
COURTING
the
Royal Brat
ALANA CHURCH


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Courting the Royal Brat



By Alana Church

Artwork by Moira Nelligar

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~~ All characters in this book are over 18. ~~

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The inside of the carriage was stifling, and the road was full of potholes. Wedged against one corner of the swaying, rattling conveyance, Weyland swore as his older brother slumped against him, snoring into his ear.

Seven Gods grant me patience. He loved his brother. But after a long day spent feeling every rock in the road as the carriage clattered its way to the capital of Delania, on top of a long week of the same, his patience was wearing thin. Especially when his brother's sour breath blew into his ear. He set his book down, braced his arms, and shoved him back onto his side of the seat.

Like a drunk ogre, Frederik fell against the wooden frame of the carriage, striking his head sharply. He sat up, rubbing his temple. "Ow." Squinting out the window, he looked around blearily. "Where are we?"

"A few miles from the city," Weyland said shortly, picking up his book again. He twitched the curtain covering the window to one side, letting in clean spring sunlight. "We just passed a mile-stone. We should be at the gates in less than an hour."

On the other side of the carriage, facing the two brothers, their mother sniffed. "I, for one, will be happy to be out of this miserable thing. Why the queen lets the roads fall into such miserable disrepair is beyond my understanding."

"That's what the new tax measure that was passed last autumn was for, Mother," he said, trying to rein in his impatience. "Queen Laurelin and

Prince-Consort Roland plan to use the money from the new taxes to repair the roads and bridges across the realm."

"What they should be doing is increasing the size of the Royal Army, so that your brother will be able to prove himself. He's a knight now. What's the use of a knighthood if he can't use it? He should be placed in charge of a company, at the very least. As it is, he might as well be a…a farmer!"

At least farmers produce something useful. Like food. "I think the realm has seen more than enough wars for the time being, Mother."

She arched a delicate eyebrow at him. Despite her nearly fifty years, Baroness Severina Stonehill was still an attractive woman, and a force to be reckoned with at court. "A civil war, Weyland. And a short one, at that. And it's nearly fifteen years in the past, thank the gods." She sighed. "A pity, really. So many of your father's friends chose the wrong side."

"What side was that?" Frederik asked.

Baroness Severina smiled thinly. "In a civil war, my son, there is only one wrong side.

"The losing one."

Thankfully, as they neared the capital, the quality of the road improved, until the carriage rode smoothly, crushed stone replacing dirt and potholed mud. A mile from the city, gravel in turn was replaced by fitted stone. Looking out his window, Weyland could see the gutters to the side, put in place to catch the runoff from the spring rains. Muddy water trickled past as the road slowly rose, nearing the hills that cradled Eradon in its arms.

The carriage slowed, and his mother leaned forward, peering out of her window. "It's grown," she remarked, not sounding entirely approving. "Even since last year. No one used to build outside the city wall. I'm surprised her majesty allows it. If there was a war, these people would be exposed and helpless."

“We’re at peace, Mother. And we have Chernavog as an ally. Who would attack us?”

The baroness lifted her shoulders as the carriage neared the gate. Sounds around them rose. Hawkers shouted the quality of their wares. Cattle and sheep and pigs, brought to market, bawled loudly. And over it all were the cries of humanity. Guards, travelers, peddlers, and more. “Many, Weyland. Someone who wishes to strike at Chernavog through us, for instance. Delania is little more than a mouthful compared to some of our neighbors. And Altera is always hungry. And the Old Fox on his throne to the south might not be terribly interested in helping, if he and his brother, Price-Consort Roland, have a falling-out. Or maybe he wishes to keep us for himself. After that disastrous expedition to the Sunrise Isles, King Hyssel may keep his eyes closer to home. And a short, victorious war would help raise his standing among his people.”

“If he wanted to do that,” his brother pointed out, surprising him, “he could have done it fifteen years ago. Instead he was happy to let Prince-Consort Roland marry Queen Laurelin.”

Severina nodded, smiling her approval. Weyland had often been told, by men and women who made it their business to know, that his mother was one of the most politically canny women in the kingdom. After their father’s death and before Frederik had reached his majority, she had held the barony in trust for him, guiding it with skill through the treacherous shoals of politics and intrigue. Many noble families had fallen, some disastrously, when they had thrown in their lot with Prince-Consort Welston’s ill-fated rebellion against his wife, Queen Laurelin.

The rebellion had been crushed, but not without cost. Thousands had died. And dukes, earls, and barons alike had their family trees pruned to the stumps, or hewn down altogether, when Queen Laurelin’s justice was felt. His mother had once said, in a rare unguarded moment, that his father may well have chosen Welston’s side, preferring a strong male arm over the wits of an untried queen, daughter of a king who had let crucial matters slide in his pursuit of pleasure. Delania had been neglected for years, to the detriment of many of the lesser nobility and the common folk. Even now,

over a decade after the rebellion had ended, there were areas that still bore the scars of that time.

The carriage jerked forward. Weyland could hear the driver speaking with the guards at the gate. After a cursory peek inside by a bored, unshaven face, they were waved through.

Eradon! He fought to hold still, unwilling for his mother and brother to see him squirming with excitement like a child on Midwinter's Eve. For years, he and Frederik had begged their mother to take them with her when she made her yearly appearances at court. Baroness Severina used the spring months to renew old alliances among the nobles of the realm, and to foster new ones. But every year he and Frederik had been left in the care of servants and tutors. At least, until Fred left to become a squire, serving under old Sir Ocasio of Dunmore. After that, Weyland was all alone until she returned, with enough tales of the people she met, the functions she had attended, and the glittering elegance of the royal court, to make him go green with envy.

And now, with Frederik having finally won his spurs, and with himself finally reaching the long-desired age of eighteen, he was here! As the carriage wound its way upward toward the palace, he leaned out the window and gawked, for all the world like a dung-fingered bumpkin from the hinterlands, seeing a temple of Alianna for the first time. Elegant, sun-filled squares with shops lining the sides, temples of each of the seven gods, stately townhouses that held the families of rich merchants, and more met his delighted eyes.

And above it all, on the two highest hills, facing each other across a narrow, rock-choked ravine, were the pride and joy of Delania – the palace and the university. One was high and proud, with towers and battlements and flags fluttering in the breeze, displaying the arms of the houses which were in attendance, soon to be joined by their own. The other was low and rambling, falling haphazardly down the slopes of the hill like a set of blocks scattered by an inattentive child.

And if I play my cards right, that's where I will be when Mother and Fred leave for home. It was no secret that his mother had invited Frederik to court

in the hopes of finding him a wife from among the daughters of her circle of friends. As the second son, Weyland knew he was the spare, and with his brother's health robust, held no hope at all of inheriting Stonehill.

Not that he really wanted to, anyway. He had watched his mother closely over the last few years. Being baron seemed like it would be an awful lot of work.

Almost as bad as being queen.

"What's she like, Mother?" He started at his brother's voice.

"Who?"

"You know." His brother's broad, beefy face was worried. "The queen."

"Laurelin?" Her thin lips curled in a smile. "Dangerous."

Fred blinked. "What?"

"Think on it, my darling son." She leaned back on the embroidered cushions of the coach. "When she was little older than you are now, the queen survived an assassination attempt and had her husband rebel because she wouldn't make him king." She snorted disgust at the idiocy of men. "In the process, she had a good third of the kingdom rise in revolt against her. She then proceeded to grind her opponents into dog meat, married the brother of the man who betrayed her, gave birth to two more children, and three years ago managed to have her oldest daughter confirmed as heir to the kingdom, even though she was the daughter of a traitor."

Her eyes pinned both of her sons in their seats. "A man would be wise to admire her, and a fool to underestimate her.

"But whatever he does, he should never leave her out of his calculations."

"And her daughter? The Royal Brat?"

Severina glared at him.

“Never,” she snapped, “call her by that name again, if you are within a hundred miles of the capital. Or if you think you might be ever heard by someone who might gain the queen’s favor – or the heir’s – by repeating what you just said.” She bent her gaze on her oldest son until he dropped his eyes, flushing, then turned to face Weyland.

“In case you hadn’t realized it from the tales I’ve brought home, my dears, this place is a snake pit. The queen and her consort, and even the princesses and the prince, do their best to keep things from degenerating too badly. But there are men and women inside that palace who would sell you out for an extra hundred acres for their barony, or to be raised one rank in the temple hierarchy. Selling secrets is one way many do it. It would be very, very easy for your foolish remark to be relayed to the queen, or to Princess Kitiara. And then I wouldn’t give two pins for your chances to win the queen’s approval for your wedding, if your eye should fall on one of her ladies-in-waiting.”

“Magar’s Teeth,” Fred muttered. “It was a joke, Mother.”

“And some people have absolutely no sense of humor. Especially here. As you will learn if you don’t keep your mouth shut.”

“So what is Princess Kitiara like, Mother?” Weyland asked, trying to defuse the situation.

Severina took a deep breath, then let herself be distracted. “Two years older than you are. Southern, like her father. Black hair, dark skin, blue eyes. Tall, for a woman. Intelligent, like her mother. Like both of her parents, really, if you count Roland, and most do. Even Kitiara refers to Welston only as her “blood-father” these days. She rides well at the hunt, can shoot a bow as well as most men, and has recently taken a place on the queen’s council.”

“Pretty?” Frederik asked, as the carriage finally made its way through the palace gates.

“Very. But don’t even think about courting her, Frederik. She’s not for the likes of us. I would sooner have you wed a washerwoman than to try to lure Kitiara into your arms.”

Weyland, who had watched as Frederik cut a swathe through every eligible maid within a day's ride of Stonehill, kept his mouth diplomatically shut.

"And then there is the Heir's Companion as well," Severina continued. "Where you find one, you'll find the other."

"Who?"

"Lady Eleanora Tentrees. She is the Heir's Companion. She has been with Kitiara since she was a child. She's a few years older than Kitiara, but she trusts her implicitly."

A palace servant drew near and opened the door of the coach, emblazoned with the stylized crag and maple leaf of the Barony of Stonehill. Severina rose, gathering her skirts in her hands. "Anyone who tries to court one, will end up needing to court both," she shot over her shoulder as she descended. "And heaven help the one who wins her heart."

She sighed and smiled as she lit on the stones of the courtyard. "Seven gods above, it's good to be back."

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"Harder, Nora. Harder!"

Lady Eleanora Tentrees, daughter of Baron Warner Tentrees and Heir's Companion, paused, the deerskin flogger hanging limply from her hands. Smiling, she leaned down over the figure on the bed, trailing the thongs over the vulnerable curve of her lover's bottom. "What did you say?"

Princess Kitiara Tanthalasa, daughter of Laurelin Tanthalasa, heir to the throne of Delania, looked up through the shining fall of her night-black hair. Her backs and buttocks were scored with thin red welts, and she strained against the silken cords which tied her wrists to the posts of the huge bed she often shared with Eleanora. "Please," she whispered. "I need it."

"Need what?" She leaned forward, drawing a finger across red, plump lips.

"The pain. I've…I've been bad. I deserve to be punished."

“Oh?” She reached a hand under the princess’ body, pinching an erect nipple, smiling as Kit’s body arched upward in pleasured response “What terrible sins have you committed?”

“I…I….I voted against Mother’s proposal in council yesterday. I was rude to Lord Whiteside two days ago. I….” she writhed on the bed. “For the love of the seven gods, Nora, please!”

“Wicked tramp,” she whispered, leaning down. With the expertise borne of months together, she caught Kit’s mouth in a blazing kiss. At the same time, her arm rose and fell, whipping the flogger across the skin of her buttocks. Once, twice, a third time, and on the fourth, Kit shrieked into her mouth, her body quaking as she finally found the release she sought.

“That was good,” she said a few minutes later, after Nora had released the ropes. Her sweaty body was curled into her companion’s arms. Nora held her lovingly, her hands softly caressing the welts the flogger had left behind.

How strange. The queen had chosen her to be the Heir’s Companion when she was only thirteen years old, and Kitiara a spoiled, vain, tantrum-throwing child of seven. It was only after she had discovered that Kit was being abused by her nurse, whose husband had perished in Prince-Consort Welston’s rebellion, that things had started to heal inside her. The frightened child, whose world had been turned topside-down by her father’s death and her mother’s remarriage, had grown into a lovely woman of twenty years, with a quick wit, a wise heart, and a slender, comely body which caused most of the men at court to stare at her in longing.

But somewhere deep inside was the tiny seed of guilt which drove her to sometimes seek pleasure in pain. Since they had become lovers, during a visit to her uncle’s kingdom of Chernavog, most times Kit was content to please and be pleased in the way most women found comfort with each other. With lips and fingers and tongues, they had explored the heights of ecstasy together, sometimes aided by the cunningly-crafted toys her uncle had gifted them before they returned to Delania.

But every three weeks, or four, some inner demon woke in the princess, and then her sins needed to be paid for, driving her to violent needs, and even

more violent release. Then Nora used the flogger, or the tawse, or the paddle, or the flat of her hand, to leave the marks of passion of Kit's olive-hued skin.

The prince-consort suspected, she thought. Roland was no fool, and Chernavog was a land where the erotic arts were raised to a level not seen in poor, backward Delania. Despite the roles of the guild of courtesans, and the priests and priestesses who served Alianna, goddess of carnal love, Roland had often teased the queen about the ways he thought Delanians to be stuffy, repressed prudes. His keen eye, Eleanora believed, had seen the way things had changed between Kitiara and herself. Before they visited Chernavog, the younger woman had been first her responsibility, then a beloved friend.

Never, ever, she had thought, her lover-to-be, despite the fact that she had often woken in her cold bed, sweaty and aching with need, with dreams of Kit's nubile young body flashing before her eyes. But somehow it had happened.

"Do you think your mother knows?" she murmured, giving voice to a question which had gnawed at her for months. She held Kit close. During a normal lovemaking session, Kitiara often seemed determined to bring her as much pleasure as possible. But on a day like today, the younger woman was content to bask in her affection.

"Knows what?" The dark-haired girl shifted languidly in her arms. "About us? Of course. I told Mother and Father when we came back from our visit to Uncle Hyssel. They were happy for me. But even happier for you. Mother thinks the world of you, you know."

Nora stiffened. "You told them?"

"Of course I did." She turned to face Nora, brushing her hair away from her brow with loving fingers. "Should I not have, dearest?"

She swallowed. Despite her own title of Heir's Companion and the fact that her father was a knight and a baron, elevated to his rank by Queen Laurelin herself for heroism on the battlefield and service to the realm, when all was said and done she still thought of herself as a farmer's daughter from

Buckhallow. “I don’t know,” she said slowly. “How can I face your mother, knowing that she knows that we do this?”

“I haven’t told her absolutely everything,” Kit replied tartly. She rose from the bed and began to dress. “A woman has to have some secrets, you know. I am sure Mother and Father would understand. But I don’t really see the need.”

She sighed with relief. Facing the queen would be bad enough. Facing her, knowing that the formidable, beautiful woman who had ruled Delania with strength and grace for over twenty years knew that sometimes she paddled her heir’s bottom raw would be mortifying.

“It won’t last, you know.” The words were a mere murmur, spoken to herself.

“What?”

She looked up and blinked, fighting back tears. “It won’t last. What we have. It can’t. Even if we somehow manage to keep it a secret, you’re the heir, Kit. Someone, some man, will take you away from me.” She sniffled. Just two weeks ago, Duchess Wilmina had petitioned the queen to grant Kit’s hand to her son, Declan. The suit had been politely rebuffed, after several days’ consideration, which had pleased the duchess not at all. But more would follow, she knew. In the game of nations and thrones, Kit was a valuable piece.

The younger woman took three brisk strides to her side, then caught her in a firm embrace. “No one, not even my husband, Prince-Consort or no, will take my Companion from my side. Or from my bed.

“You’re right. Some day I will wed. A man who will be the father of my children, children who will inherit the throne from me when I am gone.

“But he will not come between us, beloved.” She leaned close, her lips brushing hers, and her hand touched her cheek. “I promise.”

“So why did you go against the queen’s wishes and vote for a goodly chunk of the army to be sent off to the eastern provinces for the summer?” she

asked curiously, changing the subject. The queen, canny politician that she was, had won the day. But the heir's defection had made the vote closer than Nora had reckoned it would be. One or two of the other councilors had switched their vote as well when Kitiara had come out strongly in favor of the plan, though the Prince-Consort and Eleanora herself had stayed true to the queen.

"Oh. That." Kit dimpled, her dark blue eyes dancing. In sunshine they shone violet. In shadows, they were nearly black. "Mother and I have decided that the appearance of some youthful rebellion would be useful. Spymaster Elcarth has heard some rumblings from the various factions here at court. They fear too much power concentrated in four people." Slipping her gown up over her head, she turned to Nora, who began to lace the back. "Myself, Mother, Father, and you. They fear us marching in lockstep and trampling everyone else beneath our feet."

"If a law is wise, it shouldn't matter who favors it," Nora said hotly. "And if an idea is foolish, such as sending our army out east to do nothing all summer, it shouldn't matter who votes against it."

"Yes. True. But the nobles see their ancient privileges being eroded. Higher taxes on the great landowners to pay for the army and the roadbuilding Mother favors. Artisans and merchants and the guilds gain more influence with every passing year."

She shrugged, the dark waves of her hair bouncing around her shoulders. "So we play a game. I make a scene in the council chambers and vote against Mother. She makes an unpleasant remark or two. The nobles think I favor them, and might be ripe for a little…cultivation.

"And if they go out on their limbs too far, I will happily saw them off behind them." Her eyes glinted. "This country has gone through one civil war. I won't let anyone use me as an excuse to start another. My loyalty to Mother is absolute.

"Hopefully these thick-headed nobles will learn that someday."

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“So when will we be presented to the Queen, Mother?”

By the time they had been shown the suite of rooms which belonged to the Barony of Stonehill, had their belongings unpacked by a platoon of palace servants, and had eaten a light dinner, it was after sunset. Weyland sat in a comfortable armchair and watched his brother walk back and forth across the room, a delicate wineglass held in one thick-fingered hand.

He drank off the contents at a gulp, making his mother wince. “Tomorrow. Or the next day. Be patient, Frederik. We do not want to appear to be desperate for attention.” She plucked a grape from a platter before her, and leaned back, chewing slowly. “Let others scramble for crumbs and scraps. We are Stonehill. Our family can count its loyalty to the crown for generations. We may not be the richest. Or largest. Or strongest. But the realm is built on houses such as ours.”

Frederik nodded. “Yes, Mother. But I was hoping, now that I am a knight, to go with the army. I hear that some of the regiments might be sent to the eastern provinces this summer. Or maybe the Queen’s Own, the small patrols that help keep the peace.” He held up a hand, forestalling her reply. “I know there isn’t a war. And seven gods willing, there won’t be one. Not for a long time. The realm needs peace, and the benefits peace can bring. But there are still other things that need attending to. Bandits. Outlaws.” He shrugged, broad shoulders rippling. “In some of the smaller villages, a lone knight might be called upon to help settle a feud. Or even say the last rites for the dead.” One fist clenched. “I have a responsibility, Mother. Would you have me shirk it?”

Weyland blinked. This was a side of his brother he had rarely seen before. He had always been faintly contemptuous of his brother’s military ambitions. Being a knight, he had thought, was simply an excuse to ride around on a horse and brain peasants with a mace when they didn’t get out of your way fast enough. But Sir Ocasio, it appeared, had done more than simply drill sword-work into his brother. It seemed he had given his brawny brother a sense of obligation to those worse off than he as well.

“But…” his mother began.

Sensing an argument, he levered himself to his feet. “I’m going to take a walk,” he said, as his mother’s eyes swiveled towards him. “I want to start to learn my way around this place, since we’ll be here for the next few months.”

Severina pursed her lips, then nodded. “Don’t stay out too late. And don’t leave the palace. The last thing I want is to have to explain to your grandmother or uncle how you got your throat slit in a back alley somewhere.”

He smiled affectionately. “Yes, Mother.”

The castle was a warren, seemingly built piecemeal over centuries by a series of crack-brained architects. Some halls seemed to lead nowhere at all, but dead-ended at blank walls. Others led to ballrooms, now empty and bare, or graceful salons, full of light, talk, and laughter. He peeked inside, then quickly withdrew. Such places, he knew, were rife with gambling and games of chance, and penniless nobles with quick hands and quicker wits would not hesitate to skin him for every copper he had. He passed the throne room, mercifully dark, and glimpsed what he was sure were the halls leading to the royal apartments. A pair of stone-faced guards in royal livery stood at attention, guarding the entranceway. He nodded and quickly hurried away, not wanting to catch their attention.

He took a stairway upward, and then another, reaching a long hallway that was completely deserted, lacking even servants going about their tasks. At the end was a large pair of double doors. A tug on the handle brought forth the scent of leather, paper, and time.

The library. His breath caught as he looked around the huge room. Books were everywhere. In dark wooden shelves that stretched high to the ceiling, a full twenty feet or more. In glass-fronted cabinets, locked against potential thieves. On desks and small tables, piled in haphazard stacks.

He walked into the room, feeling as if he was entering a cathedral of learning and knowledge, more holy than the Great Temple to the seven gods

in the town below. The room was dimly lit, only a few lamps scattered among the tables shedding any light. But high, narrow windows promised an abundance of sunlight during the daytime hours, and skylights in the ceiling showed the gibbous moon riding high in the skies overhead.

He stepped to the side, running his fingers along the spines of the books, reading their titles. There must hundreds here. Thousands! Maybe more! His scholar's heart woke. Back at Stonehill, the tiny library boasted perhaps a hundred volumes, and those were mostly dry, academic tomes used by his tutors in mathematics and history and rhetoric. Only a few had been meant to be read for pleasure, and he had devoured those so often that their pages were worn and their spines creased. For his name-day and major holidays, his mother had become so used to him asking for books as gifts that nowadays she simply rolled her eyes and purchased two or three off the lists he produced.

I could never read them all, he thought, almost drunk with the bounty spread before him. Not if I had three heads and a hundred years.

But maybe I could take one? Or two? I am sure Her Majesty wouldn't mind, as long as I returned them after I was done.

The whisper of a turning page made him turn. A young woman, close to his own age, lay on a reading couch, her head propped on a cushion at one end. A lamp resting on a table nearby gave her reading light and illuminated the blue-black waves of her hair. She was dressed in a fine, put plain, gray gown, and a pair of low-heeled slippers lay on the floor, as if she had casually kicked them off as she read.

"I beg your pardon," he said, facing her and bowing slightly. "I didn't realize anyone else was here."

The woman flicked up an eyebrow and closed the book on her finger. From her clothing, and her clear, steady gaze, he took her to be a member of the minor nobility, like himself. Or perhaps she was one of her majesty's ladies-in-waiting. Or even a governess or a tutor for a nobleman's daughter. "The library is open to all. It's a good place to go when you need to be alone to think."

“It’s…incredible,” he sighed, gazing around. Then he remembered his manners. “I am Weyland Stonehill. And you are?”

She moved a shoulder slightly, “Most people call me Kit. I am most pleased to meet you, Lord Weyland.”

He blinked. “I beg your pardon.” He was entitled to the title of ‘lord,’ being the younger son of a baron, but only someone who recognized his name would know that. “Do I know you?”

“Oh, I doubt it. I don’t recall ever visiting Stonehill. And I am sure we have not met before. But you are Weyland Stonehill, brother to Frederick, son of Tamarack and Severina, are you not?”

“I am.” He cocked his head. “But how do you know who I am?”

She waved a hand. “I make it a habit to know such things. What brings you to the library at this late hour, Lord Weyland?”

He put her strange familiarity with his family out of his mind. Perhaps she was one of those women with a passion for family history and genealogies. His aunt Barressi was the same way. An old maid, she sat in her rooms, dreaming up marital alliances and charting family trees. If you gave her half a chance, she could tell you who was related to who and in what degree for as long as you were prepared to listen.

“Nothing in particular,” he said, answering her question. “I’ve been in the palace for less than a day. My mother comes to court every year, and this year she brought my brother to be presented to her majesty and the price-consort and Princess Kitiara. He just won his knighthood and is mad to show his prowess on the battlefield or in the summer tournaments. I was just along for the ride.” He gestured at the room. “I never dreamed a library like this existed, outside the university.”

“Oh, the library in the university is much bigger,” Kit replied casually, unaware of the effect her words had on him. Bigger? She fished a ribbon from the pocket of her gown and marked her place in the book, standing up. “But I like it here. It is always open, and much more comfortable, and there

aren't any fusty old men and women always glaring at you as if you're going to tear one of their precious volumes to shreds."

He frowned, confused. "But how do you keep the books from being stolen, then?"

"Ah." A dimple formed in the corner of her mouth. "Her majesty has one of her wizards cast a spell on every book here. Anyone can borrow it for one cycle of the moon. But after that, it begins to do unpleasant things."

He hastily put down the book he had been holding. "Like what?"

Her smile deepened. "Oh, the wizards are endlessly inventive. Sometimes the book emits a foul odor. Or refuses to open to the right page. Or hides itself. Or screams like a child when you pick it up." She laughed. "One time, a book I had neglected to take back began to read itself. Loudly. In the middle of the night. In a dreadful Dolorean accent."

He joined her in laughter. A book-lover like this woman was someone to be treasured. "And what do you like to read?" he asked.

Her answering smile was blinding, and he was struck suddenly by just how attractive she was. As the light from the lamp caught her olive-toned skin, he began to suspect that she might be from the prince-consort's homeland of Chernavog. She certainly resembled the few people from that land he had seen. She was very tall for a woman, with clear skin, an exquisitely carved face, and a body that was all slim, shapely curves. Her gown was demure enough to satisfy even a stickler like his mother, but the neckline was cut low enough for him to see the tops of her generous breasts. Her waist was slender, and she moved with a thoughtless grace as she took a step towards him.

"Everything," she said simply. "History. Politics. Philosophy. Theology."

"But right now," she added, "I'm reading a collection of tales about Lady Eikenskalda."

"I read those when I was a child," he said, then bit his lip, hoping he didn't sound obnoxiously pompous.

“Oh?” Her eyes danced. “My…governess read them to me when I was little. But she didn’t think some were appropriate. I wanted to hear about all of her adventures, not just the ones she approved of, so I would sneak the books out of her room and read by candlelight until I fell asleep.

She waved a hand at the stacks behind him. “We have all of them here. ‘Eikenskalda and Dumkopf,’ ‘Eikenskalda and the Seven Brothers,’ ‘Eikenskalda’s Lovers.’ I pestered my parents until they bought two copies of every book. One for me, and one for here.”

“What about-’’ His words were cut off as the doors of the library were thrown open with a bang.

“What in the world?” he started, but then a strong grip took hold of his collar and tugged him down behind the couch. He frowned at Kit, who was motioning him to remain silent. “What?” he whispered.

“Damn the bitch!” a high voice snarled. “Who does she think she is?”

“I rather believe she thinks she is the queen of Delania, dear sister,” came the drawled reply, carrying the accent of the east. “And lower your voice. Even as thick as these walls are, if you keep screeching like a harpy, someone will hear you.”

“Go to the pits, Merrick.” But the woman’s voice quieted somewhat. “Queen or not, she is getting too arrogant for my taste. An alliance between our house and the Tanthalasas would bring strength to us both. The eastern provinces have been ready to bolt ever since her father held the throne. Marrying Declan would tie them to the royal family more closely.”

“And I suppose you offered your son in marriage to Princess Kitiara out of the sheer goodness of your heart, without ever taking into consideration the fact that your grandchild would sit the throne in two generations.”

“Of course I did, you dolt! Who wouldn’t?” From the sound of the woman’s voice, she was facing away from them, and Weyland risked a look over the arm of the sofa. Beside him, Kit did the same, her shoulder warm against his.

A thin woman with graying blond hair stood a dozen or so yards away, her shoulders set in anger. Nearby, a tall man leaned against a bookcase, his vulpine face a study in mocking boredom.

“Do you know them?” he whispered.

Kit dipped her chin in a tiny nod. Her fingers circled his wrist, chill with fear or anxiety. “Duchess Wilmina of the Weald,” she breathed. “And her brother, Baron Torpin Grayslake.”

He caught his breath. The Duchy of the Weald was one of the highest houses in the realm, blessed with wide, fertile farmlands and meadows that bred the best horses in all of Delania. It was said that one horse out of every four that bore a knight, or made up the heavy cavalry which were the shock troops of Delania’s army, was foaled in the Weald. Despite the recent efforts of other houses, like the Tentrees or the Oldhams, no one could match their skill in breeding horseflesh. It constantly filled their coffers with gold, which made them a force in the kingdom to be reckoned with. During the last conflict, he remembered from his lessons, the old Duke of the Weald had remained carefully neutral, unwilling to become embroiled in the conflict, content to stand aside and wait to see who emerged victorious. It had not warmed the queen to him after she put down her rebellious husband, but at least his house had survived where so many others had not.

“She will find out that we are not to be trifled with,” Duchess Wilmina was ranting. “Has everyone forgotten that the brat is a traitor’s child herself? Why should she polish the throne with her bottom when Laurelin is gone? If Linessa wasn’t a dreamer, set on being a priestess, or if Ashkelon had the slightest bit of ambition, either one would be a better choice than that high and mighty bitch!

“But accidents happen,” she breathed, her voice dripping hate. “Everyone dies. Some sooner than later. Laurelin had the chance of being reasonable. But now she will find that her path is filled with pain.”

Weyland swallowed. This was going beyond mere anger and stepping perilously close to sedition, if not outright treason. From Kit’s tense, white-lipped face beside him, she knew it as well. And if the duchess and the baron

found them hiding and listening, well, he wouldn't give two coppers for their chances of leaving the room alive. No one would miss a lady's maid, or whatever Kit was. And his own mother had told him more than once about how 'accidents' sometimes befell those who brought themselves to the attention of the mighty. He eyed the dagger hanging from Baron Graylake's belt uneasily. It would be a simple thing to slide it between his ribs, especially since he had been foolhardy enough to leave his chambers unarmed.

Before he had time to think, he rolled onto the couch. A quick hand through his hair turned it into a tousled rats-nest.

Yawning loudly, he sat up. "How can anyone sleep, with all this shouting going on?" he complained. Blinking rapidly, he faked a start of surprise as his eyes lit on the duchess and the baron, who were staring at him in consternation. "Oh. I beg your pardon. I was reading, and I must have nodded off."

"Indeed." Baron Grayslake narrowed his eyes at him as he stood. "I don't know you, sir. Might I have the pleasure of an introduction?"

"Of course." He grinned vacuously. "Weyland Stonehill."

"More like Stonehead," the duchess muttered. "What are you reading there?"

"This?" He passed over the book Kit had been reading to the duchess, who looked at it with scorn. "It's the most wonderful book ever!" he gushed. From the shadows, he thought he heard a muffled giggle, and raised his voice. "It's about Lady Eikenskalda, and how she fought the evil giant of Black Fang Mountain singlehanded. And after that, she-''

"Enough!" Baron Grayslake shoved the book back at him. He juggled it in his hands, then held it tight, fighting to keep a look of dim-witted cheerfulness on his face. "Get out. And sister, perhaps we should leave as well. There are better places to talk than here."

*****

Kitiara's belly shook as she made her way through the night-darkened halls of the palace.

She had known that many of the nobles still looked at her with suspicion. And she had never thought of the Duchess of the Weald as an ally. The older woman was too cold, too nakedly ambitious. Unlike her father, who had been cautious, confident in his own strength, and willing to let Queen Laurelin and her blood-father tear themselves to pieces as he watched, Duchess Wilmina obviously thought Kitiara unsuited for the throne. And now that she had politely rebuffed Declan's bid for her hand in marriage, Wilmina apparently was thinking about taking more radical steps.

Is it just me she wants to be rid of? Or Mother and Father? And Linny and Ash as well?

She stopped in front of a small door in a seldom-visited wing of the palace. She knocked three times, then twice. Then after a count of five, twice more.

The door opened, revealing short, slender man. His gray eyes were sharp under black brows, and his face was thin and clever.

"Kitiara," he said without preamble. "What do you want?"

"Lord Elcarth. I need to speak with you.

"On business regarding the safety of the realm."

"You are sure of this?" The man her mother trusted above all others, excepting only her husband and, perhaps, Baron Warner Tentrees, passed her a cup of tea.

"Beyond doubt. You should have heard her, my lord. Should have seen the look on her face. She hates me."

"Hmmmm." Lord Elcarth took a slow sip of from his own cup, his eyes fixed elsewhere. "You were lucky to slip out when the Stonehill boy distracted the duchess and baron."

She nodded silent agreement. The man sitting across the low table in front of her looked like anything but one of the most vital servants of the realm. Thin, with a narrow blade of a nose, a sharp, determined chin, and black hair speckled with gray, Kit knew that many members of the nobility were incensed that Elcarth was still allowed to live in the palace, considering that he was one of the men that her traitorous blood-father had brought with him when he came north to wed her mother. To their eyes, he was just another landless noble, and from a foreign land at that, with a meaningless title, whose only skills were cozying up to those in power and playing cards and dice. She had heard more than one person whisper that Elcarth should be banished. And if he was not willing to go willingly, he should be dealt with by other means.

What they did not know, and what the queen and the prince consort and those few who were let in on the truth did their best to keep secret, was that Elcarth was loyal to Roland, and had been sent to Delania as his spy to keep tabs on Prince Welston of Chernavog, who had become Prince-Consort when he wed her mother. It had been he who had notified Roland of Welston's plans to assassinate the queen and take the throne. And it had been he who had taken over the kingdom's shattered intelligence network when Delania was rent asunder by civil war, piecing together rumors, innuendo, and whispers in the dark to let the queen know who was loyal to her, and who was not.

To keep up appearances, he had been briefly imprisoned following the last battle where Welston fell and his alliance collapsed. A few weeks later, he had been freed, with vague rumors that it was a necessary sop to keep King Hyssel of Chernavog from invading to avenge his slain brother. For the last dozen years and more, he had been a fixture around the palace, gaming with the younger sons and daughters of the nobility, drinking with the guards, gossiping with merchants and guildsmen, and generally picking up any stray thread he could find. Seven years ago he had married the beautiful, brilliant, and utterly unscrupulous Liselle, daughter of a minor earl from the north, who had taken over the handling of Delania's spy network. Together the two of them worked hand in glove to keep the country safe.

"I haven't heard anything about Wilmina," he said slowly, his eyes focused on a point just over her left shoulder. If she had not seen this behavior

before, on those instances when her mother wished for her to sit in on sessions with her intelligence chief, she would have felt vaguely insulted. “But the Weald has always been difficult to read. They have never forgotten that they used to be independent once, before King Bezhan conquered it when your great-grandmother was a child. Duke Edelbert ran it as if he and Delania were almost two different countries, and your grandfather was never strong enough to bring him to heel. He stayed on his lands and practically dared the king to do anything about it. And he never did. Luckily, he didn’t wish to expand his influence beyond that.”

“Wilmina is different, though,” Kit said. “She’s ambitious. She showed her cards when she had Declan ask for my hand. I suppose she could have tolerated me on the throne, if she knew her grandchild would rule after I died. But to see me rule and to get nothing out of it…”

She trailed off. She had known, since she was a child, that she would always bear the burden of being her blood-father’s daughter. That truth had been driven brutally home by her first nurse, Helga. Enraged by the fact that her husband had died in Welston’s rebellion, while his daughter lived to sleep on silk sheets and dine off fine porcelain, she had grown more and more vicious in her abuse. What would have happened if Eleanora had not been assigned as her Companion, she would never know. She had been well on her way to becoming a vile little monster. Only Nora, and the grace of the gods, had kept her from that fate.

“I’ll look into it,” Elcarth was saying. He cast a significant look at the doorway to his bedchamber, where his wife was waiting. “Is there anything else?” he hinted.

“No.” She stood up. Lady Liselle was with child, their second. “But you’ll keep an eye open, won’t you?”

“Two eyes,” he said, and smiled. “And when my lady wakes, four.

“And, Kitiara?”

“Yes?” She paused, her hand on the door.

“Tell your mother and father about your suspicions, won’t you? The queen might get a little…upset…if I tell her that I suspect someone is plotting against her heir, and the heir herself hasn’t bothered to tell her.”

“I will.”

*****

“Mother?”

“Yes, dear?”

Weyland paused in the act of eating his breakfast. Across the table, Frederik was chewing heartily. “What do you know about the Duchess of the Weald? Do you know her? Are you close?”

His mother blinked at him. “Wilmina? What do you have to do with her?”

“Nothing, I hope,” he said fervently. He looked around the small, sunlit chamber where they were eating their morning meal. The servants had left after setting out platters and bowls of warm rolls, cold fruit, steaming ham and sausage, and chilled juice. Outside, flowers bobbed in a gentle morning breeze.

It seemed impossible that on such a beautiful morning, one of the great nobles of Delania could be plotting against the heir to the throne. But he had heard the venomous hatred in Duchess Wilmina’s voice too clearly to doubt her intent.

“I was in the library last night,” he began.

“Typical,” Frederik grunted, chewing on a jam-smeared muffin.

He ignored his older brother. “I was talking to a young woman I met there. Just talking,” he added hastily, as his mother’s eyes narrowed in suspicion. “Seven gods, Mother!

“Anyway, two people came in. They didn’t see us. And the woman said she was Duchess Wilmina. And the man was Baron Grayslake. Her brother.”

“Aye,” Severina said, nodding. “Torpin became Baron Grayslake when his wife died in childbed, two years gone by. He’s Wilmina’s younger brother by a few years.”

“And they were talking about how Duchess Wilmina had proposed her son as prince-consort for Princess Kitiara. And how the queen turned her down.”

His mother nodded. “Yes. The servants could talk of little else, when I asked them what had been going on at court.” She smiled at his look. “Learn your lessons, my son. Servants know more than most people give them credit for. They go everywhere, see much, and say little. But a little encouragement,” she rubbed fingers together, like a man polishing a coin, “can do much to loosen their tongues.”

“Well,” he continued, “the duchess was…unhappy…that the queen hadn’t looked at her son’s suit favorably.”

“You mean she was angry enough to bite a gorgon’s head off,” Severina said. “I know her. She’s pleasant enough when she gets her way. But she’s a vicious bitch when you cross her.”

“Yes. She said some things about the princess.” He looked up from his plate. “I think she means to harm her, Mother. Or to try, at least. Some of the things she said…If she said them within earshot of the queen, or Prince-Consort Roland…she could be executed. Or exiled, at least.”

“Seven gods.” Severina swallowed. “Did they see you?”

“Yes. But I acted the fool, as if I had been asleep and hadn’t heard a word. They weren’t happy to find me there, but I got away clean. And the young woman as well, I believe. Kit, she said her name was.”

His mother blinked. “Kit, did you say?”

“Yes. I hope I meet her again. She was…nice.”

Frederik forward, leering cheerfully. “Just ‘nice,’ Weyland?”

He blushed, stabbing a piece of sausage with his fork. “Yes, Fred. Nice. And attractive, too, since I know that’s going to be the next question out of your big fat mouth.”

“Weyland.” He subsided before that iron tone, and Frederik leaned back, obviously disappointed that the chance for a little brotherly needling had been interrupted. Severina dabbed at her lips and stood. “Time to dress, darlings. I think we may meet the queen today. And even if we don’t, we should be seen at court.

“And Weyland, don’t look so glum. I am sure you will be seeing your Kit again very soon. It’s a small world, after all.”

The audience chamber was nothing like Weyland had thought it would be. In his imagination, he had pictured well-dressed nobles, lined up in rows on either side of the throne, with dozens of people hanging on every word the queen said.

The reality was much less formal. The large hall was well-filled, yes. But there any resemblance to his dreams ended. People milled about, making conversation, trading jokes, and generally paying only the slightest attention to what was going on at the far end of the room where the thrones of Laurelin and Roland sat. Occasionally the loud voice of the herald cut through the noise, and people paused to listen, but once it became clear that what was being said did not concern them, they went back to their own affairs.

“Don’t slouch, Weyland,” his mother said, picking her way through the throng with an expert’s ease, her hand on Frederik’s arm.

How can she tell? She isn’t even looking at me. I swear, the woman’s half a witch.

“And don’t fiddle with your tunic, either.” His hand stopped halfway to his collar. On impulse, he stuck out his tongue at her back.

He sighed, resigning himself to a dull afternoon as Severina paused to speak with a man in the queen's colors. He listened, then nodded, making his way to the herald, talking to him quietly.

Weyland stiffened as a familiar profile came into view. "Mother. That's her! The Duchess of the Weald!"

His mother turned to him, smiling pleasantly, as if he had merely commented on the weather. "I know."

"Well? Aren't you going to do something?"

Her smile turned brittle. "No."

"Why not?"

Severina leaned close. "Are you saying that I should accuse one of the strongest nobles in the country of treason, just because you overheard a conversation in the library?"

He swallowed. "Um. No."

"Good. Because if you had, I would have thought you mad." She dropped her voice. "Listen to me, Weyland. This is your last chance to learn this lesson. After today, you are no longer playing a game. Now, you are a child. In an hour, you will have been presented at court, which means you are an adult, as far as all the wolves in here are concerned.

"If you accuse Wilmina of treason, she can laugh it off as a joke, a few idle words spoken to her brother in front of a drowsy young man. With no evidence, you have no proof. The queen, even if she believes you, will be able to do nothing.

"And then Wilmina will be free to destroy us. And she will, as easily as you could grind a beetle beneath your boot-heel."

He felt his face grow red. "Sorry."

"Don't be sorry. Be smart."

The man she had spoken to returned. “Baroness Stonehill?

“The queen will see you now.”

“Baroness Severina Stonehill! Her heir, Sir Frederik Stonehill! Her son, Lord Weyland Stonehill!”

His stomach lurched as he moved forward, following his mother and Fred. Fighting to keep his footfalls slow and even, he watched as the crowd in front of them parted.

As they approached the thrones, he drew even with his mother on her left. Frederik was a looming presence on her right.

Three thrones. Four sets of faces. A queen, a consort, a princess, and a companion.

But he had eyes for only one.

“Most people call me Kit.”

Somehow, he bowed, doing his duty to the queen, a white-skinned, red-headed blur. Somehow, he straightened.

“Severina. It is good to see you again. I trust the gods have blessed you with your usual good health?”

His mother’s voice seemed to come from a great distance. “They have. Your majesty, may I have the honor to present to you my oldest son, Sir Frederik Stonehill?”

“Sir Frederik. Be welcome at court. Your mother has told us much about you. Congratulations on your knighthood. Delania needs every strong arm it has.”

“Thank you, your majesty.”

As the queen and her husband chatted with Frederik, empty courtesies flew past like birds, and silently Weyland wished for the world to end. Or, at the very least, to go away so he could talk to the laughing-eyed woman who sat on a low throne to the left of the queen. Clad in a satin gown the color of summer twilight, it brought out her eyes, as did the gleaming sapphire she wore on a fillet of silver about her brows. Standing behind her throne was a tall, brown-haired woman, with an intelligent, mobile face and warm brown eyes. Sensing his attention, she cocked her head and studied him, as if he were a dog she was not quite sure was safe to let into the house. He nodded greetings. His mother had told him enough stories of the court that he recognized Lady Eleanora Tentrees.

Probably worried that I'll piddle on her feet. I don't blame her. What in the name of all that's holy is going on? And why didn't the princess tell me that she was…the princess?

His name snagged his attention. "…my youngest son, Weyland."

Startled, he managed a creditable bow to the queen. "Your majesty."

"Young Weyland." The queen set her chin on her hand, studying him with apparent interest, and no little amusement. "I have heard much about you. It seems you are a great admirer of libraries."

"And all that dwell within them, majesty."

"Indeed." Queen Laurelin was a lovely woman still, though a few threads of silver were beginning to show in the auburn fire of her hair, and the corners of her eyes and her mouth were lined with the cares of her position. She gestured at the throne to her right. "My husband, Roland."

He bowed again. "Prince-consort. I am honored."

The tall man with jet-black hair smiled. "Do you intend to follow your brother into the knighthood, young man?"

"No, my lord. I fear my skills lie elsewhere."

“Indeed, if he has any skills at all.” A cold voice cut through the murmur of conversation, drawing gasps. “From what I can see, the boy is a lackwit.”

“Then perhaps your eyes need to be examined, Duchess Wilmina.” Princess Kitiara leaned forward, smiling sweetly. “But take heart,” she said to the sputtering woman. “I hear there are clever artisans in town who can fit you with a pair of spectacles, if your eyesight is failing you. I would not worry overmuch. It is said that when the elderly near their dotage, their physical abilities begin to fail them. Doubtless that is what caused your intemperate words.”

Wilmina opened her mouth, but the queen’s calm words cut across her tirade. “Duchess Wilmina. Your presence no longer pleases us. Please remove yourself.”

The duchess curtsied stiffly, then left, but not without casting an evil look over her shoulder at Weyland and the princess. Rising murmurs surrounded her as she stalked out the doors.

“Ah. Where were we? Oh, yes.” The queen smiled, and opened a hand in the princess’ direction. “My two youngest children are otherwise occupied in their studies. However, allow me to introduce my daughter, Princess Kitiara.” Her eyes twinkled. “But I believe you have already met?”

He blushed to the roots of his hair. “We have, your majesty.”

“Lord Weyland.” Kitiara’s voice caressed his name. A cock of her head drew his eyes to the woman standing behind her. “Let me make you known to my Companion, Lady Eleanora Tentrees.”

Seven gods, he hated this! Every eye on him, wondering what the second son of a small barony was doing, bandying words with royalty. He bowed again. “Lady Eleanora.” He took a deep breath, trying to regain his balance. “Word of your grace and wit has reached even Stonehill. I am honored to meet you.”

“And I you.” Though her face was carefully controlled, her voice was warm, and Weyland thought he caught a glimmer of amusement deep in her brown eyes.

Kitiara stood. “Lord Weyland. Would you do me the honor of a few moment’s private conversation?”

He bowed. “I am entirely at your service, my lady.”

“Good.” She stepped down from the throne, ignoring the murmurs from the audience. “Eleanora will accompany us, so that no one need fear for my virtue.”

Of all the things he had thought likely to occur that morning, taking a casual stroll through the back halls of the palace with the princess, while her Companion walked a few steps behind them, was not among them.

Last night there had scarcely been time to notice. But now, with Kitiara matching him stride for stride, he was surprised to see that she was very nearly as tall as he was. Of course, he was not as tall as many. Fred had received most of his father’s height, leaving little left over for him. But still, Kitiara’s shoulder brushed his companionably as they walked and spoke of inconsequential things. He fought to keep his eyes away from the swelling neckline of her gown. The last thing he needed was for one of the royal guards to catch him ogling the princess.

“Tell me, Lord Weyland…”

“Please.” It was more than he could bear, to have her address him in so formal a manner. “My name is Weyland. Unless my brother falls off his horse or gets eaten by an ogre, I’ll never inherit Stonehill. So there is no need to call me ‘lord’”

“Very well.” Kitiara smiled, and behind them, he heard Lady Eleanora make a low sound of approval. “Tell me. Have you ever heard of ‘Alianna’s Gift?’”

He racked his mind. “No. I can’t say that I have, princess.”

“My name is Kitiara. It would please me if you used it. I am sure we are going to be friends, Weyland. Good friends.

“Alianna’s Gift,” she continued, “allows those of the royal house to see into the souls of others. With a touch, we can get a glimpse of their innermost selves. Whether they or kind or cruel. Noble and generous, or wicked and self-serving. Ambitious or lazy.

“It is a gift of the land, my mother and I believe. Of Delania itself, meant to help us rule wisely and well. But like all gifts, it can be abused. My grandfather was one who did so. If the tales about him are true, he used it to seek out women who would welcome the sexual attentions of a king, and cut a swathe through every willing woman at court.” She made a face. “No wonder the kingdom was a shambles by the time Mother took the throne. The only part of him that ever did any thinking was below his waistline.”

He kept silent, trying to discern where the conversation was going.

“Mother was wiser. Much wiser, once she gathered up her courage and began to use it.” She sighed. “A pity she didn’t start earlier. Then she would have known her first husband was a liar and a lecher and only pursued her because he wanted her throne for herself.”

“Truly a pity,” came an amused voice from behind. “Of course, if she had done as you say, you would never have been born, my lady.”

“Well, yes.” Her plump lips twitched in a smile. “There is that.”

“But Mother did begin to use it, eventually. So she knew that Father was the right man for her. And when Lady Eleanora’s father came up to her before the Battle of Fisher’s Crossing with the news that one of her nobles was intending to turn his coat during the battle and betray her, she knew Baron Tentrees was telling the truth.”

“He wasn’t a baron yet,” Eleanora protested.

“This is all very interesting,” Weyland said. “But what does it have to do with me?”

“This,” Kitiara said.

And kissed him.

It was like no kiss he had ever experienced before. Oh, he had kissed plenty of women in his time. With his position, it would have been difficult to avoid every woman who thought she could advance herself at Stonehill by bedding him. And, once learned what they wanted, he hadn't tried very hard to avoid them.

But Kitiara was different. She wasn't thinking about what he, as the second son of the baroness of Stonehill, might do for her. When she kissed him, she kissed with the whole of her. Her lips rubbed on his, and her tongue licked at his mouth, politely requesting entry. When he opened to her, she gave a soft, breathy moan, and flowed up his body, her hands gripping his waist. He could feel the soft press of her breasts against his chest, and his groin ached with a sudden, fierce need.

When she backed away, her lips were curled in a triumphant smile. "Yes. I knew it."

Blinking, he glanced at Lady Eleanora. The Companion showed no sign of being scandalized by her charge's outrageous behavior, instead shaking her head with a small half-smile on her face.

"Um. What?" he asked.

"Yes." Eleanora's smile widened. "She's like that. You might as well get used to it. The first time we were together, she flipped up her gown, bent over the arm of a sofa, and practically begged me to take her."

"What?" he repeated, sure his ears were deceiving him. "You're…" He looked back and forth between the companion, a woman grown and a full nine years older than he, and Princess Kitiara. "You're lovers?" he finished weakly.

"Yes." Kitiara slipped her arm through his, guiding him down the hallway. The press of her breast was warm against his arm, and he fought back a surge of desire. Eleanora was a quiet presence at their backs.

"And I hope you don't intend to be silly about that, Weyland. If you are, I simply won't have any use for you."

“Use for me?” he parroted, feeling like an idiot, as if this were a play on the stage at the royal theatre, and someone had forgotten to give him his lines. “I don’t understand.”

“He has a point, you know,” Eleanora pointed out, her voice warm and faintly amused. “Perhaps you should explain?”

“I did explain.”

“Use smaller words then. Or stop assuming he knows everything you know. Because he doesn’t.”

Weyland caught his breath. Never, in a thousand years, would he dare to dress the heir to the realm in such a brisk, no-nonsense voice, just this side of disrespectful.

But Kitiara, it seemed, was not about to take offense. “I suppose I have to. Men’s brains seem to be located in their breeches, from time to time, poor things.”

“Hey,” he protested weakly, unable to come up with anything stronger. “I’m not an idiot.”

“Good,” the princess said firmly. “I have little need for fools. The castle has a bountiful supply already. One more would be gilding the lily.

“The nobles want me to take a husband, Weyland. The Duchess of the Weald was not the first person to push her son forward, hoping for my approval. And she will not be the last. Until I settle on a man, every two-penny duke, earl, and baroness will be panting after me, hoping that their son will be the one chosen. And that’s to say nothing of the heads of the great merchant houses. A few of the guild chiefs have made some unsubtle hints in council that the tradition of the heir marrying a noble is silly and outdated. They ask what makes an earl’s son from the back of beyond a better choice than a man who has clawed his way up from the slums to become one of the wealthiest men in Delania?”

“And then there are the suitors from foreign lands. They’re even worse. No matter how many hints we drop, they refuse to believe that the nation won’t

stand for the heir to marry outside the kingdom again," Eleanora put in, her voice faintly aggravated by dullards who refused to use sense. "It's bad enough that the Old Fox down in Chernavog is going to have his granddaughter on the throne. Should we give Altera or Pedloe a similar opportunity? It's an easy thing to rile up a succession crisis, and before you know it, we'll be swallowed whole. King Hyssel is a decent enough sort, for a king. But I wouldn't trust Nebbish of Pedloe any further than I could kick a sheep."

"So you have to get married," Weyland said impatiently. "What does this have to do with you kissing me?"

The two women stopped and stared at him. He stared back. Then, as realization hit, he backed away, hands raised. "Oh, no." He shook his head. "No way. This is a joke, right? I'm no one. I'm nothing. I'm the second son of a small barony, and I wouldn't bring anything of value to a marriage. I'm not a warrior. Or a wizard. Or wealthy. And my family is not in the least bit influential, beyond my mother's circle of friends."

Kitiara shrugged, her face impassive. "I have no need of a warrior. My father commands the royal army. Wizards can be bought. They are so refreshingly honest that way. Enough gold, a tower to do some experiments, a supply of dribbly candles, and they're as happy as a puppy with a ball of string. And my family has enough wealth for both of us. I don't intend to pour all my gold into a hole in the ground and swim around in it.

"What I need, Weyland, is a good man. And you are. I felt it when I touched you last night. And you proved it a short time later. You knew that Duchess Wilmina and her brother would have happily gutted anyone they caught spying on their little council. And you still put yourself in harm's way for me. Even when you had no idea who I was."

He opened his mouth, then closed it. Put that way, his actions did sound rather noble, instead of a momentary lapse of reason.

"So where are we going?" he asked, more than a little desperately.

"You'll see."

The royal apartments were luxurious. Unfortunately for Weyland, they were also filled with royals. Kitiara and Eleanora were bad enough. But at some invisible signal, a door opened and two more members of the royal family entered; a slim girl of about fourteen years, so like the queen in her face and her flame-red hair it was impossible to take her as anyone other than Princess Linessa, and a sullen-faced boy of the same age, scowling at Weyland from under a mop of coal-black curls.

He fought the urge to huddle into a ball as Queen Laurelin and the price-consort swept in. His mother trailed behind almost as an afterthought, a small frown on her face.

“Well!” the queen said brightly. “We’re all here. Good.”

“All?” he asked, turning to his mother. “What about Fred?”

“Sir Frederick,” the prince-consort said, “is being given a tour of the Royal Army’s headquarters by the head of my personal guard.”

“That should keep him out of trouble for a few hours,” Severina said. “And allow us to talk.”

“Talk? Talk about what?” His voice keyed upwards. “Would someone, for the love of all seven gods, please tell me exactly what is going on?”

“He speaks for me, as well,” the boy muttered sourly. “What’s so gods-blessed important that Linessa and I had to be pulled away from arms practice?” He pulled a dagger from his belt, and spun it in his fingers, mindless of the wickedly sharp edge. “They’re finally letting us start with knives.”

“Ashkelon.” The word was a quiet warning from Roland, and the boy subsided, slouching into a chair with ill grace.

“First, let us make some introductions,” the queen said. “Lord Weyland, here are my other two children. Prince Ashkelon, and his sister, Princess Linessa.”

“Charmed,” he said, managing a bow that took in both of them.

Ashkelon returned it with a scowl and a grimace. Princess Linessa, however, looked at him with an expression of delighted curiosity. “Oh! So you’re the one! We’ve been waiting for you!”

“The one what?”

“The one who is going to marry Kit, of course!” She bounced over to him, beaming from ear to ear. “I’ve dreamed of you. Many times.” Her brows set in a delicate frown. “But I never could see why you were important. But now I know!”

“Marriage?” he stuttered, turning to his mother helplessly.

“About time someone got married,” Ashkelon grumbled. “No one is going to marry Starlight over there. Not with her dead-set on being a priestess of Alianna.”

Linessa smiled sweetly at her sibling. “I already know who my lover will be, Shadow. I’m just giving him some time to work things out on his own.”

Ashkelon made vomiting noises, and the queen shook her head. “Enough, you two.

“Yes, Lord Weyland. Marriage. I am sure my daughter has spoken to you about it. The longer the Heir goes unwed, the worse it will get. Everyone with an unattached son will be crowding around, and the quarrels and fighting will get worse and worse. Soon enough, we’ll have nobles dueling in the streets over the right to hold her horse’s reins when she dismounts. We might as well get the whole thing settled, for once and for all.”

“But…me?”

“Why not you?” Roland asked bluntly. “Your blood is noble enough, you seem to have a full complement of wits, and you haven’t committed treason recently. Have you?”

The queen sat in a chair, crossing her legs demurely, missing Weyland's shiver at the mention of treason. "My daughter seems to be rather fond of you, as well. And her companion. Trust me. If Nora thought you meant her charge ill, she'd pull your liver out." She cocked her head. "Of course, we never asked you, my dear." She cleared her throat delicately. "You do favor women, do you not? It would be a jest worthy of the gods for you to be one of those who desired other men."

There was no censure in the queen's eyes. But nevertheless, Weyland found himself blushing fiercely. "No. Gods, no!"

"I'm glad." Kitiara's voice was soft, but her eyes danced with suppressed mirth.

Overcome, he found himself sinking into a chair. "Mother?"

The older woman held up her hands, then let them fall. "What am I to tell you, Weyland? I always meant for Stonehill to do right by you. There would surely be some daughter of a merchant house whose father desired to buy his way into the nobility. Such things are often done. Stonehill would receive a fine dowry, you would have a wife, and the merchant's house would rise in the world."

Her voice softened. "And I did hope you might marry for love. I did. But many others are not so lucky. Frederik may not be. We will have to make the best match for him we can."

"If Weyland and Kitiara wed," Eleanora said quietly, "you may find Stonehill's fortunes rising rather precipitously." She smiled crookedly. "Much like the Tentrees, after the Battle of Fisher's Crossing. It is not always a bad thing to catch the royal family's eyes."

"You're right, Lady Eleanora. But I never dreamed of this. Stonehill has never been ambitious. We cannot afford to be. The high houses could chew us up and spit us out."

"The gods," Linessa said softly, "have decreed otherwise."

"Save me from priestesses and seers," his mother muttered.

“Amen,” Ashkelon seconded, earning himself a glare from both sisters, as well as his parents.

“Mother, Father,” Kitiara said, stepping forward. “Am I to take it that Weyland has your permission to court me?”

“Of course.” Laurelin nodded. “Keep in mind, however, that you must preserve your reputation. Lady Eleanora should accompany you, if you and Lord Weyland spend any time behind closed doors.”

Kitiara bowed her head in acceptance, though a tiny smile curled her lips. “Of course, Mother.

“Weyland. Will you come to my rooms? I think we have much to discuss.”

He looked at his mother, who waved a resigned hand. “Go. I’ll try to rescue as much as I can from this disaster.”

As he walked out of the room, he began to laugh. Laurelin’s voice rose behind them. “Disaster, baroness? Your granddaughter will be queen.”

“If we’re alive to see it!”

*****

He’s actually taking this rather well.

Eleanora Tentrees smiled as young Lord Weyland paced in the upstairs chambers which had been Kitiara’s for as long as she had known her. On the second floor in the palace complex, reachable only by a narrow stair and overlooking the formal gardens, the rooms had been a place she had despised in those first few months when she had been trying to civilize Kit. But after nearly fifteen years of sleeping in the chamber next to the princess, she felt more at home here than she did on one of her infrequent visits home to visits her parents, her brothers and sisters, and her ever-expanding horde of nieces and nephews.

“Relax,” she said. Weyland turned and stared at her. “Unless you’re planning on wearing a path in the carpet.”

He shook his head, his hands thrust deep into the pockets of his breeches. “You can’t possibly understand. Until yesterday, all I wanted was to stay here and attend the university when Mother returned home. I wanted to learn, and bring what I learned back to Stonehill. My brother is a good man. But he has no more imagination or ambition than a loaf of bread. When he inherits, unless someone pushes him, he’ll do things the same way as my father did, and his father before him. And Stonehill will remain a poor backwater of a barony, one or two bad years away from disaster.”

She felt her heart warming to the young man, and glanced at the closed door to Kitiara’s bedchamber, where her mistress was doing…something.

“No one is saying that you still can’t attend the university, even after you and Kit wed. It would certainly be a way to keep you out of the public view, if you cultivated an image of a scholarly recluse. Perhaps,” she said quietly, as Weyland snorted agreement, “the gods have decided that your ambitions lack…scope.”

“Scope?”

“Yes.” She smiled. “If you can do a little for Stonehill, why not do a lot for Delania?”

He opened his mouth to reply, then closed it slowly. A considering look passed over his face. “That…actually makes sense. I suppose something today had to,” he muttered in an aside. “But I ask Mother to send me all the information from the royal council. I can see for myself how much trouble all those old sticks are giving Queen Laurelin.”

“Indeed.” She looked Weyland over, coloring slightly at finding herself on the receiving end of his gaze.

“So…” he said slowly. “You’re lovers.”

“For nearly a year.” Her chin rose. “Does it bother you?”

“Not really.” He leaned against a wall, his arms crossed. “But someone who has a less suspicious and nasty turn of mind than myself might find himself wondering if the Heir’s Companion truly cares for the heir, or if she is

simply doing all she can to bind the heir tighter to her. Once Kitiara chooses a husband," he continued, ignoring Nora's sputtering protests, "she might find her influence…waning."

"Yes. That is exactly what someone with a nasty mind might think," Kit said, emerging from her bedroom. "Don't lose that streak of brutal practicality, Weyland. It will serve you well at court. I'll assume you learned it from your mother."

Eleanor enjoyed watching the play of expressions across the young man's face as he took in the princess, clad only in a diaphanous gown the color of spring roses. Kitiara's hair was let down to fall across her shoulders in delightful disarray, and her bare feet whispered across the marble tiles of her chambers.

She put her hand to her mouth, hiding her smile. Kitiara's uncle, King Hyssel, had gifted them both with several sets of the clothing that lovers wore in that much warmer realm. She remembered the first time she had seen one, last year, when Kit and herself had spent several weeks visiting her royal uncle, his wife, and their children in Chernavog. King Hyssel had sent a quartet of courtesans to their chambers, both as a welcoming gift, and, Nora suspected, as potential spies.

She had been scandalized. But later that same evening she and Kitiara had made love for the first time.

Now her eyes narrowed suspiciously, wondering what message Kitiara was sending. And was it to Weyland? Or herself?

From Weyland's expression, he was wondering the same thing. "My lady?"

Kit paused in the act of pouring wine into a trio of goblets, which, as she bent, had caused the hem of her gown to ride up, exposing the perky brown globes of her bottom. Her smile, over her shoulder, was wise and wicked. "Yes?"

"This is awkward." Nora was reminded that Weyland was almost as much an innocent as she had been, the first time her father had brought her to court.

His face twisted in a fury of embarrassed indecision. “Do you wish to be alone with…with Lady Eleanora? Or…alone with me?”

“No.”

“Then why are you dressed…like that?”

“Because I want to be alone with both of you.” She stood, waving them forward, then handed each a goblet, filled with rich red wine.

Nora swallowed. “Kit…this may not be wise.”

“Hush.” Her glorious violet eyes were gentle. “You know what I swore, the first night we were together. That I would never let a man come between us.

“To that oath I hold. But beautiful, sweet, lovely Nora. Love of my life, joy of my heart, who taught me more about being noble than others whose blood was much higher. You do not know how much it pains me to know that you have never allowed yourself to taste the joys of being with a man. Twenty-seven years old, and you have given your entire life to my mother, myself, and Delania.”

Trapped, Nora looked from Kitiara to Weyland and back again. To her gratification, Weyland looked just as confused as she. “Him?”

“Ummm…what?” Gradually beginning to realize that something was going on that he knew nothing about, Weyland began to back slowly towards the door.

Kit was too fast. Before he had moved three steps, she was on him. “Lord Weyland. Do you find my Companion attractive?”

Weyland narrowed his eyes in suspicion. “Is this a trick? If I say yes, will you throw your wine in my face, kick me in the crotch, and throw me in the dungeon?”

“Nora? Do we still have a dungeon?”

“Oh yes. Remember? When your mother caught that troop of travelling mimes in Temple Square two years ago? She had them thrown in the dungeons, and only let them out on the condition that they never set foot in Delania again, on pain of death.” She made a face. “I still think she was too merciful, but Linessa begged her to let them go.”

Diverted, Weyland frowned. “Princess Linessa doesn’t actually like mimes, does she?”

“Oh, no.” Kitiara smiled. “But she likes to cultivate an impression of being merciful. She says that will make it easier to excuse the torrents of blood which will be shed once she becomes high priestess, and grinds all of those who oppose her beneath her heel. My sister,” she said, exaggerating only slightly, “is of a very…determined…frame of mind when it comes to her duties as a priestess.”

“Oh. Well, that’s a relief.” Weyland shuddered. “I was starting to think your family was a little weird. No one likes mimes.”

“Too right. But you haven’t answered my question.”

“What question?”

“Weyland.” Kitiara’s voice was heavy with impatience. “You’re sexy as hell and my future husband, if I have my way. Please don’t act the fool. I know better.

“Now. Do you find Lady Eleanora attractive? It’s a simple question.”

“A simple question, yes.” Weyland ran his fingers through his hair. “But questions have answers. And some answers might not be ones your ears wish to hear.”

“An honest answer, from you, will always be welcome. Only polite lies will offend me.”

“Fine, then!” He took a step forward, glaring, at the end of his patience. “In the rocky valleys that surround Stonehill, flowers grow. But the shining petals of lilies and stonecrop pale before the luminous beauty of Lady

Eleanora's skin. And the stars of the night sky are wan and dull when compared to the sparkle of her eyes."

"And her body?"

"Ripe as a grown woman, but still bearing the maidenly allure of youth," he replied, and despite herself, Eleanora felt her lips curl in appreciation. Whatever else Weyland might be, he was quick-witted with a clever tongue. And he would need that, both among the snares of court, and with Kitiara, who had one of the keenest minds Nora had ever seen, and who loved to spend time in clever word-play almost as much as she loved passionate love-play.

She realized the princess was speaking to her. "What?"

"I was asking," Kit repeated, "whether you appreciated Lord Weyland's charms as much as he does yours."

She swallowed. She had been content to be Kitiara's Companion. For years, she had held her desires at bay, visiting the temple of Alianna once a season to calm the fires in her flesh. Telling herself she desired no man, she had been deliriously happy when she and Kit became lovers.

But there had always been the seed of doubt. What if…

What if she found a man who desired her for herself, and not as a means of growing closer to Kitiara, seeing her only as a path to power? A good man, a strong man, decent and kind, with a well-made body and an earnest, open face?

Someone, she was forced to admit, who resembled Lord Weyland Stonehill more than a little bit.

"He is not…uncomely," she heard herself say. "His face is pleasant, and his body is," she swallowed. "Well-made."

"Mmmm." Kitiara wandered behind her, trailing a finger up her arm as she did. Rooted to the floor, she flinched as her lover's arms wrapped around her

waist. Kitiara's breath was warm on her neck as she set her chin on her shoulder. "You would take him to bed?"

She shivered, and cursed her cowardice. "I would."

"Good." She started as she felt clever finger busy themselves with the ties that held her gown closed. "You know I rarely give you orders, Nora. Mostly," she continued with a smile in her voice, "because I know you won't obey a stupid one. It's one of the first lessons you taught me. Never give an order you know won't be obeyed."

She slid her hands up the bare skin of her back. "But this one, I think will be easier for you to accept.

"Take this man to bed. Cast off your fear. Come into the full glory of your birthright as a woman."

"Hey," Weyland said. He was looking at them with a frown on his face. "Don't I get a vote?"

"This is not a democracy, my lord." Kitiara pulled her gown down, leaving her bare to the waist. In the cool air of the room, her nipples tightened, though whether it was from fear, excitement, or arousal even she couldn't say. "You wanted to know the price you will pay for courting me? This is the first coin."

"You want me to make love to your Companion?" His voice was high with disbelief, but a quick glance at Weyland's breeches told her that he wasn't nearly as horrified at the idea as he pretended to be.

"I want you to make love to my best friend, and teach her the joy of womanhood." Kit's voice was like steel. A quick shove with her palms, and her gown and smallclothes were at her feet, and she was nude. "She is a virgin, who has never known a man's touch."

"She's also terrified," Weyland said grimly. "Look at her, Kitiara. She's shaking like a woman with a fever."

"I'm not scared!" she flared. "I'm just…." She stuttered to a halt.

He crossed his arms. “Just what?”

“Nervous,” she admitted in a small voice. “Kit?” She pleaded with her friend with her eyes. “Will you stay? Here? With me?”

A soft smile stole across her face, full of love. “Of course I will.” Her hands rose, cupping her breasts, and she trembled as her fingers pulled gently at her engorged nipples. “How do you want it to go? This time is for you.” She could feel the heat of the scorching glare she shot at Weyland. “Everything else can wait.”

She swallowed. “I don’t know.” Her mind, bobbing like a sailor on a storm-tossed sea, found a single spar to cling to. “Maybe…if we were in bed together? And you were behind me?”

“Clever girl,” Kit breathed. “Yes. That will work.

“Stop staring, you big ox, and take off your clothes,” she said to Weyland, who was obviously trying to figure out what was going on.

“As my lady bids,” he said sourly, unbuttoning his tunic. Despite her nervousness, her breath began to come quick in her chest as more and more of his splendid body came into view. Silently she thanked the seven gods and goddesses, and especially Alianna, that Weyland wasn’t like his older brother. Sir Frederik was no doubt a strong warrior, but physically, he resembled what might happen if someone shaved a bear. She had no desire to take either to her bed.

Weyland, on the other hand, despite his scholar’s heart, did not show the signs of a sedentary life. His legs were lean and toned, the result of long hours in the saddle. His chest was firm, lightly dusted with hair a few shades darker than that on his head. And his shoulders were broad, his arms strong.

And she bit her lip when his jutting cock came into view, bouncing in front of his belly. To her surprise, it did not horrify her, as she expected. Instead, she found herself consumed by curiosity. Would it actually fit inside her? What would it feel like? During the year she and Kit had been lovers, they had experimented in all sorts of ways, from fingers and tongues to mock-

phalluses carved from wood and ivory. But none of them, she knew, could replace the real thing.

“Kit?” she asked, hating the quaver in her voice.

“Yes, my love?” A pair of lips pressed into the nape of her neck, and she relaxed the tiniest bit. As long as her lover was with her, there could not be too much to fear.

“Is it…how big…does he…” she stammered to a blushing halt, ignoring Weyland’s sardonically raised eyebrow. Really, for a man standing naked in the middle of the princess’ sitting room, he was remarkably debonair about the whole affair.

“He’s large. But not ridiculously so.” A smile warmed Kit’s voice. “Which is a good thing. No woman like to feel as if her man is shoving a log between her legs. It doesn’t matter how much she wants him. If he’s too big, it hurts. Nikolas Stormcroft taught me that. Wonderful man, gentle as a lamb in bed. But he was still too damn big.”

Despite herself, she snickered. “I thought you were walking funny last midwinter, when you snuck away after the banquet.”

“He made up for it. In other ways.” Kit’s voice in her ear was wicked. “But enough. Why are we talking about this? Come over here, Weyland, and kiss her.”

“Yes, your excellency.” Somehow, despite the ridiculous sight of his phallus bouncing like a fishing rod with a trout hooked on the far end, Weyland was still able to keep a measure of dignity as he walked across the room.

“Lady Eleanora.” She shivered as he spoke her name. But his eyes were without any hint of foolery. “I know you love our lady Kitiara. But if this is not something that you want, you have only to say the word. I have no desire to bed an unwilling woman.” Something dark stirred behind his eyes. “I have seen the results of that particular sin.”

Kit’s arms tightened around her. Whether from anger at Weyland’s presumptuousness, or fear that she would prove herself a coward at the last,

she did not know.

“No,” she said softly. “I am not sure whether I will ever prefer men to women. But I am tired, Weyland. Tired of not knowing.

“I grew up a farmer’s daughter. Then, when I was little more than a girl, I found myself the daughter of a baron, and the Heir’s Companion.

“Nowhere in there was there room or time for me to see if a man ever desired me for myself, rather than as a receptacle for his lust or a way to ingratiate himself with the princess.”

“You’re lucky to have such a friend,” Weyland said softly. For an instant his eyes left hers, and he knew he was looking at Kitiara.

“Lucky, yes,” Kit’s voice was dryly amused. “But sometime we’ll tell you of the first few weeks Nora spent as my Companion. Trust me. Neither of us felt terribly blessed at the time!”

Weyland smiled, and set his hands gently on her hips. She breathed in deeply, not daring to look down, knowing she would see the red, pulsing tip of his shaft, only an inch or two away from the vulnerable curve of her belly.

“I will never hurt you,” he whispered.

Then he bent down, and kissed her on the lips.

It was…different. Over the last year, she had grown used to Kit. Her lover was many things. But diffident could not be counted among them. The princess was impetuous, headstrong, and utterly uninhibited when it came to the ways of love.

Weyland…wasn’t. He was almost…shy. Which was a relief. The last thing she wanted was some man, stuffed with his own importance, not giving her a chance to think or breathe.

Weyland did that. She could feel the desire within him, yes. But right now, it was a simmering fire, not a full-out conflagration. She put her hands on his chest, exploring the planes of his body, and opened her mouth the tiniest

fraction, inviting his tongue inside. He took the opportunity, but again, he did not invade her as a ravening plunderer. Instead, he explored, with a sense of soft wonder and delight, never pushing her too far.

When their lips parted, she was breathing hard, and she knew her cheeks were flushed. Kit's hands roved over her body, from hips to shoulders and back again, her warm breasts pushing into her back. "Well?"

She had to clear her throat twice before she could speak. "He's good." The words came out in a mouse's squeak, and she blushed even harder. "Very good."

"That is well. Perhaps we should retire to a bedroom. Even I would be hard-pressed to explain this to our servants, if they should walk in right now."

"Gods forbid," Weyland said fervently.

She took his hand and led him into the room that was Kitiara's, though now, more often than not, she slept here with her, rather than in the small chamber which was her own.

"Kit?" Her own voice was small in her ears. "How…"

"How about this, dearest?" Kit lay on the bed, her back, cushioned by feather pillows, propped up against the headboard. The robe rode high on her thighs, and the inner swells of her breasts could be seen peeking out through the gap in the thin cloth. She spread her legs invitingly. You can lay here. And I will hold you." She darted a saucy look at Weyland. "And our lover here can work his wicked wiles on you."

"I don't have any wiles," the young man muttered. If he hadn't looked so earnestly ridiculous, with his cock sticking up from the downy nest of brown curls at his groin, Nora would have been tempted to laugh. Instead, she was filled with a sense of aching tenderness. A man's pride, she had once been told by the queen, after she had rebuffed one overly-ardent suitor, was a fragile thing.

"No one likes being laughed at, Eleanora," she had said, her green eyes pensive as she sipped a glass of wine. "Maybe that's what drove Welston

away from me, poor man. I laughed at him the last time he asked me to make him king, rather than merely prince-consort. His pride couldn't take it.

"So he tried to kill me and take the throne by force."

Instead, she smiled at Weyland. "Your wiles are working on me just fine, boyo," she said, slipping into the slang of her youth, when she had been a mere knight's daughter. With as much grace as she could muster, she climbed onto the bed, sighing at the feel of the soft mattress. Putting her back against Kit's chest, she leaned back, trying to calm herself as her lover's arms came around her in a gentle embrace.

"You'll do fine." Kit's breath barely stirred her hair as she whispered into her ear. "He wants you."

"I'm scared," she said, though she felt a fool to admit it.

"Don't be." A hot hand settled on the inside of her thigh, and she bit back a moan. "You're wet. Aren't you?"

Despite herself, she giggled. "Soaking. It's a good thing we're naked, because otherwise my smallclothes would be ruined."

She could feel Kit's smile. "That's all the answer we need, then." Imperiously, she wiggled her fingers at Weyland. "Come on, Sir Lover. I expect you to serve my companion well."

Weyland frowned at them both as he joined them in the bed. "I see that this courting business is going to be complicated. Who am I supposed to please? You? Or her?"

"Both of us." The words emerged from her lips and Kit's at the same time, and she laughed.

"Fine," Weyland grumped, but a smile curled his mouth. She was caught by a sudden desire to kiss him, so she did. His lips were warm and soft under hers, and she raised her hands, exploring his body with delight. Different from Kitiara, yes. Her lover was olive-toned skin and sleek, soft, wonderful curves, underlain with strength honed from years of riding and archery.

Weyland was different. There was no softness in his body, no potbelly from too much ale or flabby, seldom-used muscles. He was lithe and hard, with a body like spring steel.

Under her tentative touch, he groaned, and moved closer. His cock pushed against her, and she laughed in wonder and disbelief. “It’s…soft!”

“Soft?” He sounded scandalized, while Kit giggled. “It certainly is not!”

“But it is!” She wrapped her hand around his girth, pumping her fist experimentally. “I expected it to be hard. Like stone. But the skin is so soft. And the tip, too.” She prodded it with a finger, eyes widening as Weyland flinched. “Does it hurt?”

He closed his eyes. “That’s…not quite the right word.”

“Carefully, dearest,” Kit murmured in her ear. “A man’s body is a strange thing.”

“Yes. It certainly is.” She squeezed Weyland again, and was rewarded with a groan.

“Carefully,” Kit repeated. “Do you want him to spend his seed all over your belly?”

She made a face, not sure whether her lover was joking or not. “That can happen?”

“Easier than you think,” Weyland replied. His eyes were screwed shut. “My lady, please. Release me!”

She did, in the same way she might let go of a pot handle that was too hot. Weyland shivered with relief, his body slowly relaxing.

“Men,” she said briskly. “Are strange.”

“Not strange.” There was more than a hint of laughter in Kit’s voice, drat her. “Just…different. Their curse is our blessing.”

“What?”

“Well, think about it,” the princess said, as Weyland scowled at her. The expression was rather adorable. “If men were as difficult to please as women, how would children ever get made?”

“I never noticed that you were all that hard to please,” she replied. “What are you doing?” she said, in an altogether different tone of voice, as Weyland lowered himself.

“Kissing you,” he replied, then kissed her stomach. His mouth was hot and wet, and she shivered as his tongue tasted the skin of her belly. It lingered there, sweeping across her skin in long, slow strokes, then wandered upwards. “I’m tired of being discussed like the prize bull at the fair.” He stopped at the swells of her breasts, and she found herself arching her back, wanting to feel his mouth on them. Teasing her, he dotted kisses around her ribcage, his hands running up and down the outsides of her thighs. Finally, in a fury of impatience, she gripped him by the nape of the neck, her hands tangling in his hair, and forced his mouth upwards.

“Alianna!” The cry was pulled out of her as Weyland finally gave her breasts the attention she craved. Gentle and strong at the same time, his mouth settled over her nipple, suckling avidly. As it tightened, straining so hard she thought it might burst, he flicked his tongue over the throbbing tip, inciting a fire of desire in her loins. Her head lolled back against Kitiara’s chest, but her groin rolled upward, hot and flushed and wickedly wet. Her breath caught in her throat as her woman’s bud pressed against the rigid pole of Weyland’s manhood. A voice inside her whispered she should be ashamed for acting the wanton, but it was overridden by desire, and she hooked her ankles around the young man’s legs, giving herself even more leverage. Her fingers clutched him about the shoulders as she ground her aching cleft into his hardness, eager for a release she had never dreamed possible.

This was a man! This was desire! If she had not been delirious with passion, she would have wept for the time lost. But no. None of those men, half-glimpsed in a future she would never know, would have been Weyland.

She pulled his mouth up, kissing him hard, her breath coming in soft, frantic mewls. And all the time, Kit's voice was in her ear, whispering dark, heady words of passion and desire, words which would have had her blushing like a nun in a brothel if she had not given herself wholly over to the man in bed with her.

"She is ready, Weyland." The voice was not her own, commanding with its simplicity. "Take her now."

"I'll take her when she tells me to take her. Not before." Weyland's glare was fierce. "And if you don't like it, my lady, you are more than welcome to hie yourself out of this bed and let me and Eleanora finish what we've started."

Oh, Gods, no. She waited for the explosion. Kit's temper was not as bad as it had been when she was the "royal brat," but it could still be fierce.

Instead, there was a muffled giggle in her ear. "So you have a spine after all. Good." Hot hands cupped her breasts, and she shivered as a wise, knowing mouth traced the curve of her ear. "Are you ready, dearest?"

"Seven gods, yes!" Her lower body was on fire, and she pulled Weyland down on top of her, her hips rocking against his rock-hard shaft. "Please, Weyland. I can't wait any longer!"

She reached down, gripping his staff around its base, heedless of what she would have thought if anyone had dared to suggest to her, even a few days earlier, that she would be welcoming a man in her bed. It throbbed pleasantly in her hand, and she opened herself to him, her legs spreading wide.

The tip breached her gates, and she bit her lips as he slipped into her, inch by wonderful inch. Big, yes. Thick, yes, turning her insides to water as he slowly, so slowly, entered her. But not so big he hurt her, thank all the seven gods, and especially Alianna, goddess of lust, fertility, and sexual desire.

Braced above her on his arms, he looked down at her, his face giving her little hint of what he was feeling. "Are you all right?" he asked.

“All right?” She blinked, then wiggled experimentally, enjoying the way his eyes widened. “I…think so.” Inside her, she could feel him twitch, a quick jerk of his muscular rod, and her insides flexed around him in startled response. Her voice husked. “Good. Better than good. How about…” another moan. “You?”

“I’m…good.”

“Just good, Weyland?” Kit teased.

He moved inside her, backing out a little, then pushing forward. She closed her eyes against the lovely sensation of his cock rubbing against her inner walls. “I’m trying to be polite, princess.”

“Don’t be.” Her voice was a throaty rasp, and she pulled him down to her, kissing him fiercely. Her hands splayed across his back, wondering why she had ever been afraid of this. Oh, it was wonderful! “Don’t be,” she repeated. “I want to know what you think, what you feel.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

His throat worked. “Then…” He kissed her again. “It’s like making love to spring.”

She blinked. “What?”

“You.” His eyes were dark and wonderfully earnest. “You’re like spring, Lady Eleanora. You’re soft and warm and kind and gentle.” A finger traced the curve of her cheek, even as the pace of his thrusts began to increase.

Something was happening. Something inside her. Something she had never felt with Kit.

“But underneath, you have an edge like a snowstorm in March. And woe be it to anyone who gets between you and those you protect.”

“Oh, gods!” Her body was beyond her control, shaking like a woman in the grip of an ague. She closed her eyes, wrapping her arms around Weyland’s torso as if she was drowning. Far off, she could hear Kit whispering encouragement in her ear.

And then it hit. A blazing spike of passion pierced her belly, and she screamed into Weyland’s neck as her body convulsed, wracked by the strongest climax of her life. Her inner sheath clamped down on his thrusting cock, and she felt a boiling, liquid explosion deep inside her, his phallus throbbing inside her, and even in the midst of her orgasm, her eyes opened in wonder, meeting Weyland’s as he poured his essence deep within her.

For a long moment, there was silence, broken only by the sound of their breathing. It was broken by Kit.

“I would ask if that was good for you, but I think I already know the answer,” she said, laughing softly.

Weyland levered himself up on one elbow, pushing an errant lock of his hair out of his eyes. “You have no shame at all, do you?”

“No. None.” She made a show of patting her body in a mock search. “I can’t think where I left it.”

Nora snorted. “Very funny.”

As supple as a snake, Kit slipped out from behind her, her face suddenly serious. “It was good though, wasn’t it, sweetheart?” She blinked. “I know I pushed you. Both of you…”

She gripped her best friend’s hand. “It was.” She slanted a look at Weyland, who was watching with more than moderate interest. “It was very good,” she repeated, noticing how his face relaxed in relief.

“Good.” A finger slipped down her chest to rest between her breasts. “You’ll have to take care to start wearing your charm in the future.”

“My charm?” she repeated blankly, then blushed in furious realization. Every woman in Delania who didn’t desire a pregnancy wore one of the cheap anti-fertility charms that were sold at the local apothecary shops, or given away for free at the temples. “I never even thought about it.”

“Better start. Unless you want to be a mother.”

She shuddered. “Heaven forbid!”

“Why?” Weyland put his hand on her hip. “I think you would be a wonderful mother, Lady Eleanora.” He slanted a look at Kit. “From all accounts, you did a fantastic job of civilizing our beloved princess.”

“Ass.”

“Brat.”

“Think, Weyland,” Nora said. “Do you really want your children’s half-brothers or half-sisters, my children and yours, running around the palace? Half the nobles in the kingdom want Ashkelon or Linessa to be declared Heir rather than Kit, because of who her blood-father was. The other half want them permanently banned from having any say in how the kingdom is run at all, because they’re terrified of Hyssel of Chernavog getting more influence over us than he already has.

“Do you really want to open that can of worms in a second generation? Right now, we’re lucky. Linessa has all but publicly declared that she will enter the priestesshood of Alianna when she comes of age. And Ashkelon, gods bless him, is so obviously unsuited to the duties of being king that anyone who brings up the subject is immediately branded a fool. He’s a sneaky little shit, and if I had to guess, I’d bet he takes on Lord Elcarth’s job in a decade or two.”

“Elcarth?” Weyland frowned. “Isn’t he that friend of Prince-Consort Welston that everyone wanted to hang from the tallest tree in Delania when the war was over? What does he have to do with anything?”

“Ah.” Kit smiled like a cat, if cats could smile, instead of looking as if they were quietly planning to murder you while you slept. “Some day soon we’ll

have to enlighten you about Elcarth. And about Lady Lisette."

She climbed on top of him. "But not now." She leaned down, the tips of her breasts brushing his chest. "I want you to do to me what you did to Nora."

"Already?"

She wiggled on top of him, smiling as she felt him begin to harden. "Are you…incapable?" she teased, laughing low in her throat. "It doesn't feel like you are.

"Or do you not want Nora here? I have to say, that seems rather…unfair."

Incredibly, Weyland blushed. He would have thought, after the last few hours, that his capacity to be embarrassed would have been completely exhausted. "Is it always going to be like this? All three of us?"

"Of course not." To Nora's amusement, Kit seemed rather offended by the suggestion. "Nora was my lover before you were hers, and before you were mine. There are times, my move, when she and I might wish to be alone together."

Weyland opened his mouth, then closed it. The expression made him look like a fish which had been hit over the head with a shovel. If one hit fish with shovels, which hopefully, one didn't. That sort of thing could give someone a bad reputation, Nora thought madly. People in the street would say, "Here comes that fish-hitting weirdo."

She tore her mind back to the present. Weyland was gripping Kit firmly by her rear, slowing the motions of her hips, though not stopping them completely. "Alone?" he asked.

"Yes." Kit cocked her head curiously. "Does that bother you?"

Weyland was quite adorable when he chewed his lip that way, Nora decided. Like a child who was trying to decide if he was in trouble, or if the adults might actually be wrong. "Stop teasing him, Kit," she said, turning so she was lying on her side, and kissing Weyland's cheek. "Give the poor lad time to get used to things. We here at the court are used to a certain amount of

casual debauchery," she explained to the young man, who nodded quick agreement. "I doubt he ever expected anything like this."

"Seven gods no," Weyland sighed. He blinked, and continued on. "But I wouldn't think of trying to come between the Heir and her Companion," he finished manfully.

"You won't." Nora ran her hand up the length of Kit's back, smiling as she arched under her touch. The movement brought her breasts within reach of Weyland's mouth, and he wasted no time in licking and suckling on her nipples, as Kit sighed and writhed sensuously. "There are some days," she added, "when Kit will want you, and not me. And some where we will have to…entertain…each other, when the needs of the realm take precedence over the desires of the body.

"We have so much to teach you, Weyland," she whispered, as Kit began to impale herself of his cock. "So much you have not dreamed of. There are pleasures unknown, unthought of in Stonehill. Or in the village where I was born. But here, in Eradon, we can explore every facet of desire, until we are drenched with the sweat of our passion, and our bodies exhausted from lovemaking."

"Oh." Weyland blinked, and for a moment Nora wondered if he was indeed the fool that the Duchess of the Weald thought him. But she realized that it was just that Kit had completed her mission to take Weyland's beautiful manhood inside her body. Having experienced what Kit was like in bed, she forgave him for the way his mind seemed to have wandered off course, like a ship with a mast missing.

"That's…good," he sighed, and she fought down the sudden surge of jealousy. Really, Eleanora! Who are you jealous of? Weyland? Kit? You've had them both, and will again soon!

"I bet it is," she said, getting on her knees, fondling the lovely globes of her lover's rear. "It's almost enough to make me wish I had a cock, too, just to know what the inside of her lovely body feels like."

“Hot. Wet.” Weyland groaned and began to move, his hips rising and lowering on the bed. Above him, Kit gave vent to a thin, moaning keen. “Tight.”

“Big,” Kit panted. “Hot. Thick. Full. Oh, seven gods above, Nora, he fills me up just right. And the way he rubs my button.” She buried her face in the crook of his shoulder, her groin slapping down harder and harder as she lost control. “Alianna bless our union. Holy Goddess, I beg thee!” She kissed Weyland, their arms wrapping around each other feverishly, and Nora found herself joining them, her mouth and tongue exploring everywhere she could reach, while her hand reached around to grasp Weyland’s cock, feeling his sac fill her palm, his balls full of life-giving seed.

A groan was torn from their throats, and her eyes widened. She could feel the surge and spurt as Weyland came to his climax. At the same time, Kit gave a convulsive shudder, her muscles clenching and releasing, her throat closing on a high-pitched wail, and she collapsed across Weyland’s chest, her body coated with a sheen of sweat.

She smiled, which grew only wider as Kit rolled bonelessly off of Weyland’s chest, her eyes closing and a faint snore emerging from her lips.

“Is she…all right?” he asked nervously. His cock was red and wet, slickened with his lover’s juices.

“Relax. She’s fine.” Leaning over, she blew out the lamp. The room dimmed, lightened only by the silvery light of the rising moon, shining through the eastern window. “She’s like this every time she has really good sex.” Leaning over, she pulled a blanket from the floor and settled it over all three of them. “She will wake in an hour, demand that we get her some food, ‘because by the seven gods, I’m starving to death,’” she continued, mimicking Kit’s voice as the young man chuckled. “And if you’re really lucky, she’ll wish to make love to you again before you go to sleep tonight.

“So if I were you, I’d take a nap and recover my strength.” She lay down, curling her body into the sweet curve of Kit’s form.

“I don’t know if I’m ready for this.” Weyland’s voice, almost haunted, came drifting out of the dark.

“I wasn’t either,” she answered, yawning. “One day I was Heir’s Companion. The next I was the Heir’s lover.

“My advice is, get ready for one hell of a ride.”

*****

“You know what I wish you to do?”

The man in front of her smirked. “I do, great lady. It is a task which is simple in the concept, though difficult in the execution.”

“Execution.” She laughed, high and brittle. “Yes. Exactly. And you will do it?”

He shrugged. “I will attempt it. There may be…difficulties. The lady is well-guarded, after all.”

“What do you want? More money?”

The lean, hatchet-faced man stiffened. “More money will not make this any easier, Duchess. What you are asking…” He swallowed. “It’s not knifing some stupid lout who has got on the wrong side of a petty noble, and who will never be missed. This is treason, at the highest level.”

He raised his eyes. Dull brown, nevertheless the expression in them made her flinch. “Are you sure you want me to attempt this? If you are found out, if I am caught, may the seven gods have mercy, for the queen will have none. The lady is precious to her. The entire kingdom knows it.”

The thin mouth tightened. “Yes.” The word hissed from her lips like a snake in a sack. “I want her to hurt. I want her to feel, for one time in her precious little life, real pain. She has been coddled and protected her whole life, while we beg and plead for the scraps she lets fall from her table.”

A tight nod, though his eyes were bleak. “Very well.” He fingered the dagger at his belt. “It will have to be here. The lady seldom leaves the palace.”

A wave of white fingers. “All I ask is that it is done quickly.” A feral snarl marred her features. “And that when it is done, I never see your ugly face again.” A purse passed from her hand to his, heavy with gold. “Disappear, someplace far away.”

He nodded. “My lady.”

As he walked away, he shuddered. I have to get into a new line of work. This one is too foul for me.

Maybe the north. At least there the monsters have the decency to not look human. A glance over his shoulder showed the lady staring after him. With an effort, he kept his stride slow and casual. He had seen that expression on other faces before.

Faces that were planning murder.

*****

When Weyland woke up, he wondered where he was.

Then the memories of the night before came crashing down on him like an avalanche in the northern mountains, and he stifled a bout of panic.

He was lying in a sumptuous bed, with a warm coverlet over him. Black hair and warm, olive-hued skin was only a few inches in front of his sleep-fogged eyes. And a warm, soft presence pressed into him from behind.

Kitiara. And Eleanora. Seven Gods. Mother will have a stroke. And Fred will call me a liar.

Best not to tell them, then.

He must have shifted, or made some sound, because he was suddenly aware of Kit's eyes staring deep into his own. Dark blue, almost violet in the early morning light that poured through the windows set in the eastern wall, they examined him with frank curiosity. Her thoughts were easy to read. After a night of lovemaking, how would he react? Revulsion at her wanton nature? Greed and avarice at the sudden elevation in his rank? Lust, taking for granted that as the man, he would decide when and how his desires would be sated?

He leaned forward and kissed her softly on the lips. "Good morning. I love you."

The eyes widened. For a moment he thought he had chosen poorly. Then they brimmed with tears. "You do?"

One corner of his mouth pulled up in a smile. "I do." He laced the fingers of one hand with hers, willing her to feel his sincerity. "I think you're the most gloriously beautiful woman I've ever seen. And the most fascinating." He shrugged. "I'm sure that at some point we'll curse the day we met, have arguments, shout at each other." He pulled her close, marveling at the feel of her warm, sleek body, all tan skin and warm muscle and soft curves, against his own. Below his waist, his cock gave an enthusiastic twitch. "But there is no woman I would rather be with than you."

"I think I'm going to be sick." Behind him, he could feel Eleanora getting out of the bed. The sun dappled her body with gleaming highlights as she walked out of the room.

"Sick?" He raised his eyebrows worriedly.

"Don't worry." A smile lit Kit's face. "My Companion…is not at her best in the mornings. And she is not a romantic. When we go to the royal theater to watch the players perform, she mocks the sweet words of courteous love.

"I, on the other hand…" her hand reached down, gripping the base of his cock and giving it an enthusiastic tug, "am." Her arm swept up, pushing the coverlet away, revealing her wonderful, naked body. Her cleft was shaved

bare, and in the morning light, he could see her plump lips, glistening with a hint of moisture, like the morning dew on the petals of a flower.

With a spin, she lay down on his chest, her groin only a few inches from his startled face. “What are you doing?”

Kit was kissing the inside of his thighs, her hot tongue tracing patterns on his skin. “Have you never pleased a woman in this fashion, my lord?” she teased, wiggling her bottom provocatively.

He swallowed. He hated to look like an untutored bumpkin in front of (or under) Kitiara. But something told him that lying to her would be the worst possible strategy. “I had heard…rumors. Things the guardsmen would say when they thought I couldn’t hear, back home at Stonehill. But I thought it was all…just talk. The same way they would brag about how big their… manhood was.” He ran his hands along her trim thighs, blinking as Kit lowered herself even closer to his face. “Women…like this?”

“Oh, yes.” The words were a sultry moan. “How do you think Nora and I please each other so well?”

“I hadn’t really thought about it,” he answered honestly.

“Mmmm. Start thinking. Then start doing.” Her head lifted, and he gasped with stunned pleasure as she set the circle of her lips around the tip of his shaft.

To say that it was unlike Weyland had ever experienced before would have been true. But at the same time, it was a grostesque understatement. Other girls had done this for him, of course. During the long summer months when his mother was at court, there was little to do at Stonehill, and he had whiled away many a pleasant hour in the happy company of cleaning maids and seamstresses, who had been more than exchange a bucket and mop or a sewing basket for an hour or two in his bed.

But their abilities paled beside those of Kitiara. His head lolled back in the thick fat pillows as she made love to his cock. She licked him with ungodly ability, up one side and down the other, and then probed his weeping slit with a skill that nearly made him weep with pleasure. Her hands crept

between his thighs, and when she cupped his balls, rolling them between her fingers and tickling the sensitive sac of his scrotum, it was all he could do to not shout aloud.

She raised her head, and let his shaft escape her mouth. It slapped his belly firmly, leaving behind a glistening trail of moisture. “Well?” she asked impatiently.

“Well, what?” he replied.

A huff of frustration. “Weyland, I love you dearly. But you are going to learn that at certain times, and in certain places, you will have to take action. Not just let life happen to you.”

He ran his hands up her legs, his thumbs teasing the insides of her thighs. “Really? And how should I take action, my royal princess?”

“You know what I want,” she snapped. Her groin fell another inch, putting the pouting lips of her labia within reach of his mouth. “And if I don’t get it…” her hand gripped the base of his rod in mute warning, “I might just go to Nora’s chamber and let her finish what you’ve started.”

“No, you won’t,” he stated with confidence he didn’t feel.

And before she could do more than draw in a breath to make a furious retort, he lifted his head, opened his mouth, and kissed Kitiara’s nether lips with the same deep, fiery passion that he had used when he kissed her mouth the previous night.

“Nrgh!” It was a grunt of surprise, and, Weyland thought, pleasure. Oh, so carefully, picking his way through this new and strange landscape, both richer and more sensual than anything he had imagined, he parted her folds with his tongue, licking and exploring her inner secrets. Her taste exploded on his tongue, thick and dark and musky, but by no means unpleasant.

“Seven gods.” It was a whisper, a prayer. And suddenly his cock was back in Kit’s mouth, her hands locked around his calves as she bobbed up and down on him. This was no slow, teasing trip to paradise. It was an all-out effort to get him to spend as quickly as she could.

A challenge. His lips curled, and he squinted in the dim light. Kit's body made it hard to see, and not every woman was as blessed as the groom's daughter who had taught him what to look for, but-

There! And to his immense but unspoken relief, the treasure he sought was almost painfully obvious. The size of the smallest joint on his little finger, Alianna's Bud stood out from its protective hood of flesh, glistening with her womanly dew.

With a lunge that was half a wallow, he fastened his lips around the tiny nodule of flesh, running the pad of his tongue over it in a long, slow sweep. Ignoring the startled, pleasured jerk of his lover's hips, he did it again, and again, until he could feel her body shake. Then he took it between his lips, the tip of his tongue reaching out to flick over it, his motions almost too quick to feel.

"Ahhhhh." Cooler air hit his erection. "I'm sorry, my love." Her hand gripped his base, pumping leisurely. "But it's for the best. You keep doing what you're doing, and I'll bite your pole in half."

Something to keep in mind, he thought, but did not vocalize. All his attention was on this incredible woman, his love. Slowly, sensuously, she ground her mound down on his mouth, and he opened wide, wider, widest, trying to take in as much of her succulent, dripping flesh as he could, tonguing her bud furiously. His hands clutched her rear, gripping hard, and Kit gave a tiny, breathy moan as his fingers dug deep into her flesh.

His world shrank. All that existed was Kitiara. Her hand around his manhood, her hot, slick lips on his mouth. Her hands tensed, gripping him hard enough to bruise, and he could feel the weight of her chest come off his stomach as her back arched, her mouth opening wide to give vent to a single, ecstatic shriek before her lips fastened around the head of his cock, her flying fist pulling his seed out of his swollen, aching balls as he emptied himself in a single wild burst of earth-shattering pleasure.

*****

"This could get annoying."

He stood beside the bed, a faint frown on his face, his hands set at his hips. On the bed, Kit was sleeping contentedly, a faint smile curling the sweet pink bow of her mouth.

He reached down, intending to shake her awake.

"Don't."

He started, spun. "What?"

"I'm warning you." Lady Eleanora walked into the room, clad in a well-made, if sensible, bronze-colored gown. "Don't try to wake her up. Give her the turning of a glass and she'll wake up singing like a tree full of birds. But get her up before she's ready and she'll be as cross as two sticks for the rest of the day."

"Oh." He straightened, felling more than a little ridiculous speaking to this elegant, self-assured woman while he was nude and the entire room smelled of lovemaking. "Learned the hard way, did you?"

She rolled her eyes. "Lord Weyland, you have no idea."

He grinned, then bent to start to gather his rumpled clothes, scattered across the floor. "Do tell."

Nora leaned up against a wall, watching him with a small smile as he dressed. "Well…" she blinked as he buckled on his swordbelt, eying the dagger it held nervously. "Do you really need that?"

He nodded. "My mother would have me skinned if I went around the castle unarmed. A sword seemed a little too much, but a dagger?" He shrugged.

"Do you actually know how to use it? I thought you were a scholar."

"I manage," he said shortly.

Truth be told, he was no match for Frederik with swords. His aggravatingly large brother surpassed him in height, reach, weight, and skill.

But with knives or daggers, he won. Always. A cunnning whirlwind, the armsmaster back at Stonehill had called him, and had told his mother that they were all lucky that he had been born to the nobility, because he would otherwise have become a very creditable assassin, and inevitably ended up with his head on the chopping block.

“Come on.” He looked up from pulling on a recalcitrant boot. “I won’t snitch. Tell me about Kitiara.”

“It was the morning after we first became lovers,” Nora said at last, smiling faintly at the memory. “I was giddy as a child who had been given a sweet. I knew Kit cared for me. I had known that for years. But I never suspected that her physical desires might match mine.”

She led him out of the chamber, closing the door softly behind her. “But then, one night, we became lovers. I still can’t quite understand it.”

“I know how you feel.”

“Yes.” Mysterious brown eyes slanted a quick look up at him, and he felt himself falling in love for the second time in as many days. “Perhaps you do.

“Anyway, the next morning we made love. It seemed to last hours,” she said, smiling in fond remembrance. “And afterward, she fell asleep. Just like she did with you.

“Well, I got a silly, stupid idea in my head. That she had only made love with me because she felt sorry for me, because I had no lover of my own, and would never take the risk to have one.

“So I woke her up to ask her.” She shuddered theatrically as they left the stairwell behind and began to walk down a long, narrow hallway. “She damn near bit my fool head off. Cursed me for asking such a stupid, asinine question, threw an empty chamberpot at me, and pulled the pillows over her head.” Her lips twitched at the memory. “I learned my lesson. Once was enough.”

“What’s…” he hesitated. Even in the empty hallway, deserted save for one skinny, seedy guard, he was reluctant to ask the question. “What’s she like?

Really?”

“Really?” Eleanora put her head on one side. “The first time I met her, I thought she was the most vile, spoiled, repellant little brat that the seven gods had ever cursed unhappy Delania with.

“Now?” Her eyes were dark. “Her mother is a good queen,” she said slowly. “Kitiara, I think, may be a great one.”

He bit his lip. Every passing hour seemed to make the stakes higher. He had never thought in terms of ruling families and dynasties, never aspired to greatness. “How do I…how do I deal with her?”

Nora’s eyes glinted mischievously. “Firmly.” To his puzzled look, she continued. “I’ll explain later. But there is a reason she was called the Royal Brat, once upon a time.”

“Really.” He didn’t like the look the guard was giving them, and he subtly guided Nora to one side, putting more distance between the man and themselves.

Afterward, he couldn’t really say what had warned him. Perhaps it had been the scuff of boot-leather on the faded carpet. Maybe it was the faint hiss of an indrawn breath. Or the slight scrape as a dagger was pulled loose form its sheath.

Whatever it was, Weyland acted with reflexes so finely honed by five years in the practice ring with the armsmaster that they verged on instinct. He turned in a neat pirouette, his left shoulder ramming into Nora’s chest so that she stumbled away from the long, wickedly-barbed knife that had been ramming towards her unprotected belly. At the same time, his right hand drew his own dagger, and he set himself between the man and Nora.

“You shouldn’t have interfered. I would have killed her quick,” the man snarled. “Prepare to meet your gods, boy.”

Weyland didn’t reply. His entire world narrowed to a deadly focus. Knees bent, weight on the balls of his feet, left foot forward, left arm protecting his knife hand. His eyes were trained on his enemy’s knife, a weapon meant to

injure and maim, all spikes and barbs, and on the center of the man's chest, the first place that would show movement.

"Nora?" he asked quietly, not taking his eyes off the man. A veteran, he thought, nearly forty, with pale gray eyes and a narrow strip of beard. His nose had been broken, more than once. But his hands bore the scars of years of fighting at close quarters.

"I'm fine."

"No one told me you'd be with her," the man snarled. He jabbed at Weyland's face with the blade, but he slid back, his footwork neat and clean. "Now you've ruined everything!"

He cut at Weyland, the steel of his knife glittering through the air as he tried furiously to break his defense. Too far, too quick. He overextended, and Weyland reversed his dagger, the pommel coming down on the back of his hand with crushing force. He could hear the sharp crack as bones broke under the blow.

The dagger fell from the man's nerveless grip, and with a muted roar, Weyland bore him across the hall, not stopping until he was flat against the wall, his knife held to his throat.

"Yield." One single, flat word.

The gray eyes glittered sardonically. "Your prisoner, my lord."

"Nora." He dug the knife in warningly as the man tensed. "Come here and search him. Gutter scum like this always has more than one knife. Where?" he asked him, not minding at all the line of red that appeared where the edge of his blade met his jaw.

A small snort. "You're a smart one, aren't you? Fine. Back of the neck. Left forearm. Right boot."

Knives fell to the floor with small chiming sounds as Nora disarmed him. "Your name?"

“Lukas. Lukas Pedigo.”

“Soldier?”

“Royal Guardsman, once. Lieutenant for the Prince-Consort.”

“Welston,” he breathed.

A tiny nod. “Cashiered after his highness tried to kill the queen.” His face twisted. “I knew nothing, I swear it! And they threw me out like so much manure!”

“And who do you work for now?”

Lukas’ lips tightened but he said nothing.

“Who?” he roared, punched the man in the gut. He doubled over, gasping.

“Weyland?” Eleanora tugged at his arm. “Someone will come by soon. If we don’t want the entire palace to know, we have to get this man behind closed doors. Her majesty’s torturers,” she said with appalling coldness, “will have the truth out of him soon enough.”

He nodded once. “Right.” With quick movements, he stripped off Lukas’ belt, using it to tie his wrists behind his back. “Get moving, scum.” He prodded him with his dagger. “You try to run, I’ll stab you where you’ll die slow.

“Nora. You know this warren better than I do. Where can we buy ourselves some time and not cause an uproar?”

For an endless moment Nora was silent as they walked, her dark eyes distant. Finally she gave a firm nod. “He won’t thank me for letting out the secret so soon. But there’s only one place to go. The royal chambers are too far, and too many people will see us between here and there.

“Lord Elcarth is the man we want.”

“Elcarth?” He dredged through his memory, and scowled. “One of Welston’s old cronies? Why him? Mother can’t stand him. She told me last year she thinks he should have been strung up from the highest tree in Delania.”

“Your mother,” Nora said shortly, “wise woman that she is, does not know everything, Lord Weyland.”

“No!” Lukas strained against his bonds, his shoulders hunching with effort. “Not him! Not Elcarth!”

If this fellow is afraid of him, maybe Nora knows more than I do.

“All right.”

*****

As the day passed, the palace buzzed with rumors.

The doors to the throne room, where Queen Laurelin and Prince-Consort Roland were expected to hold court, remained stubbornly shut, even as the hour when they usually opened passed by. Confused courtiers milled in the great hall, asking questions that no one was able to answer.

What’s going on?

I heard that Pedloe invaded the eastern provinces, and Roland will lead the army out as soon as the queen and the council declare war.

That’s ridiculous. We’ve been at peace with Pedloe for nearly a century. I heard that Kitiara was so taken with this new admirer of hers that she has decided to abdicate in favor of Ashkelon.

Ashkelon? Are you mad? Linessa would be the better choice.

You’re all wrong. My maidservant told me she saw a squad of guardsmen going to Lord Elcarth’s rooms. Maybe Laurelin has finally had enough of that Chernavogan leech and decided to give him what he should have got fifteen years ago: A sharp axe and a short haircut.

How do you know so much? Has anyone even seen the Heir, her Companion, or young Lord Weyland since last night? Weyland went strutting off with the Heir on his arm and her Companion drifting along behind him, and no one knows where they are!

That keen observation won several moments of silence. But before the idea that Kitiara was in danger could take root in their minds, another rumor flew through the room.

Several of the more foolhardy members of the nobility, who had nothing better to do with their time than try to curry favor with the queen, went so far as to approach the heavy double doors which led to the throne room. The guards, their faces expressionless under their steel helmets, deigned to answer their whispered questions. When one tried to set her hand on the door-handle, the glint of steel from a sword, pulled a few significant inches from its sheath, made her scurry away in almost indecent haste.

After an interminable time, the doors finally opened, answering some unseen signal. In unusual silence, the courtiers trooped in, their curious whispers hushed.

What they saw chilled even the most foolish. The magnificent throne room, tiled in marble and hung with tapestries and battle-flags which hearkened back to some of Delania's greatest moments, was draped in mourning. The curtains were pulled across the wide windows, shutting out the spring sunlight, and black crepe hung from the fluted columns which held up the high ceiling.

Voices rose to a muted roar, then abruptly fell. For at the end of the room were six figures. An audible sigh of relief swept through the throng as the sharp-eyed among them whispered what they saw; Queen Laurelin, Prince-Consort Roland, and Princess Kitiara on the thrones reserved for the ruler, her consort, and her Heir. Princess Linessa and Prince Ashkelon stood behind them. Linessa's expression was unusually solemn, and Ashkelon, usually sullen, seemed taken by a thunderous rage.

It escaped no one's notice that every member of the royal family was dressed in black.

Behind Kitiara, whose eyes were red and swollen with weeping, stood young Lord Weyland, his face a neutral blank. Very few of that company had any but the most fleeting acquaintance with the second son of Stonehill. But most knew his mother as a woman to respect in her own right. The baroness of Stonehill might not hold much power when it came to men at arms, lands, or wealth. But there was more than one kind of strength, and all had had occasion to witness the deadly keenness of Severina's mind.

When all were inside, Laurelin stood. Her face was ravaged by grief. Looking across the room, she caught gaze of her captain of guards, who quietly closed the doors behind him.

"My lords, my ladies. Peers of the realm, who hold our lands in their care. Heads of the guilds and representatives of our merchant elite, who ensure the rivers of commerce flow. Priests and priestesses, who care for our souls and send us back to the gods when our time on this good earth is done.

"Today I bring to you tidings of sorrow and woe.

"This morning, in this very castle, the Companion of our Heir, Lady Eleanora Tentrees, who we have loved since the day she first came among us, was foully attacked and gravely wounded."

Gasps of shock and anger rose from the crowd, and the queen held up her hand.

"At this moment, we do not know what the fate of Lady Eleanora may be. We pray to the gods that she may be spared, and that she may live among us for many long years to come."

Approving murmurs were heard, and many people signed themselves across the heart in honor of Millagra, the Lady of Mercy.

"What of the assassin?" one brave soul called. "Was he caught?"

Princess Kitiara stood. And if Laurelin's eyes had burned, hers blazed.

She spoke, and her voice fell into the sudden silence like pellets of frozen sleet at midnight.

“Yes. He was caught. By the heroism of Lord Weyland Stonehill, who, by the grace of the gods, was with Lady Eleanora when she was attacked, the foul fiend was taken into custody.”

In deadly silence, several figures stepped away from the walls. Clad in the gray robes and veils of Magar, god of justice, their presence was almost unnoticed at first. But as they walked across the room, their movements as slow and steady as a dance performed underwater, ripples of dread spread in their wake. Soon, the entire room was silent, every eye trained on them, as rapt as an audience at a play at the royal theater.

Slowly, steadily they came on, as calm and remorseless as an unpaid debt. Men and women paled when they neared, and when they passed by, they scurried away with visible relief.

Then there was only one figure, caught in a circle of judgement. Gasps rose as the Duchess of the Weald, her face pale but for two hectic spots of color high on her cheekbones, was surrounded.

A woman dressed in the robes of Magar stood forth. One arm lifted. From her hand, the scales of judgement which were the symbol of Magar dangled. The other hand swept back her veil, revealing the lovely face of Lady Eleanora. As those who could see whispered to those who could not, a roar of outrage swept over the room. Weyland shivered. He had not known, until now, just how highly Eleanora was respected among her people.

“You were attacked! The queen said so!”

“I was.”

“And were wounded!”

“To the very bottom of my soul. Luckily, it was in spirit only.” A mirthless smile twitched her lips. “My body was not harmed.”

“You escaped?” Wilmina’s voice was a choked gasp. “How?”

“Perhaps the hand of the goddess was on her,” came the cold voice of Princess Kitiara. “Or maybe she walked down a deserted hallway with a

companion, when your lackey expected to find her alone. And maybe he was captured, and confessed that you paid him to kill her."

And now the very stones of the castle shook with the force of the crowd's anger.

"Why?" Eleanora whispered. Her eyes welled with tears, and they probed the duchess' face for some glimmer of understanding. "I have never done any harm to you or yours. Why spend your venom on me?"

"Why?" The duchess laughed, and the sound was high and wild. "You can stand there, after nearly fifteen years as Kitiara's Companion, you can stand there and ask me why?

"You know why. You all know why!" Her face a rictus of venomous hate, she spun, and all who caught her gaze flinched before the force of her fury. "None of you had the will to do what had to be done! She's a traitors' child! Will you sully the very name of Delania by allowing her to sit on the throne when her mother is dead?

"I wanted her to hurt. I wanted to feel pain, as the rest of us felt pain from what her father did. I wanted her, just once, to know the consequences of her father's acts."

"The man who sired me," Kitiara said coldly. "Is not the man who raised me. I am not Welston's daughter. I am Laurelin's. And Roland's."

"It's interesting," Weyland put in smoothly, reducing Wilmina to choked sputters, "that your fit of patriotism did not surface until your son's suit for Princess Kitiara's hand was denied. Was it your morals which were outraged? Or your ambitions?"

"You," Wilmina sneered at him. "You're nothing. No one and nobody. Do you think to shame me with your words, second son of a barony I could throw a stone across? Typical man. If you get your wick wet, it doesn't matter if it's the high priestess of Alianna or a two-penny whore from the foulest cesspit in the city. Anyone can see how Kitiara bought your loyalty. That slut will open her legs for anyone. Even you."

“Enough.” The queen stood, her face carved in ice. Roland joined her. Linessa and Ashkelon followed. “We hardly need it, since we already have your man’s confession. Do you admit arranging for the assassination of Lady Eleanora Tentrees?”

A snort as a sharp chin rose in disdain. “With pride.”

“As you will.” Laurelin shook her head. Sorrow warred with rage on her face.

“It was declared in council nine years ago that an attack on the Heir was as an attack on the royal person.

“Wilmina of the Weald.” The words rolled through the hall like the sad tolling of a bell. “I arrest you for high treason.”

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“What happens now?” Linessa asked.

Weyland was glad of the younger girl’s curiosity. It saved him the trouble of asking the question himself, and looking like a fool.

“A trial,” the queen said sadly. “And an execution.” She shrugged, a weary twitch of her shoulders. “If Wilmina is fortunate, a sympathetic guard might leave a dram of poison in her cell one night, so that her death won’t be public entertainment. She deserves that much.”

“Does she?” His eyes swiveled to Kitiara. She sat on a double chair, one arm around Eleanora, who was still racked with shivers. The older, gentler woman could not understand why she had been picked out for death. “What has she done to merit such mercy, Mother? Common murderers are hung, and those found guilty of rape are sent to Alianna’s temple for castration. Why should the Duchess of the Weald have an easy death?”

Roland leaned back in his chair, crossing one booted foot over his knee. “What do you suggest?”

Kit colored slightly before the scrutiny, but carried on. “When Nora and I were in your homeland last summer, Father, we saw men who had been taken in the act of piracy.”

Roland’s lips tightened. “My brother takes a dim view of pirates. As do I.”

“Yes.” Kit leaned forward. “A quick death is a mercy, Mother. Allowing Wilmina to take her own life even more so.”

“You’re not suggesting she should be allowed to go free!” Ashkelon glared at his older sibling.

“No.” A cold smile bent her lips. “I’m suggesting we make an example of her.”

“How?”

“There are all sorts of choices available. Exposure and starvation? I am sure that it would give other members of her faction pause, if they watched her slowly waste away to skin and bones, hung in a cage outside the castle gates. Or maybe the noose, like any common criminal. Her son and brother claim they knew nothing of her plans. And the guardsman agrees. Wilmina did this on her own. But she deserves punishment as great as the law will bear.

“Whatever it is, I intend to make my position clear. Those who raise their hands against me should be prepared to face the whirlwind, if their crimes are discovered.”

Beside her, Nora pulled away, horrified. Roland shook his head. “Kit. No.”

Her violet eyes blazed up at him. “I’m sorry, Lord Weyland,” she replied, stressing his title just slightly. “Did you just tell me ‘no?’”

He held his ground firmly. “I did. Yes,” he continued. “You will teach people a lesson. But it will be the wrong one. You will kill one woman. But what of it? After what she did, her life is forfeit, and everyone knows it.

“If you do it this way, how many enemies will you make? How many plots will be hatched as a result of this one act?”

“Wise.” The queen raised an eyebrow at him. “Lord Weyland, up until now, there have been a total of three people in Kitiara’s life who have been able to tell her no and make it stick. Nora, her father, and myself.” Nora smiled wanly. “I am glad there might be a fourth.”

Kit’s fists clenched in her lap. “But I want her to hurt, Mother!”

“When I was your age, I wanted many things, Kitiara.” The queen’s voice was gentle. “And then I got them, and found out that there was a difference between the desire and the reality. I have been dealing with the results of those actions for almost your entire life.” Her lips twitched in a mirthless smile. “Today, for example.”

Kitiara took a deep breath, then let it out slowly. “I will think about it, Mother.” She turned to one side. “Lord Elcarth. I have not thanked you.”

The tall, lean figure, sitting almost unnoticed in one corner, shrugged. “I have one or two people placed in the retinues of most of the nobles.” A few feet away, Weyland’s brother made a choking sound, which the older man ignored. “Once you came to me with your fears about Wilmina, I made sure that he would put himself forward if she started looking for someone who might be interested in performing…unsavory activities.”

“He certainly convinced me!” Weyland swore fervently. “I was sure that he was trying to kill Eleanora!”

Elcarth’s smile widened. “And if you had not been there, he would have chased Lady Eleanora through the halls quite convincingly, but would never quite be able to catch her. By the time he was caught, everyone in the castle would have seen it.”

“I wish I would have known.” Nora glared at Elcarth. “I was scared half to death!”

“And if you had known, would you have been quite so convincing, my lady?” Unlike her older son, Baroness Severina showed no awe of the high company she was keeping. Of course, Weyland thought, his mother’s overwhelming self-assurance would probably last up until the moment she was brought up in front of Magar for her Final Judgement, and quite

possibly beyond. “Half the trick in a deception is making sure as few people know about it as possible.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” she replied wryly.

“I am declaring this conversation closed,” the queen said firmly. “We will talk about the Weald, Wilmina’s punishment, her brother’s possible conspiracy, and whether to strip her lands and title from her descendants or not at another time.”

At her nod, Ashkelon and Linessa began to pass around fine silver goblets. Laurelin gazed at her eldest daughter fondly. “There is no way to ask this delicately, my dear…”

“And I doubt you would, even if there was,” her husband added.

“You hush.” Laurelin gave a very un-queenlike giggle. “Have you found that you and Lord Weyland are…suitable?”

Kitiara slanted a smoldering look at him from under her lashes. Even surrounded by royalty and family, his cock stiffened, and he hoped his breeches would hide the evidence of his swelling manhood.

“Oh, yes, Mother,” she said. “I have found him a most…pleasant…suitor.”

“And does your Companion approve?”

“She does. Most enthusiastically.”

“That is well. Lord Weyland.”

“Your Majesty?”

The older woman snorted. “At this time, it is customary for the man to ask a question. A very specific question,” she hinted.

“What? Oh!” He blushed furiously, then crossed the room. A tiny smile of quiet pride crossed his mother’s face. Fred looked thunderstruck, Linessa envious, Ashkelon as scornful as only a fifteen year old boy could be.

Elcarth raised a cynical eyebrow, but kept his thoughts, whatever they were, to himself, while Laurelin and Roland watched with twin expressions of smug satisfaction.

But in the end, there were only two that mattered. Kitiara's face mingled terror and delight in equal parts. Beside her, Eleanora held Kit's right hand in her left, her lips parted in joyous exaltation, as if a burden, long carried, might not be put down, but at the very least, shared. Roland paused for a moment to contemplate the depth of a bond he knew he was not even close to understanding.

He sank to one knee. "Princess Kitiara, eldest daughter of Queen Laurelin, of the House of Tanthalasa, Heir to the throne of Delania." His throat worked, trying to force out words he would never, in a thousand years, have dreamed he might utter.

"Kitiara. Will you marry me?"

Graceful as a willow-tree, beautiful as a sunrise, Kitiara stood. Eleanora followed, only a heartbeat behind. The rest of the company joined them. Her eyes showing the promise of a lifetime together, she lifted him to his feet and kissed him.

"Weyland, Prince-Consort to be…

"I will."

The End