisted the urge to wiggle my ass at him. “Ignius.”

Smack.

Another blow fell and then another, each harder than the last until we both grunted from the effort. The only things that could be heard in the room were the sound of his hand meeting the skin of my bottom and my sobbing breath.

The blows stopped and I tensed, waiting to see what he’d do next.

“What is my name?”

I bit my lip, my ass and cunt throbbing in unison, and said between clenched teeth, “Ignius.”

He exhaled sharply and I smiled. I couldn’t help it. I knew I should be too frightened to push him so far, but I wasn’t. Instinctively, I knew the only pain he’d give me was the kind that made the fire in my veins burn brighter. The jangling of his belt and the rasp of his zipper was louder than gunfire.

He palmed my thighs apart and his cock stabbed at the folds of my pussy.

“What is my name?”

He ran the blunt head of his cock over my drenched flesh, teasing but not entering me.

“Ignius.” Gasping, I writhed against the table.

He slammed into me and I moaned as he tunneled deep, hitting my cervix. He pounded into me, the onslaught jerking guttural cries from me. Each thrust rubbed my tender nipples against the table's hard surface.

I was on the verge. One more thrust and I'd come. He lodged deep inside me and stopped. He asked the same question he'd asked half a dozen times before. "What is my name?"

Panting, I ground my ass back, trying to take the orgasm he denied me. "Please," I cried, my hips writhing against the flat exterior of the table, trying in vain to get some pressure on my clit.

His hands clutched my hips, holding them still as he pulled out of me slowly and angled up to slide back in.

"Oh God."

"You want to come, don't you, princess? I can feel your pussy contracting on my cock. But you can't come until I say so." He pressed in a little deeper. "You know what I want."

When I failed to answer, he pumped into me again, driving me hard and fast to the brink only to stop right before I fell over.

Without words, he demanded my submission as he brought me to the edge again and again, only to deny me. I lost track of the time, of why I couldn't, wouldn't say what he needed me to say until, sobbing, I could take no more.

"Please, Master, can I come?" Sweat and tears ran down my cheeks. "Please, can I come?"

"So now you know my name?" He rammed into me and I cried out with the pleasure-pain of it.

"Come," he chanted as he pounded into me, fucking me hard and deep. And I obeyed, over and over again, my cunt spasming as he rocked into me.

"Fuck," he gasped as my muscles squeezed him, milking him as his cock jerked and emptied inside me.

He collapsed on top of me, pressing me into the table as we both gasped for breath. His lips pressed against my shoulder blade and I knew this time I hadn't imagined it. Nor did I imagine his fingers intertwined with mine even though seconds later they were gone.

I groaned as he pulled out me and did up his pants. I clung to the sides of the heavy wood surface. I didn't think my shaking legs would be able to hold my weight. Gingerly, I peeled myself off the table, righted my clothing and stumbled back into my chair.

Ignius must have signaled the servants, because by the time I was back in my seat, the mess on the floor had been cleaned up and a fresh, steaming plate of food had been set before me, along with another set of silverware.

I looked up to find Ignius eating as if he hadn't just bent me over the table and fucked the hell out of me.

"Eat," he encouraged with a predatory smile. "You are going to need your strength for the night ahead. When you are done, you will go directly to my chamber and take off all of your clothes. You will lie on your stomach, spread-eagled, and wait for me." His fork stopped right before his lips. "Do I make myself clear?"

Swallowing hard, I nodded before saying, "Yes, Master."

I ate slowly, hyperaware of the throbbing and wetness between my legs. Suddenly, I realized how hungry I was and how amazing it was an orgasm could improve the simplest things, even the taste of food.

Half of my meal had disappeared when Eve walked into the dining room. The forkful of food I just placed in my mouth suddenly tasted like ash. I looked at Ignius to gauge his reaction. When he ignored her and kept eating, so did I.

"Hmm... I didn't know there was sex on the menu," Eve said, after pointedly sniffing the air. "Did he finally fuck that delightful little mouth of yours?"

My meal sat leaden in my stomach as she circled the table and walked toward me.

“Are you eating to get the taste out of your mouth?”

Eve reached out to touch me and I jerked away.

“Queenie’s too good for a commoner’s touch, eh?”

I picked up my glass, praying she wouldn’t notice the trembling in my hand, and replied, “Even if I weren’t a queen, I’d still be too good for you.”

Eve growled and knocked the glass out of my hand. Her hand was raised to strike again when Ignius’ voice froze us both.

“Let your hand drop, Eve, or the blow you strike will be the last thing you do with it.”

Astonishment showed plainly on Eve’s face as color raced to her cheeks. She hesitated before lowering her hand and turning to face Ignius. “You defend her? Oh ho, that *is* rich! Don’t tell me you’re falling for this bitch. What, is the royal pussy that good?”

Ignius slowly put his glass down and his glance skewered Eve. “Do you forget who you are talking to, Eve?”

“I forget nothing,” she screamed. “It is you who forgets. I have served you for years. Been at your back, at your side, underneath you, and you forget me because you’re too busy servicing this royal whore. Do you think just because you can make her come that that changes anything? You weren’t good enough for her then and you aren’t good enough for her now.”

Ignius’ mouth tightened. “You are to report to *Ramaca* for punishment tomorrow. Until you learn how to conduct yourself, you will not be welcome here.”

The blood drained from Eve’s face. “Si—Sire, please. Surely you can’t mean it. Please—”

Ignius raised his hand and cut her off. “Did I not make myself clear?”

She swayed and nodded jerkily as she stumbled toward the door.

I looked at Ignius at a loss. I didn't know what to say. He defended me, had made Eve leave. The same woman he had broken court law for. I opened my mouth to thank him for defending me, only to find he was back to scowling at his brandy.

\* \* \* \* \*

After I declined dessert, my earlier escort appeared to lead me back to Ignius' chamber. An odd mixture of heat and nerves fluttered in my belly as I remembered his orders.

Dominique was waiting to lead me to the *domnatoso* to "freshen up". She was quiet as she helped remove my dress and undergarments, making no comment about my lack of panties or the wet spot on my skirts.

Naked, I stood before her, amazed at how different everything seemed from when we stood in a similar situation upon my arrival.

This time I shook my head when she attempted to follow me into the bathing pool, assuring her I was able to attend myself this time. She nodded and dismissed the other *domna* that stood with towels and then she, too, left me to bathe.

As I waded into the water, I gave myself permission to hope the scene between Ignius and Eve meant something. Why else would he banish her? True, she had not directed her venomous tongue solely at me, but...

And if it did mean something, why should I care?

Sighing, I floated on my back, staring so hard at the ceiling my eyes lost focus. What had started out as a cruel punishment was turning into something altogether different and I didn't know if I was ready to face how I felt about it.

Ignius was everything I remembered him to be and everything the rumors said he was. Fierce, terrifying, immovable. But I had seen something beneath the hardened warrior on the surface that thrilled and attracted me just as much as his natural ability to bring out the part of me that wanted to submit to him did.

What would I do if a child resulted from my time here? My heartbeat sped and this time when I pictured a child with Ignius' eyes, I did not chastise myself.

I lost track of how long I floated in the water, dreaming schoolgirl dreams of babies and satisfied ever after. Could I take whatever he had to give me and be satisfied with it if he became my king? I couldn't say for certain but if I was honest, I'd admit it would be better than facing the alternative—a life without him.

\* \* \* \* \*

After I got out of the pool, I dried off, wrapped a fresh towel around my body and walked into Ignius' chamber.

The first thing I noticed when I entered the room was the candlelight. Three-foot-tall black metal sconces held hundreds of candles. Their flickering firelight cast the room in a dreamy, quixotic glow.

A black satin sheet covered the bed and a serving tray stood next to it. I walked to see what it held. A sole candle, different than those scattered around the room, burned next to a small bottle of clear liquid, a bowl of ice and an intimidating object that was cylinder shaped and made of hard rubber.

Folding the towel, I placed it on the chair, the only other available surface in the room, and climbed onto the bed.

The cool, crisp sheets made me groan as my skin, still warm from the water, met them. I buried my nose in the pillow, drinking Ignius' scent into my senses. I hugged the pillow for a moment before pushing it away, laid my head flat against the bed and spread my arms and legs as Ignius had instructed.

I didn't remember closing my eyes, but the combination of the hot bath and the enticing, shimmering candlelight pulled me under as I waited his arrival.

When I awoke, it was to the feel of Ignius caressing my back. Stretching, I pressed deeper into the mattress.

My fingers clenched in the sheets as all too soon his hands were gone. I turned my head in time to see him tying a silken black tie to one side of the headboard.

He didn't speak, only held out his hand for mine. I gave it to him automatically; afraid if I spoke, I'd break the spell set by the room's atmosphere.

Looping the sash around my wrist, he secured it to the headboard before doing the same with the other.

Had I fallen so quickly for this that I'd allow him to tie me down without question?

After he secured me to the bed, it dipped as Ignius climbed on it and straddled my back. He allowed his weight to rest against me for a moment, pressing my hips into the flat surface of the bed and nudging his erection into the curve of my ass.

The feel of him, hard and heavy resting against my rump. It distracted me enough not to realize what was next to happen as I watched him pick up the smaller tray where the bowl of ice and other items lay.

The first drops of hot wax against my skin were so unexpected I cried out, my hands pulling at the silken bonds.

The liquid stung even as it cooled and the fiery sensation sank beyond my skin into the very core of me. Remembering Dominique's words from my first day, I didn't concentrate on the pain but on the rippling wave of internal heat that spread outward. I allowed it to draw me deeper into the daze that blunted my sense of surroundings until every part of me focused solely on Ignius.

The wax lifted and in one layer he peeled it off my back. I groaned as the warmth of his tongue followed the path the wax made.

He repeated the act. Dribbling the hot wax, letting it run down until it pooled in the indentation in the small of my back. Blowing on it, letting it cool and solidify before peeling it off and soothing the sensitive skin with his tongue.



Moaning, I squirmed as the combined heat of his tongue and the candle wax pooled in my belly, radiating outward to rest between my thighs. It took me a moment to clear the haze in my head enough to comprehend what Ignius was saying to me.

“Still with me, princess?”

I nodded before moaning, “Yes.”

His weight lifted as he settled beside me on the bed and picked up the bowl of ice cubes.

I knew what was coming but still was unable to prevent the half moan, half groan as he trailed an ice cube down my sensitive back and licked the trail of moisture. He ran it down my buttocks, letting the melting water sink between the crevice before running his tongue along it. His teeth sank into my butt cheek and I grunted as he chilled the small pain of his bite with the ice cube.

I rocked my hips back, hoping he’d touch me where I ached the most.

Tapping my bottom lightly, he chastised, “Uh, uh, uh, greedy princess. You get what I give you when I’m ready to give it to you.”

I sank back into the mattress and waited. I concentrated on breathing, but no matter how I tried, I couldn’t stop the restless movements of my hips.

His hand cupped my ass, squeezing and caressing before dipping between the cheeks to touch the puckered flesh.

I waited for the apprehension to set in as a dollop of thick, cool liquid dropped onto me, but there was none. In the state of mind I was in, Ignius could do whatever he wanted to me and I’d only ask for more. My breath hummed out of me as his blunt fingertips massaged the lube deeper into my back entrance, teasing the responsive nerve endings. I was unaware of anything other than the movement of his hand and the fire that licked along my senses.

Slowly, he worked one finger inside me. I let out the breath I hadn't known I held as he thrust gently, taking time to allow my body to adjust to the invasion before probing deeper.

Another finger joined the first and the sensation of fullness was almost painful as it melded with the throbbing in my clit.

"Are you going to give me this ass, princess?" His voice echoed in my brain.

Nodding, I arched my back and thrust my ass in the air to show him just how willing I was.

Pulling his fingers from me, he applied more of the gel. "Take a deep breath."

I obeyed. With firm, slow strokes, he worked something harder and thicker than his fingers into my ass. Pressure turned to burning as he worked it in deeper, passed the first tight ring of muscle and stretched me apart.

Panting, I pumped my hips against the empty air, searching in vain for something to press against my aching clit. The bed dipped and frustrated tears streamed down my face as I heard his retreating footsteps.

Unintelligible sounds came from my throat as I tried to form the words to call him back, to tell him the pressure and need bordered on unbearable.

I cried out in relief as the bed dipped again and the warmth of his body draped over mine, his heartbeat thumping steadily against my back.

"Easy, princess. I got you."

"Mmm..." He had me and that was all that mattered. I sighed as his cock stabbed the slick folds of my pussy.

"Almost, baby. Almost. First we have to..."

Vibrations radiated from my bottom as he flicked the switch on the toy.

"Unh."

The pulsing spread out, buzzing along my nerve endings, and he rammed into my pussy with one deep stroke.

I trembled and my breath sobbed from my chest as if each would be my last. In my mind, I chanted his name and begged him to fuck me harder. But in reality, I had been reduced to nothing more than an animal. Whimpering, mewling and grunting as he rocked into me with short digs of his cock. Each thrust nudged the vibrating toy in my backside until it felt as if both my ass and pussy were being fucked.

“God, you feel so good.” His teeth scraped against the skin of my shoulder and as he angled up and a cry ripped from my throat. Spasms exploded deep in my belly, rippling in waves, jerking my body like a rag doll. Liquid gushed from my cunt as it contracted, milking him.

My breath wheezed out of my chest as I trembled uncontrollably, darkness blurring around the edges of my vision. My last conscious thought before the second wave hit me, propelling me into the blackness waiting for me, was *Ignius*.

## Chapter Five

It took me a long time to surface. As I awoke, I lay still, simply appreciating the ability to breathe. My limbs were liquid lead, heavy and loose at the same time. I rolled onto my side and sought the heat of Ignius' body, only to realize I was in the bed alone.

No longer tied to the headboard, I sat up and looked around the room to find all the evidence of last night gone – the candles, the tray, Ignius.

Wincing, I scooted to the edge of the bed. Something that couldn't be hidden away in the light of day was the tenderness in my bottom and between my legs. That, along with the scent of sex that still clung heavy in the air, was proof enough that it hadn't all been a very erotic dream.

I had just placed my feet on the floor when the door opened. My heart leapt in my chest. *Ignius*. My face fell as Dominique walked in. I wanted to ask where Ignius was but didn't.

"Good morning, your Highness." Dominique walked to the bed and opened the robe she held for me. Wrapping it around me, she pulled it tight and tied it after I stepped into it.

"You must be hungry. Let's get you bathed and then I'll call for lunch."

"Will Ignius be joining me?" My voice sounded small. I *felt* small as I remembered all of what occurred last night, all of what I allowed Ignius to do. It still had a dream quality about it as if it had never happened.

Waking up alone hadn't helped. I tried to gather my wits, bring myself back to reality. I was overreacting, making more of this than I should. The sex was no doubt an added bonus in achieving his ultimate goal. And I'd be a fool to believe anything else no matter what occurred between us.

I allowed Dominique to bathe and feed me. After lunch, instead of escorting me back to the room to wait for Ignius, Dominique had a servant to show me to where the library was, saying Ignius usually took care of business during the day until late afternoon, so I had plenty of time to read.

As we walked I didn't bother to look around as I had before. I knew Ignius' home was beautiful but it wasn't his home I wanted to know more about, it was him. I was supposed to be here as punishment yet I dreaded the fact I had less than seventy-two hours left.

Was it just the sex? For Ignius, maybe. If I were a liar, I would say it was just for sex for me too. But in my heart I truly knew it wasn't. I could have had sex with any man at court. Indeed, the council actually encouraged me to do exactly that so they could finally get their precious heir, yet not one of my would-be suitors had appealed to me.

"Here we are, your Highness."

Lost in thought, I stopped in front of the double doors the servant had just opened. Thanking him absently, I walked into a massive room that had bookshelves that stretched from floor to ceiling. There must have been thousands of volumes in the first couple feet of the room alone.

Soren would have loved it here. I had never been much of a reader, not like my late husband. A smile stretched my lips as I remembered fondly his near obsession with the written word. All of court knew where to find the king when he was missing, in the library, with a hound sprawled across his lap and a book in his hand.

"Soren."

I said his name out loud and it froze me in place as a wave of pain slammed into me and nausea rolled through my belly.

Closing my eyes, I prayed I was wrong but I knew I wasn't. Confirmation—I needed confirmation but I dreaded the truth as much as I needed it. Step by slow step, as if I was shuffling toward the gallows, I walked to the nearest desk, which held an appointment book.

I hesitated before I touched it, as if the bound leather would scorch my fingertips. Drawing a deep breath, I flipped it open and verified what I already had known. Yesterday had been Soren's birthday.

I swayed dizzily, a combination of guilt and anguish nearly splitting me apart. At court, I had used the excuse of my husband's birthday to get out of council meetings. How had I had spent the day that supposedly was so precious to me?

Fucking Ignius.

Flashes of us together in the *domnatoso*, the dining room, *his* bed, flooded though my mind and I nearly lost it. I had to get out. Get away. I wheeled around so fast I stumbled and nearly lost my footing. Like a winded mare, I let my head drop as I took in huge gasps of air. Panic raced through my system and once again the thoughts of flight swamped my senses. I lifted my head, unwavering in my decision to leave when I met Ignius' eyes. Tears flooded my eyes as I took him in. It wasn't him but a perfect likeness of him. The painting was so realistic I swore it was his eyes that stared down at me with his knowing look and self-satisfied smirk.

I was a fool, an incredible fool. What was I doing here, allowing this man into my body, my mind, my very *soul* when I knew he wanted nothing more from me than my kingdom? And all the while he was killing the memory of a good man who truly loved and cared for me.

I stood looking at the painting until the image blurred. I turned and started walking. Once outside, I didn't stop. It was a beautiful day, breezy, sunny, and Ignius' lands were gorgeous but my heart had been ripped out of my chest so I fell short of appreciating the scenery.

Looking to my left and right, I attempted to figure out which way would take me back to court. Heaving sobs tore through me and without making a conscious decision I started walking.

Hours had passed and the sun was starting to set, yet I blindly I continued forward. The tears had stopped but inside I still bled. Each step that took me farther from Ignius,

the fiercer the ache in my chest became. Was it possible to love two men at the same time? Because each had a hold on me at once and it was tearing me apart.

By the time I decided to stop, it was pitch black and I knew I was lost. My feet ached and I was sure if I took off my slippers, they would be bloody. Gathering my skirts around me, I used them in an attempt to keep warm as I huddled under a tree.

My stomach rumbled loudly, competing with the night sounds of the forest. A little calmer now, I realized how stupid I had been just to walk off.

A howl ripped through the night and I shuddered. There weren't supposed to be wolves in the *Ether* realm. It had long been thought they were extinct from over hunting. Rumors of shape-shifting wolves surviving the extermination had been spread for years but most laughed them off and used them as fairytales to keep wayward children in line.

As one howling cry met another and another until they all melded into one, I prayed I wouldn't find out firsthand the stories were based on fact. The mournful sounds of the beasts got closer and closer until I imagined I could feel their breath on the back of my neck. I looked into the dark copse of trees trying to make out their shapes when I spotted a pair of glowing green eyes.

Great, maybe I wouldn't have to worry about forgetting Soren. If the wolf ripped out my neck and ate me, I'd be able to see my husband in person.

I swallowed a cry as the first beast stepped into the moonlight. It wasn't hideous as the fairytales described. He was so black I was surprised I was able to make out more than the shape of his huge body. He didn't growl, didn't act aggressively, just stepped forward, silently followed by two white wolves and an auburn one.

The other three stood back as the first ventured toward me. I didn't move, terrified doing so would make it attack. As I stayed statue still, the wolf's gaze met mine.

His eyes were almost...human, and if that wasn't crazy enough, there was something about them that looked familiar.

Huddling against the tree, I didn't know how long we sat there staring at each other when another shape parted itself from the shadows.

Heart thumping, I prayed I wasn't imagining the man walking toward me. He came up behind the wolves, close enough to touch them. He *did* touch them. Running his fingers lightly over one wolf's back, he spoke softly to them as they turned to look at him.

The black wolf made a movement that could have passed as a nod as Ignius said something to him I couldn't hear. The beast looked at me one last time before melding back into the darkness, the other three wolves close on its heels.

Ignius stood in the moon's glow and I fought the need to throw myself in his arms. I should be mad at him, not glad to see him. It was entirely his fault. *He* was the reason I was here, had almost become a meal for wolves, and why I felt like a traitor to Soren's memory.

Tears pricked my eyes and I turned my face away from him. I was cold, tired and hungry. A sob ripped through me as I told myself I couldn't love this man, could never love *anyone* the way I had Soren. Another sob tore through me as I fought the truth and lost.

I was in love with Ignius.

Wrapping my arms around myself, I curled into a ball as if it would protect me from the blows that were sure to fall.

I flinched as Ignius laid his palm against my back, and retreated further into myself. I cried harder even as his touch comforted me. He tried to pry my arms away from my body and I shied away from him. I didn't deserve to be comforted, but unfortunately he was stronger than I could ever be.

After a futile battle, I gave in and when he picked me up, I buried my face in the crook of his neck and hugged him hard as if I'd be undone if I let him go. A shudder went through his big body and he tightened his hold, pulling me closer to him.



Carrying me effortlessly, he started walking. I continued to weep even as sleep tugged at my senses. I had never been so tired and emotionally drained in my life. I was nearly asleep when I thought I heard Ignius whisper, "I can't lose you."

Too tired to respond, I clung to him, no longer caring if I heard his words correctly, if he meant them or if it was the crown he spoke of losing or me. At that moment, none of it mattered as long as he kept holding me.

I don't know how long I dozed when the sound of voices woke me up.

"Thank goodness, Sire, you found her." Dominique touched my back. "She's frozen through and through. Let me take her, we must get her to the *domnatoso* right away."

"No," Ignius replied. "I'm taking her to my bathing chamber, please have a bath prepared there."

I heard a gasp and assumed it was Dominique. "Ye-yes, of course, Sire. Right away."

Her response baffled me, but not ready to face Ignius, I continued to pretend I was still asleep. Ignius didn't set me down or hand me off to a servant, just continued to carry me. He walked for a few minutes when I heard the sound of running water.

"Everything's ready, Sire. If you set her in the water, I'll get her bathed and warmed up."

Ignius' chin brushed the top of my head as he shook his head. "No, I'll take care of her. Thank you, Dominique."

There was a moment of silence, as if Dominique would say something else and decided against it. "Yes, Sire, you're welcome. I'll see you in the morning before you go out."

Ignius laid me on a soft surface. "No, I won't be going out tomorrow. Basal and Michael can handle things fine with out me."

The confusion was back in Dominique's voice. "Yes, of course. Good night."

The water stopped and I tried to stay still as Ignius took off one slipper then the other. His hand caressed my calf as he worked my skirts up to my thighs.

“Still playing possum, princess?”

My heart sped up, the heat of his touch and rumble of his voice making it impossible to keep my eyes closed.

I let one eye drift open, then the other. He wasn't looking at me. His head was bent as if he were concentrating on the task of taking my thigh-high stockings off, rolling them down carefully, as if I were made of glass.

Absurdly, I almost closed my eyes, as if I were spying on someone in a very private moment.

When my legs were bare, he brushed one calloused hand over the length of one leg and then the other. A shiver ripped through me and he looked up, his gaze immediately catching mine.

He stood and impossibly my heart beat harder. He didn't speak as he helped me sit up. Gently, more gently than I ever thought this hard man capable of, he brushed my damp hair back from my face, then removed my blouse, shirtwaist and chemise.

Ignius made a tsking sound as he unlaced and removed my corset. His blunt fingertips traced the red welts the binding left before his hands moved down to span my waist. Encouraging me to stand up, he unbuttoned my skirts, pulled the ties on my petticoats and let them all fall to pool at my feet.

I stood before him naked, shivering. He towered over me a moment, his eyes missing nothing before he swept me up and walked to the bathtub. He let the length of my body slide down his as we stood in front of the massive tub. At a loss of what to do or say, I watched as he removed his own clothing. His eyes kept mine as he slowly took them off, our gaze only breaking when his shirt went over his head and he bent to unlace his boots.

Still I didn't lower my eyes or turn away, and when his gaze returned to mine, I was there waiting as if he had instructed me to.

When he was naked, he stepped into the tub and held out his hand. I took it without thought and marveled how right it felt when his massive one engulfed my smaller one. Pulling me closer, he dropped my hand, wrapped his arm around my waist and lifted me. He held my body against his for a moment before setting me down. The hot water made my feet feel as if a thousand pins were pricking them as the warmth settled into my skin.

Ignius sat in the water, his legs on either side of mine as I stood above him. He didn't invite or encourage me to sit down with him as I looked down at him, wondering what happened to my resolve, my guilt, my anguish. And once again I wondered if one could truly love two men.

Loving Soren had been effortless. We'd been best friends. He hadn't challenged me, hadn't demanded, hadn't pushed. He'd just let me be and I'd done the same for him.

But Ignius... Loving him was the scariest thing I'd ever done. He challenged me on a level no one had ever dared. What was easy about that?

Nothing.

Absolutely nothing about loving him would be easy. It didn't help that I didn't think trusting him was a good idea either. But I did anyway even though I knew he wanted me for one thing and one thing only.

Minutes ticked by and after about two, he settled deeper into the water and let his head rest against the back. His eyes closed as if there weren't a million words between us.

His chest rose and fell as if he was asleep but I could see the tension vibrating through his body. Gingerly, I knelt before him, and since he couldn't see me, I concentrated on letting the water do its job. In minutes I was warm. I was just about to get out when Ignius' eyes opened. There was a look in his eyes then that worried me, made me feel almost...guilty.

Still kneeling, I knew I couldn't get away from him as quickly as I wanted to. He scooted forward until there was nothing but a foot of space between us.

“Are you a witch?”

They were the first words he had spoken in nearly an hour and they made absolutely no sense.

“A witch?” I questioned, thinking I’d heard him wrong.

He nodded. The expression on his face reminded me of a little boy who’d just found out the tooth-fairy story had a little bit more behind it than the grown-ups let on.

“I don’t scare easily,” he said absently.

Well, since he was the personification of fear itself for so many, I would think not. It wasn’t a question, and even if it was, I didn’t know how to respond.

“But today...” He closed his eyes and raked his hands through his hair, tugging a little harder than necessary. “Today, when I couldn’t find you, I-I—” He swallowed hard.

I moved toward him before the decision was fully made in my mind. He needed comfort and I needed to give it to him. Straddling him, I wrapped my arms around his neck, amazed at the trembling going through his body. He hesitated a moment before returning the embrace and crushing me against him.

“I won’t lose you.”

I wanted to assure him he never would, but I couldn’t guarantee my words wouldn’t be a lie. There was no label we could put on what was happening between us. At least none I’d welcome.

\* \* \* \* \*

I woke to Ignius carrying me again. He didn’t speak as my eyes opened to find him watching me. I didn’t speak either. Sitting me in his chair, he turned down the bed. I watched as he moved around the room and it struck me as odd to see him perform such domestic duties, yet he seemed comfortable, as if it were not his first time doing such things.

As he plumped the pillows, heat simmered through me as I watched his back and shoulders contract. Battles scars and warrior tattoos stretched across and down his back. The largest spanned the breadth of his shoulders and dipped down his back until it ended somewhere unseen beneath the towel wrapped around his waist.

We'd been intimate, truly an understated way of describing what had transpired between us, but I hadn't had the time to discover everything about him as I'd liked. He had always been in control and I loved it but I was curious about the body that gave me so much pleasure.

Waiting until he turned back toward me, I stood and purposely let my towel fall. He sucked a breath in through his teeth and my body heated under the fire in his eyes.

He continued to look his fill but didn't to come to me. So instead I went to him. There was a look on his face that struck me as panicked but of course I was wrong. Nothing in the world could ever panic this big bad warrior, especially not me.

Closing the space between us, I ran my fingers down his chest and reveled in the way his pecs jumped under my touch. I lifted my hand, intent on touching his nipple, when he wrapped his hand around my wrist and held it still.

Pressing it against flat against his chest, he held it there as his heart beat beneath my palm. His eyes fluttered closed as we stood. This wasn't exactly what I had had in mind but in a crazy way it felt just as intimate as anything we'd shared sexually.

Ignius wrapped his arm around my waist and pulled me impossibly closer to him. I raised my face to his, anticipating his lips meeting mine, but instead of kissing me, he laid me down on what I was beginning to consider my side of the bed before joining me on his own side.

Automatically, I turned toward him. Gathering me close, he tucked my body against his. I didn't want to be pushy but it had been more than a few minutes since we'd lain down and he didn't seem inclined to make a move toward me.

As a matter of fact, his breathing was steady and even. His chest rose and fell almost as if he was...

Asleep. He was asleep. I couldn't have been more perplexed if he had stood atop of his chair and crowed like a rooster. I couldn't believe that we lay naked in each other's arms and he was asleep. I feared I wouldn't be able to fall asleep as easily as I had the other time. Then I had been exhausted, nearly catatonic with satisfaction, but tonight there was no satisfaction – at least for me there wasn't.

From the soft sounds Ignius made in his sleep he was quite content.

Wiggling away, I sat up on my elbow and looked down at him. He was trying to drive me mad, what other explanation was there for it?

*Maybe he's being considerate?*

Now of all times? Where was the consideration when had taken me in every possible way? And now he wanted to be considerate when it was the last thing on my mind?

I needed him and subconsciously or purposely, he denied me. I thought not. Pulling the blanket down to his waist, I traced the ridges of long-healed scars. And still, he slept like the dead. I became bolder. Leaning down, I traced the circle of his flat nipple until it rose.

Still, no response.

Insulted, I decided to explore at will. Tossing the only thing separating the rest of him from my view, I took in a breath as my eyes found his cock. Even soft its size was daunting.

Heat roared to life in my veins as the images of our previous encounters rolled through my mind like an out-of-control locomotive. Mouth dry, I traced the length of it from root to tip, my pussy clenching as it jumped rising to meet my touch. Guiltily I looked up, expecting him to be awake and watching me. He wasn't.

What now? I ached but wasn't an expert in satisfying my own needs. I fed off the arousal of others, had never masturbated, even in front of Soren when we were intimate.

So how did I get what I needed from him? Was I even supposed to? Was it some kind of faux pas to touch your lover as they slept? I didn't know and I honestly I didn't care. Not that I'd admit it out loud but I needed him more than I cared about breaking a rule I knew nothing about.

Maybe if I touched him with my mouth? The way I thought he wanted me to when we made the journey here. When he had done the same to me, it was amazing. If I had been dead, that would have brought me back to life, so surely it would wake him up.

Unsure how to proceed, I leaned down and flicked my tongue against his cock. I don't think it had a taste but it was warm and the skin so soft I had no idea how it held all of him when he was aroused.

Looking up, I attempted to gauge his reaction, if he had one, before settling my weight on his thighs and wrapping my fist around him. It looked a little bigger than it had when I started my exploration. I ducked my head again and took the tip of him into my mouth.

He groaned, the sound making me jump, and I almost moved off him until I felt his hand resting on my back. I turned my head and met his eyes. They glowed and the stark need on his face sent a powerful thrill through me.

I sucked harder, licking around the ridge when he tangled his other hand in my hair, pushing me down gently so I took more of him deeper until his cock tickled the back of my throat. My eyes didn't leave his until he groaned again and his eyes fluttered shut.

Up and down he guided me, until I caught the rhythm. I loved the way his breath shuddered as he said my name, the way his hand shook while he struggled not to thread his fingers through my hair to pull it and take control. There was an underlying violence I knew he fought. There was no need. I was his to use, control and treat as he wanted.

Suddenly, he pushed me away.

"Rhiannon, stop."

I ignored him and he yanked me up until we were face-to-face.

"I said stop," he growled.

"I didn't want to."

"Is that right?"

I nodded, a little devil in the back of my mind encouraging me to push him even though I could see he barely held on. Pulling against the grip he had on my hair, I crawled up his body until I was straddling him. His cock brushed against me and I swallowed back a moan. I was wet and so very ready for him.

Wrapping my fingers around his cock, I raised my body, fully intent on taking what I needed, when in a movement so fast I barely processed it, Ignius flipped us over until I was on my back and he lay hot and hard between my thighs.

"You tempt the beast, princess."

"I'm not afraid of the beast."

He grinned and it was so predatory I almost reconsidered my words.

"Are you sure about that?" he asked as he pulled both my wrists up over my head and restrained them with one hand.

I nodded, my chest rising and falling rapidly as I pulled breath into my oxygen-deprived lungs.

His smile widened as he buried his face in the curve of my neck. I shivered as his tongue touched my pulse point. "You've been through so much tonight, I told myself I would play the gentleman, but you don't want that, do you, princess?"

He nipped my shoulder before sucking my skin into his mouth and I whimpered as my sex spasmed.

"I can't hear you, princess," he taunted, as he moved down my body. He looked up at me before returning his gaze to my breasts. I felt his breath on my nipples but it was his mouth I needed.



It seemed eons had passed before he leaned down and pulled one into his mouth. He pinched the rigid crest between his teeth, sucking it hard. I cried out at the pleasure echoing between my thighs. He raised his head, his mouth making a popping sound when he released my nipple.

"That was a lovely sound, but not exactly what I was looking for." Moving back up my body, he pressed his lips against mine and then pulled back.

"Hmm..." he whispered against them. "Where's that wicked tongue of yours now, princess?" His lips brushed over my chin, my collarbone, the swell of my breasts then belly as he moved down my body until he came to the juncture of my thighs. He pressed his lips to my mound, inhaling deeply as he did. He looked up at me and our eyes met over the length of my body. "You still not afraid?"

I swallowed hard and nodded.

My breath left me as quickly as it came. I was shaking and I couldn't seem to stop. My body ached and it was centered in the place he was inches from. Poor little pussy, indeed, I suffered because he tormented me.

The protest on the tip of my tongue turned into a yelp as he parted my lips and sucked my clit into his mouth. No preliminaries, no warning, just the wet heat of his mouth.

Hands clenched into the sheets, my back bowed as I writhed against him. The pleasure was exactly what I wanted, needed, but it overwhelmed at the same time. My mouth opened to call his name but I could barely breathe, let alone speak.

Moving his hands from my hips to my ass, he cupped my cheeks and held me still. I cried out as his mouth moved away from my sex and my orgasm waned. Tears of frustration burned my eyes and I closed them to keep them from falling.

I was fucked. Well and truly fucked but not in the way I wanted to be. Emotionally, mentally, and I honestly didn't know if I had what it took to be in a relationship with a man who could control my body so easily.

I kept my eyes closed as Ignius made his way up my body. He watched me, his gaze singeing my skin. Would he wait for me to acknowledge him?

He answered the question as if I'd asked it aloud as he pushed my legs wider apart and hooked my knees over his arms. In one movement he pulled them up and held them splayed open.

Tentatively, I tested his grip to see if I had leverage to move.

I didn't.

I was open, exposed and totally helpless against his strength. I tossed my head back, the thought of it heady and so fucking hot I could have come right there.

I lay silently, waiting to see what he'd do next.

"Open your eyes."

I obeyed without hesitation. He pushed forward slowly, his cock entering me inch by excruciating inch. I kept his gaze as he went deeper until he could go no farther.

Or at least I thought he couldn't. Pressing forward, he pulled my lower body against his at the same time and went deeper still until he nudged the mouth of my womb.

The pressure was intense and I tried to writhe away. His grip tightened as he leaned forward and settled deeper between my thighs. His body draped over mine and when he let my legs go, I wrapped them and my arms around him, holding on to him as if any moment he'd be taken away from me.

He pulled away so he could rest his weight on his forearms. I shook my head. I wanted no space between us. A silent battle was waged as he tried again but he gave up and settled against me as I tightened by limbs around him.

"Stubborn," he whispered as he buried his face in the crook of my neck and I smiled, taking it as the endearment it was.

The only sounds in the room were the ticking of the clock as my body tightened around his. I couldn't tell how much time had passed when he pulled away so our eyes could meet. As he leaned down I rose up and our mouths met.

Slowly, Ignius moved his body against mine and I mimicked the movement until our bodies melded into one. Back and forth we rocked, sharing breath and wondrous gasps as miraculously we found unknown spots that pushed us higher.

This was different—it was ecstasy, not only of the body but of the soul. A meeting of beings, it didn't seem possible but could not be denied. Clutching his back, I held on.

When I came, he was a few paces behind me. My body clutched at his as he poured himself inside me and I welcomed him.

## **Chapter Six**

I drifted, dozing, Ignius' body still deep inside mine. He pulled away and I was awake.

"Where are you going?" I tried to keep the hurt out my voice. It stung that after what we'd shared, he would leave me without so much as a word.

"I have work."

I shook my head. "No, you told Dominique you wouldn't be working today."

I snuggled against him, knowing if he pulled away, I would take it as the rejection it was. He didn't. He lay back down and pulled me against him.

"The day you found me in the forest, the day before had been Soren's birthday." Once the words left my mouth, I couldn't stop them. Ignius looked as if he would speak, so I pressed my fingers against his lips. "I know you hated him—"

He grabbed my wrist, pressing my fingers harder against his lips before he entangled our fingers. "I didn't hate him. I hated the thought of him with you when I wanted you as mine."

I shook my head, the thought of Ignius jealous absurd. "You wanted the crown. You've always wanted the crown." I tried to get up, but he held me tight.

"I have no idea where you got that idea but it baffles me that you refuse to let it go. Princess, if the crown was the only thing I was after, I would have taken it long ago."

I was not a stupid woman, but for the first time I realized he could have taken it if he'd really wanted to. His army was nearly three sizes larger than ours.

"I don't understand."

"I know you don't." He pulled me forward until my head rested on his chest. "I knew when I asked your father for you, he'd say no. I was too hard, he said, for his

fragile girl. He was insulted when I laughed at the thought of you being fragile. If only he could see you now. I bet you anything the council would agree with me when I say there is nothing fragile about you. I'm a hard man, Rhiannon.

"I know what's said about me, but I also know that there's something about you that makes me want to be gentle and I am not used to it. I know your father didn't think I was good enough for you and I may not be but...that doesn't stop me from wanting you. I want you, Rhiannon. I don't want the crown, your kingdom or your lands. I have my own. I. Want. *You*."

I lifted my head to tell him that he was more than good enough for me, and I wanted him and had maybe even before I married Soren, but he shushed me.

"No, there'll be time enough to talk later."

I didn't push but I didn't need time to think. I had thought enough to last me a lifetime. I'd once been confused and conflicted. I loved Soren. Even now, knowing what I did, I didn't doubt that, but I realized there were different kinds of loves.

The love I had for Soren was gentle and safe. A love a woman-child might have had for her first love, her first man.

The love I felt for Ignius was rooted in the truth of the woman I was today. A woman who didn't have to hide what she was. I needed things I would have never gotten from Soren because he didn't have it in him. But Ignius did and he was more than willing to give them to me.

I would finally say goodbye to my husband, the lover of my early years, and give myself permission to love again as fiercely as I was capable of loving.

In the comfort of Ignius' embrace, I drifted again. At peace for the first time in centuries, I took a deep breath, exhaled and let go. I was on the edge of slumber when I whispered, "Goodbye, Soren."

\* \* \* \* \*

The sound of the door opening woke me. Groaning, I rolled over, seeking the heat and comfort of Ignius' body. When I didn't find it, I opened my eyes to find myself in bed alone.

Sitting up, I looked at Dominique. "Where is Ignius?"

She wouldn't meet my eyes, only draped the clothing she had held over the chair. Her gaze downcast she spoke softly, "I have been advised that your time here has been completed and your services are no longer required."

"Ser—services?" Bile rose swiftly in my throat and I swallowed it down. I knew yesterday had been my last day, but after what had occurred between Ignius and I the night before, I didn't expect to leave.

I ignored the pain in my chest and the stinging in my eyes. "Dominique." I barely recognized my own voice. "Please get Ignius for me. There's a mistake. I need to see him."

Her normally bright and friendly eyes were sad. "I'm sorry, Highness, he's gone."

Gone where? I knew I hadn't misinterpreted the night before. Even if it was possible to misconstrue his words, there was no way to mistake what his body had communicated to mine.

Dominique turned to walk away and I grabbed her arm. "No, wait, Dominique, please. Please take me to Ignius."

Pity flashed in her eyes as she gently removed my hand. "Highness, I'm sorry, that is impossible. He's gone. Now you must get dressed. The car is out front waiting."

I watched her leave the room. When the door closed, my knees buckled. Dry heaves shook my body as tears streamed down my face. I couldn't think, couldn't feel beyond the squeezing in my chest.

Stuffing my fist against my mouth to stifle the sobs, I stumbled to the clothes and did my best to dress myself.

\* \* \* \* \*

The trip from Ignius' estate passed in a blur. By the time I got to court, my eyes were almost swollen shut from weeping. Instead of comforting me, the sight of the palace's lavish grounds just brought a fresh well of tears. This wasn't my home. My home was with Ignius, but for some reason he didn't feel the same.

It was still early enough that I didn't have to face the crowds and thankfully my attendant Karena took one look at my face and spirited me away to my chambers. Transformed from servant to caretaker she undressed me, bathed me and dressed me in my sleeping gown. I allowed her ministrations but wasn't in the presence of mind to pay attention to the words of comfort she whispered. After she got me into bed, still she didn't leave.

She sat quietly as I wept myself to sleep. She woke me hours later still speaking softly as if I would shatter if she spoke too loud.

"Your Majesty, I brought a little something for you to eat."

She helped me sit up and placed the tray on my lap. The food looked as appetizing as my future seemed. I raised my head and our eyes met until her face blurred.

I didn't sob, I just let the tears fall and wondered how I could survive something so painful. I loved Ignius. And I hurt. I wanted him, needed him, and he'd sent me away without cause or explanation. How could he do such a thing? A body cannot lie—even if every word spoken out of his mouth was based on perfidy, the unspoken ones his body conveyed to mine were nothing but the truth.

He couldn't fake the trembling in his body when we were joined. He couldn't fake the inhalation of breath when my body tightened around his nor could he fake the way his embrace tightened when he pushed me over the edge and then held me while I fell.

Considering the genuineness in all of those things, how could I doubt Ignius loved me?

\* \* \* \* \*

I had been back at court for three months. During that time I had not faced the council. Matter of fact I had not left my chambers at all except to walk in the forests surrounding the palace grounds. Karena, who had been my strength, followed behind me ready to battle anyone who dared approach me. I had seen mother bears less vicious than she.

For the first two weeks I had waited for Ignius to come to me, he didn't. My return and subsequent absence from court was of course the fodder for gossip and serious speculation.

The rumors ranged from me hiding because I was still traumatized by the brutal way I had been used or because Lord Death had branded his initials onto my skin.

The story of branding was closer to fact than fiction, only it was my soul Ignius had seared and the wound didn't seem to be healing. It wasn't as raw as it had been, it had even been reduced to a muted ache, but it was still there, throbbing and festering.

Winter had been a blessing for me. On my daily walks, in the forest beyond the palace fences, I'd see footprints. They didn't belong to a dog or dogs, they were wolf prints and, absurdly, it comforted me to know Ignius' wolves were near. Even though I felt foolish, I imagined he sent them to protect me.

It could have been fanciful imagining on my part but one night I could have sworn I heard a wolf's howl, something that hadn't occurred near court in years.

I pressed my cheek against the cool glass windowpane and watched as spring slowly exiled winter. I hoped I would hear something that would indicate the wolves were near.

But I knew the hope was in vain. It would be morning soon and if they had ever been out there to begin with, they were long gone. I shivered, even though the weather would soon turn warmer, but I doubted even the full blaze of the sun would help rid my veins of the numbing cold.



Resting my hand on my belly, I smiled. It amazed me that after thinking I would never be happy again, it would be vomiting that would bring a smile back to my heart and face.

I was pregnant. After two and a half centuries of believing I was barren, I carried Ignius' child. A son. I was sure of it as I was the sun rising. My eyes closed, a fresh wave of bittersweet pain washing over me as I thought of my child's father. I still had no explanation for Ignius' actions and wasn't sure that I wanted one.

It was almost enough to know I would see him again soon. The council was aware I was carrying and no doubt they were filled with a giddiness usually reserved for an old woman anticipating the long-awaited birth of a grandchild.

And like that old woman, they expected that the child be born within the full protection of wedlock. So they'd summoned Ignius and upon his arrival and the verification I carried his progeny, we would be married and he would become king.

Had he been telling the truth when he had said he had no interest in the crown? Or was it just me he really had no interest in? Was that why he had sent me away?

I pushed the thoughts from my mind, refusing to torture myself again with unanswerable questions. Maybe, just maybe, today I'd have the courage to ask him.

Karena opened the door to my sitting room and I was grateful for the distraction as she walked in. I hadn't bothered to tell the council of the impending heir, nothing was secret at court and they probably found out the same day I had.

I yawned, already bored with the proceedings that would surely come. "Let me guess. The council has requested to see me."

Karena scowled and nodded, more momma-bear protective now that she knew I was pregnant. I smiled in an effort to reassure her and patted her hand. "Don't worry, Karena. It'll be fine." Laying my hand against my belly, I whispered, "It *will* be okay. We get to see Daddy today."

\* \* \* \* \*

The two armed guards stood ready at my door to escort me. I quelled them both with a look and they parted as if they were the Red Sea and I was the human, Moses.

News traveled fast and neither of them wanted to incur the wrath of the queen. Head held high, I walked to the council chamber. Gowned in a royal blue dress that had once belonged to my great-grandmother, I drew strength from the women who'd ruled before me.

I was about to become queen again and I made damn sure looked the part.

My stomach was a mass of knots, the child in my belly not satisfied with the two trips to the lavatory that he had prompted as I dressed. Taking a deep, cleansing breath, I pressed my hand against my stomach, hoping to comfort us both.

The room was packed to the gills with court gawkers and gossipers, all no doubt wanting to get a look at the newly reinstated queen. Ladies whispered behind their hands and fans, looking pointedly at my belly. I met their eyes without hesitation and each dropped their heads, bowing in deference as I walked by. Maybe they had read in my eyes the fierce protectiveness I had for my unborn? Even imagined harm to him would mean their death.

Standing before the council dais, I waited for them to speak.

"Is there something you'd like to share with us, Majesty?" *Consilium* Claris asked.

So there was to be no more Lady Rhiannon?

"Something that has not already been shared with you, the council and the court at large, *Consilium* Claris?" I asked.

Before *Consilium* Claris could respond, the crowd stirred. Heart pounding and for once where Ignius was concerned, I fought my pride and won. I would *not* turn to look at him but would wait until he addressed me.

Still my stomach clenched and bile rose swiftly in my throat. Clenching my eyes shut, I took a deep breath and prayed it would combat the nausea. I would not embarrass myself now.

"Lord Sebastian," *Consilium* Claris greeted.

"*Consilium* Claris."

The voice did not belong to Ignius. I whipped around to meet familiar green eyes. If the man had been inches taller and broader in the shoulders, anyone could have easily mistaken him for Ignius. But my body protested. I did not know this man.

"Who are you?" I charged at the man, rage pulsing through me unlike I had ever experienced.

He gave me a smirk and mock bowed. "Majesty."

The look on my face must have changed, because his smile widened and that was when I noticed the fangs.

Swaying, I took a step back, the elongated canines and ironic cat green eyes making me think the impossible. *He* was the wolf from in the forest. Behind him stood three others, two men with blond hair so fair it could be considered white and a curvy huge redhead that looked as if she'd be more comfortable on the cover of a men's magazine instead of in the woods. The wolves in the forest had all bore the same colors.

The blood drained out of my face. "What are you?"

"*Who*?" he corrected, the smile widening on his face.

I opened my mouth, but he gave a nearly indescribable shake of his head, leaned toward me and whispered. "Ah, ah, ah, Majesty, it's our little secret."

*Consilium* Claris, seemingly oblivious to the private exchange, cleared his throat. "Lord Sebastian, while it is an honor to have your presence at court for the first time, we were expecting your older brother."

Ignius' brother turned from me and swept a bow in the council's direction. "I'm so sorry to be the bearer of bad news, *Consilium*, but unfortunately, that won't be possible."

*Consilium* Claris' face reddened and he sputtered a moment before he was able to speak. "I beg your pardon. Not possible? Why in the world not?"

The wolf in man's clothing turned back to face me, nearly choking on the laughter he swallowed. "Not possible at all, but I've been sent in his stead."

The court gasped as if on cue and *Consilium* Claris stood to his feet, his face now the color of a perfectly ripe pomegranate. "He has no intention of doing the right thing by the crown, by the queen?"

Of course, I'd be last. I was surprised he even remembered I was involved.

"The right thing? He has returned her, hasn't he? Whole, intact, none worse for wear?"

I stood there listening to Ignius' brother, whose name I had yet to learn, and *Consilium* Claris' exchange and as I did something grew in me. Something dark, dreadful and so full of fury it almost scared me. But I embraced it, for because even as much I had hurt, this new emotion swallowed that pain whole.

"Shut up." I whispered the words.

My breathing was so erratic I thought I'd have a panic attack but it wasn't panic that was charging through my veins. It was pure, unadulterated rage and it was fucking marvelous. Somewhere along the line, with the grieving for what had never been, the guilt of what had been between Soren and me, I had totally forgotten who I was. *What* I was.

Queen.

Descended of women grown men feared yet I had sniveled for years, playing rebellious brat when the crown had always been mine by right of the very blood in my veins.

Closing my eyes, I concentrated and tamped down the rage until it was controllable and my breathing was nearly normal. Ignius would not come to me, so I would go to him. Not to beg at his feet but to confront him for daring to treat me as he did.

"How dare you talk to the council in such a manner?" William screeched.

Turning, I didn't hesitate but put the full force of everything I embraced behind the blow as I punched William dead in the face.

The sight of blood and crunch of breaking bone shocked the court and everyone else.

*Consilium* Claris swallowed hard and even Ignius' wisecracking sibling took a step back.

"Get him from my sight." My voice was a whisper, yet the guards scrambled to obey. As they dragged a bleeding and unconscious William from the council room, I walked toward the dais and addressed the council.

"His life is your gift. Thank me."

Their fear outweighed the confusion on their faces as all three mumbled the words until I raised my hand.

"You three and your fucking obsession with the crown have ruled my life nearly from the time of my birth and I am sick of it." *Consilium* Claris looked as if he would speak and I quelled him with a glare. "No more. I am done and before I let you do the same to my child, I will flay the skin from your bodies and take your heads with my very own hands." Satisfaction roared through me as I watched the three of the most powerful men in *Ether* pale nearly simultaneously at my words.

"Are we clear?" Each nodded in turn. "I understand you want what is best for the crown, for *Ether*, but there comes a time when too much is simply too much."

I turned away from the council, looked at Ignius' brother and crooked my index finger. He came without hesitation and for a moment I thought I saw a bit of admiration in his wolflike eyes. "What is your name?"

He bowed and this time the movement was sincere. "Dante Sebastian, your Majesty."

I nodded as he stood again to his full height. "Where is your brother, Dante?"

He looked vaguely uncomfortable. "*Abyssus*, Majesty."

I didn't ask why, because I knew Ignius probably thought it was the one realm I wouldn't dare to traverse. Too bad he was wrong—and he was just about to find out just how wrong.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Majesty, do you really think this is a good idea in your *delicate* condition?"

Still staring out the window as Ignius' SUV cut through the night, I answered without looking at Dante. "No, I'm not sure of anything, except I deserve for your coward of a brother to reject me and his child to my face. I will settle for nothing less."

Dante sighed. Something he had been doing quite a bit of since I ordered him to take me to his brother's home, ordered he prepare Ignius' most hardy vehicle and we had begun the journey to *Abyssus*.

I hadn't stuck around to formally accept the crown from the council. I doubted they would talk to me anyway. I didn't regret my words but I knew since I had no intention of disbanding the three I'd have to make peace with them sooner or later, especially since I'd be relying on them to handle the day-to-day trivial matters of the kingdom while I raised my child.

Unlike me, my child wouldn't be sequestered or handed off and raised by servants. He was mine and I would take care of him.

If I had to do it totally alone, then so be it.

Dante sighed again. Turning to look at him, I realized the sound wasn't one of boredom or impatience but of longing. We were surrounded by forest and he gazed out the window at it as if in unrequited love.

"Do you want me to have the drivers to stop, Dante?"

He looked at me, a hint of a blush on his cheeks. "No, Majesty, why ever would you ask that?"

"Rhiannon, please," I correctly softly. "And I ask because you are looking out the window the way I am embarrassed to admit I had once looked at your brother."

He turned back to the window, so quiet I thought he would ignore me. "It is true, I would rather be out there." He inhaled deeply and exhaled slowly as if in the time it took he'd be able to come up with the right words. "Just as I am sure my brother would rather be with you, but sometimes we don't get what we want when we want it."

My heart sped up and hope blossomed through me but I tramped it down. "I doubt that."

He turned back to me, an emotion in his eyes I couldn't define. "Doubt it all you'd like, Rhiannon, but it is true. What I am about to say is a betrayal to him but I will say it anyway because of all my brothers, if one of them deserves to be happy, it is Ignius. And I honestly think he believes there is no way for that to happen to him. But if anyone can give it to him..."

*I could.*

My eyes watered and angrily I dashed away the tear that slipped down my cheek. "That is not fair," I whispered.

Dante snorted. "Fair, Majesty? What do I know of fair? Or right or even justice? I don't know what the words mean. They are naught but a silly child's dream and have no basis in reality. In life, you fight for what you want or you will be swallowed whole while waiting for the universe to be *fair*. If life was fair, would the crown allow my kind to be hunted to extinction? Without a second thought or reason?"

I didn't know what to say but even if I had, it wouldn't have matter, because just as quickly he changed the subject. "Do you love my brother?"

I hesitated. It was one thing to admit it to myself but to admit it out loud, to a stranger...

Tired, I closed my eyes, effectively shutting out Dante and things I had rather not think about and felt guilty for it. I had not killed his people, but my family had and no matter how the situation turned out with Ignius, I'd have to face what was done soon or later.

But for now, I would rest. The day had been long and my emotions had run the gamut several times over.

We must have made it to the outskirts of *Abyssus* while I was asleep, because when I woke, I was being lifted and carried from the car. It had been three long months since I had felt his touch, but still, I knew exactly who it was who held me.

"Dante." He said his brother's name softly but still there was a world of menace in the two syllables.

"Brother, you act like I had a choice. Either I bought her, or she killed me and she came by herself. You know how fond her people are of my kind."

Ignius' growl vibrated against where I lay against his chest. "You are afraid of women now?"

Dante's laughter sounded behind us. "That *thing* you carry is no ordinary woman. And hell, yes, I fear her. I prefer my head, heart and hide exactly where they are."

Ignius blew out a disbelieving breath and Dante laughed again. "You'll soon see, brother. She's not the woman you ran away from."

Ignius stopped abruptly and I was jolted in his embrace. "I don't run away – I am –"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, I know. You are Lord Ignius Sebastian, all tremble in your presence." Dante's voice faded as he walked away. "We shall see, brother, we shall see. Are Basal, Sed and Michael here yet?"

Ignius didn't answer and I had the oddest feeling that if I looked up, he'd be staring down at me. I waited for him to speak. He didn't, just settled me closer in his embrace.

I don't know how long we walked but entirely too soon he was laying me down. I thought he'd walk away but he didn't. There was absolute silence surrounding us, me lying there, eyes closed, and Ignius hovering over me. I flinched when I felt a touch to my belly until I realized it was him, his palm against the nearly indiscernible swell.



I opened my eyes to find Ignius kneeling beside me, his gaze on my stomach. I said his name softly and still he didn't turn to face me.

I sighed and the exhalation of breath moved my stomach and that's when he looked at me.

My heart thudded to a stop at the raw, naked emotion in his eyes. It hurt me to even look at it. I just wanted to comfort him, wipe it from his face and pray I never saw it again.

"Ignius." I sat up and nearly cried out as he moved away from me. He was a foot from the door when I said his name again. He stopped, tense as if my voice had been a whip laid against his back.

"You are leaving me again?" My voice caught and I bit my lip in an attempt to stop the sobs rising in my throat. There was such a thing as pride and, unfortunately, I had none when it came to this man.

I inhaled deeply, holding it so long I swayed as dizziness went through me. It came down to this, I loved him. I wanted him for mine. I wanted to live the rest of my immortal life with him but if he weren't willing to fight for me, for us, then it would be his loss.

"Why did you send me away?"

"You whispered your husband's name in your sleep and I realized I was fighting a losing battle. I possessed your body but Soren would always possess your heart."

My eyes widened. "That is why you sent me from your home like some kind of whore who had overstayed her welcome?"

He had the grace to look sheepish.

"I wonder if all the warriors who tremble when your name is uttered know what a fucking coward you are."

I didn't mean to say the words out loud, but I couldn't call them back. He whipped around to face me, a snarl on his face so fearsome those same warriors I referenced

probably would have pissed themselves in the face of it. But as I looked into Ignius' eyes, I saw something else.

Fear.

God, what did he have to fear? I was the one who traveled nearly to hell, literally, to beg for his love like a homeless puppy.

"Coward? I fear no man, no army!"

I'd never heard him raise his voice and in the face of his rage, I almost backed down but instinctively, I knew he wouldn't hurt me. I stepped closer to him and smiled as I watched him look for a not so obvious exit. Another step took me closer and as I stepped forward, he stepped back. We continued the dance until his back hit the wall and only a foot of space separated us.

Closing it, I reached up and touched his cheek. I might as well have slapped him for the way he flinched.

"It's okay, I am scared too," I whispered.

His eyes widened and my heart nearly broke. He *was* scared. "I—I—I'm not—" He tapped my shoulder, indicating he wanted me to move, and when I didn't, he gently picked me up and set me away from him.

He stood silent so long I began to doubt. Maybe he didn't really want me and maybe my imaginings of his fear to embrace our relationship were foolish.

I turned, needing to get out of the room when his voice stopped me.

"It's not my fear we should be discussing. It's yours."

"Me? Why should I fear you?" When he didn't answer, I turned to face him. "You have never hurt me." He looked as if he didn't believe me, so I clarified, "At least not physically." Tears welled in my eyes.

Ignius crossed the remainder of the space separating us. "I have hurt you. From the beginning, I was determined to get what I wanted and I didn't care how I got it. I know in my determination, I've hurt you and I'm sorry for that."

He cupped my chin in his hand and his touch sent joy coursing through my veins. He raised my head, our eyes met and a tear ran down my cheek.

“Don’t cry, princess. I cannot bear your tears.”

I shook my head, denying his right to call me by the pet name and the hope it gave me. “Please. Please don’t do this to me. Don’t play with my affections.”

He brushed the moisture off my cheek, dropped to his knees in front of me, wrapped his arms around my waist and pressed his cheek against my stomach. “All I’ve ever wanted to be is yours.”

The last sentence was so soft, I thought I had to be mistaken.

“I let you go because...”

I finished the sentence for him. “You love me.” He stood and I flung myself at him. I didn’t mind he hadn’t said the words himself or aloud. Just the admission from him was enough. I knew how much it cost him and how vulnerable he was allowing himself to be. He couldn’t have left himself more open if he had bared his neck and pressed a knife into my hand.

He caught me, his arms stiff as if he didn’t know what to do. “I love you.” I pressed a kiss against his mouth. “I love you,” I said again, pressing another kiss to his nose. “I love you. I love you. I love you.”

A shudder went through him and after a moment of hesitation he crushed me to him, hugging me tight. Suddenly set me away from him. “I squeezed you too tight.” He ducked his head, as if he were uncertain. “You are well?”

Arousal raced through my veins as I remembered the last time he asked me that question. I nodded jerkily, my throat suddenly too dry to attempt even a syllable.

“Look at me.”

He hesitated, only raising his head after I softly made the request again. I cradled his jaw in my hand. “You have given me a gift, one I will treasure forever. Your love for me does not make you any less than a man or any less fearsome.”

Leaning into my caress briefly, he straightened to his full height. "Of course it doesn't. I am Lord Ignius Sebastian. All fear me and tremble at the mere mention of my name."

I nodded. "Yes, yes, of course they do, my love."

He arched an eyebrow as if I hadn't just agreed with him. "You doubt my fearsomeness, mine?"

"Of course not, oh mighty warrior. I, too, tremble in the face of your ferociousness, Ignius."

"What did you call me?"

Heat roared through my body. "Ignius?"

He growled at me and took a step toward me. "You're pushing it, princess. What is my name?"

His eyes promised punishment and I couldn't wait. "Ignius."

He closed the distance between us, towering over me. "What. Is. My. Name?"

Closing my eyes, I allowed myself to lean against him. The heat of his large frame soaking into mine and for the first time in nearly two centuries, I *knew* I no longer had to be concerned about my future. It was set and secure in this man.

His hand came up and pressed me closer against his chest. "What. Is. My. Name?"

I pulled away and looked up into his eyes. "Mine. Your name is mine. Along with your heart, your soul. You're all mine."

He wrapped his arms around me, his head ducking. His mouth covered mine and I opened for him. Twining my arms around his neck, I held tight.

"I'm still scary as hell, though."

"Yes, yes, you are."

He pulled back. "You don't sound so convinced."

I giggled. What could I say? He was fearsome and all the other things he described, just not to me.

He scowled. "I guess I'll just have to show you how scary I truly am."

"Yes, Your Majesty. Please show me how scary you are."

Ignius laughed and the sound warmed my heart. A few steps from the door, he leaned down and pressed a soft kiss to my lips. "Remember, Your Majesty, you asked for it."

I had and, thankfully, I was about to get it.

## About the Author

Emma Petersen wrote her first romance in high school after falling in love with historical romances and has been writing ever since. She lives in sunny California with a cool cat named Toussaint and is working through an addiction to shoes.

Emma welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

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