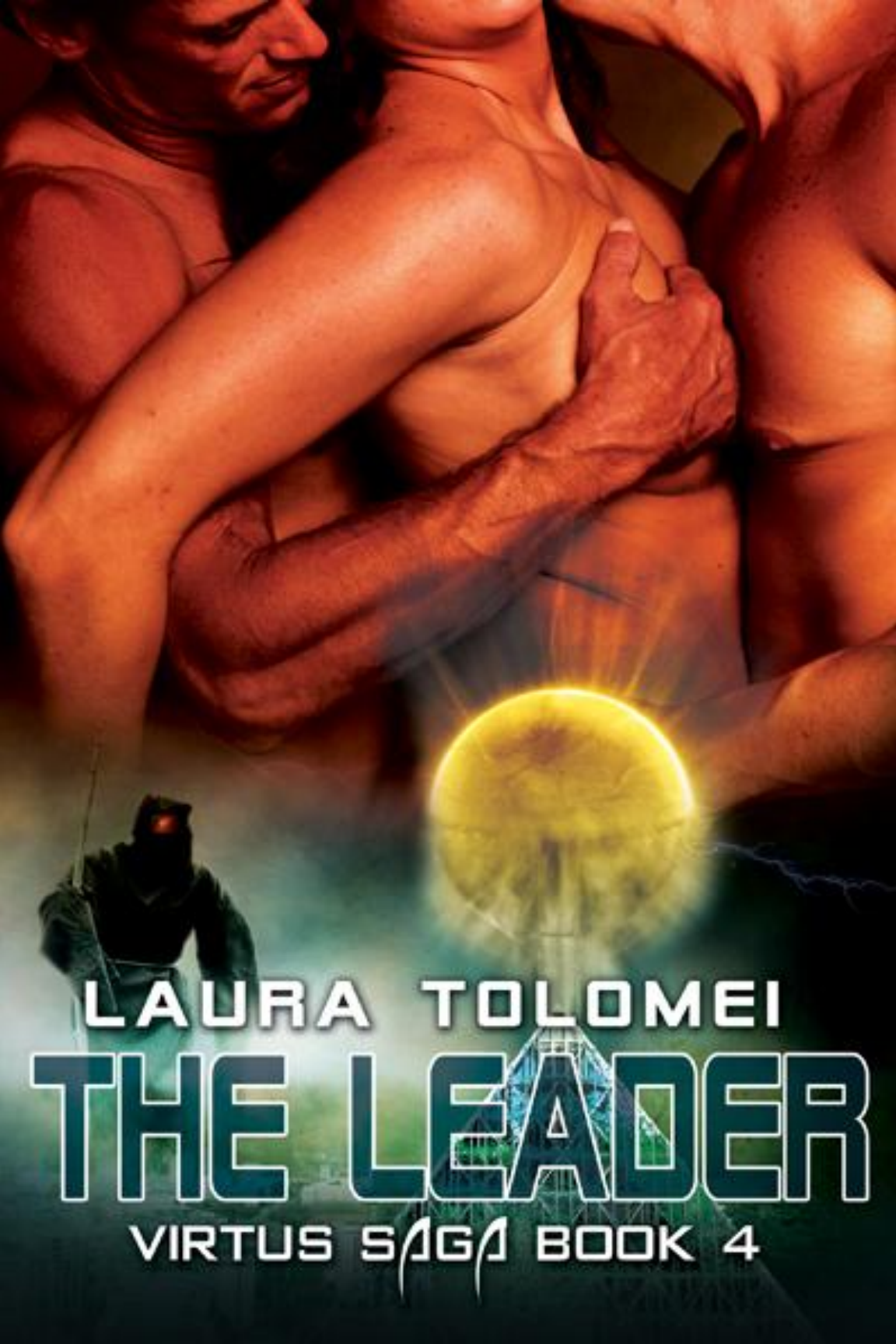




LAURA TOLOMEI

THE LEADER

VIRTUS SIGA BOOK 4

They thought they defeated Virtus once and for all. They thought they could live happily ever after. And it was no consolation to know it had to be done, like Ylianor suggested from the start, the separation necessary. Now with the Fitting and an unexpected pledge, their coming together the three of them, is at risk once more, with their compelling sexual attraction standing in the way of true union. But somehow they are the future of their world, so how to relate in and out of the council, mostly in and out of bed?

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The Leader
Virtus Book 4

By

Laura Tolomei

Prologue

Stella's setting rays warmed her skin and soothed her spirit as she walked on the sandy beach, listening to the tide coming and going. Lately, this was the only place she felt reasonably safe from her horrible nightmares, so she breathed deeply the salty sea air, brought by the same wind blowing the long hair behind her shoulders, until she stopped and looked across the great mass of trembling water. *No, there was no use thinking about it, none whatsoever.* Just forget it.

Raising her head, she focused on the physical sensations instead. Offering her face to the cool ocean breeze that made her shiver, she stared at the brilliant colors. Beautiful, yes, too bad their intensity hurt her eyes – the startlingly blue sky dotted with puffy white clouds chasing one another and shading the green palm trees on the yellowish sand that bounced the reddish rays on the sparkling waves.

At least today was a good day. Her beloved was about to rescue her from the torturing visions. Any moment now, he would ride out of the dunes on his big, black horse to pledge undying love through his fiery pitch-dark eyes. Then he would carry her straight into a happily-ever-after future, just the two of them...well, more or less. Somehow, this part of the dream did not quite ring true. She was realistic enough to know it herself despite being caught inside the illusion. Still she allowed it because –

A strong gust of wind blowing in icy-cold anger cut off her breath at the unexpected onslaught of furious shivers ravaging her delicate skin. Glancing upward, surprised, she noticed the sky had gone completely gray all of a sudden. Its heaviness promised nothing good, not with the tide crashing on the shore as though enraged. Unable to resist the air's forceful push, it could easily grab her legs and throw her into the furious waves were she not fast enough to get out of there.

Like a sharp blade, fear slit her stomach open as she turned, her gaze seeking the protection her feet were already moving to instinctively, in spite of her mind telling her to stay lest her lover missed her. *Oh, come on. He knows where I live. He'll have no problem finding me –*

"Milady, wait!" Startled, she looked up as the voice shouted, "Please stop!"

Peering in the distance, she tried to associate a face to the sound, but in the fast advancing darkness, there was no trace of the source –

"Milady, no...don't go."

"Who are you?" Only after squinting her eyes tightly did she see a figure emerging from the dunes—a boy no more than eleven years old with thick dark hair, extremely thin, pale and sickly looking. Hardly impressed, she would not have given him a second peek were it not for his unique eyes—large, too large for his mousy face, and determined however glazed by pain. "Why are you here?" Then realizing she could not hear her own voice, she raised it in an attempt to overcome the harsh wind and the boisterous waves. "What do you want?"

"Please, come with me." Closer now, he stretched out a skinny arm. "I...we need your help." With something resembling desperation, he grabbed her hand and tugged her to the dunes.

"I can't come with you." She resisted, taking a step back. "I'm waiting for someone."

"But you must!" He looked at her with the enormous eyes. "He'll never come for you anyway." Then his voice suddenly took a cold edge, threatening almost, absolutely foreign to the sweet creature standing in front of her. "Why can't you understand he doesn't want you? He loves another!"

"What?" Confused, she blinked once, then twice, thinking she had not heard right, unable to believe someone looking so innocent could sound so unfeeling. Shaking her head, she blamed the noise of the natural elements for her misunderstanding.

"I said, *please*." Again, with his eleven-year-old tone, the boy pulled her once more. "Just come with me. It won't take long."

Something in those haunting eyes went straight to her heart, so she nodded and took his tiny hand. After only a few steps, though, the boy wriggled free and disappeared behind the dunes. What could she do? With the storm's fast approach, it was too late to do anything except follow him. And she would have had darkness not fallen all at once to make her lose her way and wander aimlessly in search of the right direction.

"Hurry, Milady!" Popping out of nowhere, he caught her arm and yanked it until she had to run to keep up with him. Oddly enough, it was not on soft sand, more on hard ground. And despite the sense of chasing after an urgency rather than anything real, she ran as if nothing else mattered, as if her whole life depended on it, blindly rushing to follow the boy's speedy pace, extraordinary for someone so frail. Her breath short, her heart in her ears, her lungs dried with every jump or drop under a branch, over a fallen tree or

other obstacles not seen clearly only perceived lying in anxious anticipation of her fall. Unwilling to give them the satisfaction, she tried to slow down until she had to halt abruptly to avoid a collision with the boy now standing still in front of her. "Why have you stopped?"

"We're here."

"Here..." Catching her breath, she looked around, seeing nothing besides the enfolding blackness. "Where?"

He had to gesture before she finally saw it. "But that's..." The castle loomed ahead, lit by candles burning at each window. "Impossible." And yet it looked just like it. "Oh, no, it can't be." The one she had been trapped in when she was younger. "He..." So very young and vulnerable to have forgotten about it.

"He tore it down—"

"Then he built it back up." Apparently well informed about her, the boy spoke as if he had no doubt what he said was true. "Isn't that why you were expecting him, the dark handsome prince? To bring you into a new life?"

How could he possibly know? Still she could not suppress a leap of her heart. "So where is he?"

"He's waiting for you inside, Milady."

However, the longer she stared at the castle, the more it resembled a prison.

"Is something wrong?" The boy took a step closer.

"No..." Raising her gaze, she glanced around. "Well, it's just that—"

"Just bring her inside!"

Jumping back, she realized the shout came from inside, and she would have not stopped to inquire any further had the boy not clutched her arm with an iron-like grip impossible to break, no matter how frantically she shook.

"Yes, Master, I will."

"Let me go!" Icy fear ran down her back while she

struggled harder to get free. "I don't want to go inside."

"It's not a choice..." As though endowed with the strength of a thousand men, he yanked her without any apparent effort. "But a direct order from my master."

"Who is he?" Ignoring the chilled sweat trickling on her back, she tried to stall, wishing she could run to safety...wherever that was.

"You should know him by now." His confident air wavered slightly as if he, too, was afraid of him, or so it seemed from his nervous glance to the castle. "He's the one who controls all."

"All right, I understand." Of course, she did not, only wanted to escape. "And if you let me go, I'll come—"

"Don't believe her." The booming voice suddenly filled the air. "She's lying."

It was all the boy needed to tighten his grip, then spring her forward.

"Let go of me!" In panic, she kicked back with as much success as previously. "You're hurting me!"

Increasing the pressure, the boy drew her one step nearer to the castle walls.

However much she rooted her feet to the ground, the slender boy easily overcame all her thrashing until one final shove threw her beyond the threshold.

"Hello, little girl." The metallic voice penetrated Ylianor Caldwell's very core. "Remember me?"

* * * *

The dream always started in Black Rose, watching the rain and hearing its steady beat against the windowpanes. Behind him, his mother and sister talked softly, a distant mumbling not unpleasant, even if he would have preferred

something quieter. Too lazy to turn around and ask for silence, his gaze swept the countryside, glum and gray, wet fields drained of color drowning under the heavy downpour.

"And you should pledge, son. Have you found the right girl?"

"Mother, please..." Even if annoyed, he did not turn to confront her. "I told you. It's too early for that."

"But you're the leader." The voice became more insistent and cringed with a metallic edge, a new addition he had never noticed before. "And it's your duty to ensure our family's heritage." Now the tone was pure metal.

Puzzled, he finally swung around only to find his mother and sister gone, replaced by Virtus and Ylianor, sitting on the same couch. The dark figure looked more imposing than ever, tall and black, his face a strange mix of an oval disc-like device with bits of human flesh covering random parts such as the cheeks and something similar to a chin. Staring directly, the leader caught the red swirling light going back and forth from one side of the make-believe face. Ominous, sure, still it did a poor job in replacing the eyes. His hands were strange, too, hardly reassuring with their long, curvy, artificial pincers where fingers should have been. If one clamp tightly curled around his princess's hands, the other kept her face turned toward him so that Duncan could see only her profile. *Damn, she's so fucking beautiful!*

The threat that was Virtus faded at the sight of her magnificent body, and the fact she was completely naked was not helping either. The long, black hair covering her slender form partly hid what his mind, heart and cock could never forget.

"I know you can't have the only woman you love, dear prince." A smug smirk shadowed Virtus's expression as if it had actually read the desire and longing. "But she's mine

now." His hook-like stumps curled tighter around her hand. "So you'll have to find an adequate substitute, which I'm sure won't pose any problems for your handsome and powerful self." Bending slightly, it whispered something in Ylianor's ear until she kneeled to bury her face in Virtus's crotch.

"Princess, don't." Sick to his heart, Duncan's legs started running as though having a mind of their own.

"Come on, Prince." The voice followed him, heavy and sarcastic. "I'm willing to share her. What do you say?" A brittle chuckle, more a clanging noise, then Virtus continued his taunt. "She won't mind, right, little girl?" Then he laughed, a sinister gurgle that echoed in all of Black Rose and followed Duncan however fast he ran. He had no idea where to turn, and the places kept changing until abruptly, he was home no longer.

Dazed, the prince checked out the unfamiliar surroundings, his gaze adapting to the lesser light. Everything seemed so big and cold compared to Black Rose's cozy warmth, so it took him a few more steps before a twisting hallway brought back his memory. *Of course, how stupid of me! I'm at Rhapsen Hall.*

Yes, he was, in the extensive central path that marked its entire length and branched out to cover the side towers. He was also continuing to run, at least until he realized no evil pyramid chased after him anymore. He was alone, no one around in the vast empty space that had become his new home, however uneasy he still felt about it, wishing once more he could transfer the seat of the High Council somewhere else, anywhere besides Lord Fairchild's place.

"Dear boy, how nice to see you again!"

Am I dreaming or awake? Duncan could not tell, but Arthur looked very alive to him, standing at the end of the hallway

and smiling brightly.

"So how are you?" The older man took a step forward. "It's been a while, I know. Just dropping by to tell you I feel wonderful, finally free from all those heavy responsibilities."

"Obviously, since you died." Duncan's lips curved in an ironic twist.

"Nonsense!" Defiantly, Lord Fairchild threw back his shoulders. "Death is just a state of the mind. My body may have ceased to exist. My spirit, instead, is very much alive, if only in a new dimension." He chuckled. "But I like to keep in touch."

"Chris will be happy to—"

"He's already here." Arthur moved to the side, and Duncan saw his beautiful blond lover behind him.

Euphoric at the sight of his beloved again, the surge of pure unabated love literally flooded every sense. "Angel..." If at this point Duncan always hoped the dream would end right there, the word stuck in his throat. Something was awfully wrong.

Chris was not himself. For one thing, the strange metallic glint did not light up the blue-gray eyes as they always did when seeing the prince. Secondly, his attention was focused on Arthur alone, maybe because, and only then did Duncan notice it, he was holding a knife, its bloody tip dripping red streaks to the ground.

"Angel, what are you doing?"

"Nothing, lover." An unfriendly sneer curved his lips. "Just having fun with Arthur, like we used to."

"Yes, like old times." After nodding in agreement, Lord Fairchild turned around to kiss Chris and offered his bare back to the prince.

"Hey, you're bleeding!" He goddamn was, to Duncan's horrified gaze, unable to tear it off the tiny slashes glistening with brilliant pools of dense fluid, some trickling down and

smearing the pale skin.

"It's a small price to pay to be human again." Lord Fairchild shrugged, then smiled at Chris. "Though now you should play with the new leader."

"Can I?" This time the blue-gray eyes blazed.

"We have no time for games." Duncan scoffed. "Virtus is after me, so we have to move fast."

"That's your responsibility, not mine." Arthur raised a mocking brow. "You're the leader now, remember? So you find a way out of this mess."

"*You* put us in this mess!" Raising his voice, Duncan pointed an accusing finger at the old man. "If you hadn't let things slide—"

"No use recriminating, Prince. I was weak. I admit it. But I paid the price." Then he fixed his eyes on Duncan's. "Will you?"

"What price?" Confused, Prince Caldwell took a step back. "What are you talking about?"

"Come on, dear boy." As if he had not heard, Lord Fairchild gestured in Duncan's way, fixing Chris alone. "Time to play with your handsome leader."

"Angel, wait!" Before he could add another word, Chris and Arthur lay him on his back, pinning him to the floor with ropes tied around nails coming out of the ground, which the prince had never seen before in Rhapsen Hall. They appeared to be a solid part of the structure as his blond lover bonded his wrists and legs tightly to them, spreading his body out on the ground. "Can't you see it's me? Stop what you're doing."

"Ah, don't listen to him." Lord Fairchild secured the last rope, then stepped back to admire his work. "He's an impostor. I can tell." Swinging to young Templeton, he chuckled smugly. "He's all yours."

Chris sat on the prince, knife ready in hand. Pointing at the chest, his glassy gaze evidently did not register the enormity of what he was about to do. Rather they went through Duncan, as if he were not there when placing the cold blade against his throat and making the first painfully searing incision. Mixing fresh blood to Arthur's stale one, it slid down to the leader's stomach.

"Fascinating, isn't it, Prince?" Lord Fairchild sneered, looking at the red trails.

At this point, Prince Duncan Caldwell usually woke up, sweaty and nauseated.

* * * *

The blinding light hurt his sensitive eyes, so he squeezed them tightly to keep Stella's rays at bay. After a moment, he opened them again to stare at the village square full of people. Today was market day and many had come from all over to get goods and livestock. As horses nickered softly behind fences, some tradesmen shouted while others sat quietly by a table, with cows and sheep tied at a cart next to them. Whatever their style of bartering, they all stopped anyone passing by, however hurried. If many people strolled as though they had no crowd pressing on their every side, most simply rushed through the stalls as if looking for something very specific and impossible to find, at least judging from the nervous haste that suggested they had too little time at their disposal. Well, if it was a technique to dodge anyone with something to offer, it did not always work. The throng was too packed to allow a fast getaway no matter what the pretext.

In the confusion, it was hard to focus on a particular person, but he was searching for someone special with definite physical traits—average height, slim, dark hair and

eyes, regular features. But a pretty face would never cut it. What he required was an inclination to submission, so he intensified the scan on the horde, not in the least worried about the sheer amount of people standing in the way of his satisfaction. For someone with his training, the right candidate would be as easy to spot as a pair of liquid black eyes. Slowly picking his pace, he cruised the fair until he saw him—a young man standing at a crossroad between the two main pathways. *Perfect!*

Anticipation knotted his stomach and dried his mouth as he reached the young man. “Hello, it’s really hot today to be wandering around the market.”

The man nodded shyly.

“Come on.” An infectious grin curved his lips to dazzle his prey. “I won’t bite.” He took a confident step forward. “I’m Chris, and I can’t seem to find a decent horse trader.” He checked around to make it look more credible. “Would you happen to know where one is?”

“I believe you passed several on your way over.” He indicated behind Chris’s shoulders.

“Damn!” Turning, Chris pretended to peer in the distance. “Did I?” In reality, he studied the man—young and shy, extremely shy, always his favorite, the challenge to earn his trust already whetting his appetite. “Hey, you’re right. Now I see the horses.” Spinning around, he grinned widely. “What was I thinking of? Thanks...” He looked at the man, expecting a name.

“Robbie.” He blushed, then shook his head as if embarrassed of his reaction. “I’m Robbie.” This time he sounded more convinced to the point of extending a hand.

“Nice to meet you.” Taking his hand, Chris held it for a while. “All alone?”

“No, I’m here with my parents, but we got separated, and

I can't seem to find them."

"If you'd like, I'll help you." With a reassuring gesture, he embraced the young man's shoulders. "I'm Christopher Templeton and —"

"My...Milord..." Flushing more violently, Robbie bowed. "I hadn't realized..." He became even redder. "Please, forgive me."

"There's nothing to be forgiven, Robbie." Chris squeezed him tighter. "Shouldn't we come across your parents, we'll go to the village leader. I'm sure he'll set people in motion to locate them."

"It's not necessary, sir." Clearly ill at ease, he averted his gaze. "They must be around here somewhere."

"Then do you mind if we look for them together?" He lowered his tone, pretending he was about to reveal a secret. "I must confess I was getting bored until I saw you."

"Really?" Robbie looked disarming in his youthful innocence.

"Yes, it's so hard to meet interesting people nowadays, especially cute ones like you."

The young man just could not help crimsoning again or averting his gaze.

"There's nothing to be ashamed of." Chris's heart went out to him, but just for a moment. "Come on." Which luckily did not last long. "Let's go." So he grabbed his arm and pulled it to convince him to start walking. "The fair's a big place to look. We better get moving while there's still light, or you'll be late for your phase date."

The young man stopped. "How do you know I'm in the phase?"

"Why?" Smiling seductively, Chris edged closer, having read the signs before he made his choice. "Aren't you?"

"I...am." His breath came short from the emotional onslaught something as sense shattering as the phase always

caused in a person, regardless of gender.

"And how do you find it?"

"It's incredible, sir." There was no disguising the excitement. "George and I...George is the one..."

"No need to explain." It was nature's way to prepare its young ones to sex by having them mate with someone of their own gender first, in order to explore the delights of their bodies, before sharing them with someone as radically different from them as men and women were. "Go on."

"Well, we can hardly believe all the things we can do with our bodies and the pleasure is...well...it blows our minds."

"If you'd like, I could show you even more."

"You, sir?" Confused, Robbie stared at him wide-eyed, not daring to ask, yet extremely curious about the possibilities suddenly opening up to his lustful appetite.

Now came the best part of all, Chris simply embracing and kissing him on the cherry-like lips that however inexperienced, opened to let him taste the sweetness inside, which so far had been George's privilege alone. In the blink of an eye, the market disappeared, transformed into his bedroom at Fair Haven. In front of a warm, glowing fire, the kiss deepened to prolong his exquisite anticipation for the fate awaiting his chosen victim, until Robbie trembled in his arms. "Are you afraid, little one?"

"No...I—"

"Hush." Lord Templeton placed a hand over his mouth. "I'll show you what sex is, so that you can teach George, too."

Obviously mesmerized, Robbie nodded trustingly, leaning against Chris's aroused cock with equally hard equipment.

"At least you want me, too." Chuckling softly, Chris took off one piece of clothing at a time, admiring the athletic

frame with the well-defined muscles. His blood raced, as the tip of the knife inside the pants' pocket grazed his leg. Not yet, he told himself, his lips touching Robbie's skin at random points, making the man's excitement grow almost beyond control. "Lay down, sweet one. I have some exquisite games to share with you."

Obediently, Robbie crawled in the bed, his erection standing huge and proud while he stretched out, back on the mattress.

The first cut did not really register as if Robbie had not felt it, probably too taken by Chris's expert sucking, tongue firmly wrapped around the bulging head to draw it further inside and increase desire to a fever pitch. Then came the second slash, one the young man could not ignore however pleasurable the blowjob was. Too bad the effect of the hungry shaft pushing down the lord's throat lasted only until the pain became too strong, always too late anyway. Trapped in Chris's mouth as if hypnotized, Robbie seemed unable to utter a single sound. His reaction, a mere squirming, did not soften Lord Templeton's heart. On the contrary, it made his arousal soar, particularly once he caught the terror in the soft brown eyes incapable of tearing away from the blade striking repeatedly the yielding flesh to carve it to bits, slice after tiny mouthwatering slice. And as the blood dripped everywhere, it smeared the pale skin into a reddish pulp.

To extend his excitement, Chris stopped every once in a while to check over his meticulous artwork. A voice within told him he was emulating ancient masters, people he knew without any clear picture of them. He wanted them to be proud of his creation, so he was admiring it again when a shadow covered the firelight. Puzzled, he turned, fear clutching his heart. Standing on the threshold, stern and severe, Duncan's black eyes looked at him reproachfully.

At this point, Lord Christopher Templeton always woke up, shaking and terrified, alone in his bedroom at Fair Haven, fiercely pulling the ends of the twisted sheet drenched with his own sweat.

Chapter Three

“It’s been a long winter, Angel.” Duncan started, after having tasted Chris’s mouthwatering flavor. “Very long...” Unable to tear away, his hand pressed on the crotch, working to unlatch the fly. “Too fucking long and cold.” Now Chris’s cock was out, and all Duncan wanted was to take him to bed and make love until a new winter came. “I felt terribly alone.” His angel was simply irresistible, so he slid the soft skin on the already rigid stem, whetting his appetite with the urge to swallow him right there and then.

“I know exactly what you mean.” Chris’s hand also moved to the prince’s groin, fingering the growing erection and drawing it out of its confinement.

“What about your father?”

“Oh, he’s coming here, but we have plenty of time for what I intend to do.” With an elegant drop, he was on his knees, mouth already engulfing the bulging head.

It felt delicious to have the hot cavity surrounding his throbbing thickness again, the fiery tongue tip darting on the entire length when it was not lapping it lusciously. Wrapped around the erection to bring it to the throat, Chris used his hands, too, to induce a fast come the leader knew would not take long if the seduction did not stop immediately. “No, Angel.” Prince Caldwell removed his cock from the mouth, driving him senseless. “I don’t want to hurry or speed my way ‘cause we’ll soon be interrupted.” Pulling him to his

feet, he whispered in his ear. "I want to take my time with your very capable mouth." Sticking two fingers inside, he pushed them almost to Chris's throat, wrapped as they were by a wet tongue sucking loudly. "Not to mention with your deliciously tight ass." The free hand pushed Chris's buttocks against his crotch. "To ram until you beg my cock to stop taking what's his." Slipping inside his trousers, the drenched fingers found the narrow hole and jammed its taut entrance.

"Do it now." Chris groaned, leaning against Duncan and throwing back his ass to get them deeper. "Otherwise I might not control myself, not even in front of my father." Then his mouth found the leader's shaft, and the sudden intake took Duncan aback with the intensity of his craving.

No, he could not help the jolt of pleasure nor the fast and furious thrusts that almost brought him to the edge of bliss itself. "Oh, no." Making the angel rise, the prince jerked the swollen shaft he had taken out before, obviously in the throes of the same imperative urge torturing him, too. "It would be too fast." His fingers continued their seductive slide in and out. "I want to shove down your throat and up your ass without worrying about time." Suddenly breaking away, he stuck the two fingers back in Chris's mouth. "Now be a good boy and lick them clean." Once the angel complied with a luscious tongue lap, he moved away. "Come here." He gestured at the two couches facing each other across a low table. "We might as well be comfortable while we wait for James."

"Are you sure?"

"Fuck, no!" Too late to follow his own advice, Duncan grabbed Chris and pinned him to the wall, attacking his erection with a hungry growl that stuck it almost to his throat. By the gods, he had missed the thick firmness pounding his mouth with a decisive hip swing and

demanding immediate release. And the intoxicating taste, along with the awareness his angel was back, almost got the shaft's wish. Yet however much he wanted to forget about everything else, he could not let it overwhelm him like an adolescent at his first day of the phase. "Naughty angel." Leaving Chris's erection in the cold, the throaty whisper made it twitch. "Sorry." Before things became too hot, the prince went to the window and pretended to stare out, hoping the distraction would ease the pressure. "It seems we have no choice, even if it'll be hard to make small talk while all I want is to fuck..." He turned back to Chris who had not moved an inch. "Because you make me so hard all I think about is to stick my cock inside you." Frustrated, he swung back to look outside, a better alternative than gaze at his tempting angel.

"All right, we'll play it your way." Returning the thick shaft to the safety of his pants, Chris embraced him from behind, quickly taking possession of the tightness between the prince's legs. "But it's not going to be easy." Since Duncan did not stop him, he continued the sensual massage on the raw skin. "I missed you so fucking much I thought I was going crazy." Stroking and rubbing, his palms moved expertly over the entire length stretching under his avid grasp. "And now I can't wait to feel you again in the flesh, not that energy stuff that always left me wanting more."

"Yeah, me, too." With a firm hold, he placed his hands over Chris's to block further dangerous seductions. "And you're not helping any now." Reluctantly, he closed his cock into the pants. "After what I had to go through with your absence—"

"Hey, you sent me away, remember?"

"It was necessary, remember?" Spinning around, Prince Caldwell studied his angel's face. "But it did you a whole lot of good." His gaze drank in the lithe body's perfect shape to

the relaxed face with high cheekbones, sensually thin lips beneath the aristocratic nose and above the pointy chin. "You look...ravishing."

"While you..." Chris took a step back. "Look tired." Caressing his forehead, he paused a moment. "And tense and...you've even lost weight."

"I guess I missed you more than I said."

"Somehow, I don't think I had anything to do with it, certainly not as much as snapping off that damn control, which I told you wasn't a good idea from the start—"

"I'd rather not talk about it right now, if you don't mind." He could not keep the tense edge out of his voice.

"Sure." In spite of the quick assurance, Chris was not fooled. Duncan could tell from the skeptical look on his face. "Whatever you say." Then again, he knew the prince too well to fall for his deceptions. "But not to worry." The brightest smile the prince could remember lit Chris's handsome features. "Now that I'm back, I'll take care of you." To seal his promise, the angel kissed him again, a soft pressing of lips that seemed oddly more exciting than the enflamed exchanges of just moments before. "In every sense."

Duncan grabbed his hand wanting to keep the angel to his side while the longing was about to reach another dangerous peak. Only the knock at the door saved him. "Come in." Duncan called out, moving away from Chris, but still holding his hand.

"Good afternoon, Prince." Entering, James sent him a warm smile.

"Good to see you, Lord Templeton." Duncan bowed to the handsome man, still attractive age notwithstanding. Similar to Chris in height, build and colors, James possessed the same clear eyes, perhaps a shade bluer than Chris's, and

the same light hair, which was turning silver. In fact, the likeness was striking and not just on a physical level. "I trust you had a pleasant journey."

"Tiring, I confess, but Chris makes for a good traveling companion."

"I know." Duncan squeezed Chris's hand before letting it go. "He makes the road seem lighter."

"He certainly does." With slow careful movements, James sat on one of the couches. "Still I'm getting too old for this." Sighing in relief, he leaned back. "I must admit I'm glad to retire and leave you younger generation in charge."

"Cecilia would certainly agree with you." Smiling broadly, Duncan sat in front of him.

"Lady Hurst is already here?" Suddenly curious, Chris shifted to sit next to the leader.

"Actually, she never left, stayed behind to help out with things."

I bet she did! The angel did not have to say it, his look louder than words. *Couldn't wait to get her grubby paws on you once the competition was gone.*

And she did, too. The prince confirmed readily with an amused glance at his beloved.

"Hem..." As though aware of their silent exchange, James cleared his throat. "With the farming, too, I presume."

"Yes, she was my liaison with Oliver Sentry who, as you know, lives in her District."

"We know him well." Lord Templeton eyed Chris. "Or rather your brother Steve does, has admired the man for years—"

"And learned a lot from him, too." Prince Caldwell nodded.

"Steve adores the man and is thrilled to be working with him," Chris agreed.

"They tell me he's the most gifted among Oliver's

disciples and has been one of the most dedicated in our efforts to restore agricultural production to its standards." After peaking at Chris, he focused back to James. "Somehow, Lord Templeton, it seems I owe your family more than I can ever —"

"Nonsense." James chuckled. "We're all at your service, each with his own talent, so there's nothing to thank me."

Except for having such an incredible fucking piece of ass for a son. No need to share it. Chris who caught it in his eyes and bowed his head to hide the blush.

"Rather, it was damn brilliant of you to enlist Oliver's know-how and apply his methods on such large scale."

"It's just the beginning," the leader assured. "Change is what our future will be about..."

"Then the Templeton's are right on track." After exchanging glances with his father, Chris beamed at Duncan. *All thanks to you, lover*, his eyes confirmed.

"True, there have been quite a few changes in our family lately..." James, too, turned a grateful look on the leader. "And all most welcome." Stretching carefully, he shifted position. "Which reminds me of how old I am, and that it's time for me to rest." Rising slowly, a grimace of pain stopped him midway.

Rushing to his aid, Chris grabbed his arm. "Father —"

"I'm fine." Taking his son's hand anyway, James briefly leaned on it for support, then let it go as he straightened. "Don't worry about me."

"We can take you to your quarters, sir." Duncan had risen, too, and hovered around James.

"No need, my leader, but thanks for the concern." He headed for the steps dividing the room in two. "I trust my quarters are the same as always."

"Of course, Lord Templeton, they're all ready and waiting

for you." Duncan watched the old man walk his way to the door. "Oh, and I hope you and your son will join me for dinner tonight."

"Gladly." Turning around, James grinned warmly. "And I doubt Chris has any objections." Looking at his son's flushed complexion and bright gaze, he cocked an eyebrow. "Will it be just the three of us?"

"No, Lady Hurst will be joining us as well." *Sorry, Angel, it's unavoidable.* He hoped his apologetic smirk would stop Chris from fretting at the news. "Then I'll see you at the thirty-first hour in the white dining room."

"All right, Prince." Picking up his step, Lord Templeton was soon out of the office.

* * * *

"My poor lover, all alone with Cecilia." Chris cooed sarcastically once they were alone, running his hand through the long dark hair.

"Don't remind me." Grabbing his hand, Duncan pulled him closer. "Now you know why I need some serious loving."

"Glad to be of service, Reverend Leader, like my father said," Chris teased, bowing deeply. "Where can I perform my duty?"

"Guess!"

"That's easy." Chris scoffed. "It must be the round Tower Room."

"So you noticed."

"Couldn't help it, lover. The roof's never looked better." Located in the exact center of Rockyhorn and conceived as a secluded construction by the original builders, it divided the Hall's main axis into four main branches, uniquely distinctive among the other seven towers, all squared in

shape. "Arthur didn't like it much, only used it on special occasions."

"That's why it was so run-down."

"But you fixed it."

"Did it for you, Angel." Cornering him to a side, Duncan's lips pressed on Chris's—hard, passionate, fiery. "After all the times you talked about it, I couldn't have any other room." Then pulling him to the door, Duncan got out of the office and headed for the tower. "Come on."

When Chris had first seen it, he had fallen in love with the offset place, something apart from the rest of the Hall however centered in it, at its very core to be precise. In time he had spent many a nights in Duncan's arms fantasizing about the round room as if it held some magical secret, wishing Arthur would let him have it to himself at least once.

"You'll love it." Prince Caldwell grinned in anticipation. "It's perfect for us." Reaching the winding stairwell, he twisted around it to climb to the top, then urged Chris to open the door.

"I bet it is." The door gave in to Chris's nudge, and they both entered a vast room surrounded by thick walls and large windows, furnished in Duncan's favorite color, blue. But the real advantage was in the invaluable seclusion and the freedom it allowed in such a crowded place. "Particularly if your guests tend to be...noisy." Just saying it brought to mind sleeping beauty's screams of pleasure.

"Particularly at nights." The prince grinned back, a flash lighting the black eyes as if commending Chris's intuition.

"Which you obviously plan to spend with a lot of company." His gaze fell on the huge bed on the far side of the room, opposite the door.

"Right now I only want to entertain one, and one alone."

Duncan closed the door.

By the gods, how long has it been? And how did I manage to survive? Chris could not be sure. He only knew he wanted to drown in Duncan's powerful embrace and imperious arousal pressing on his stomach, on the hot tongue ravaging his mouth, on the silky black hair covering his face, on the most intoxicating taste and smell Chris had ever known. Letting his senses go wild with desire, his ass burned from the craving to receive what was his – the prince's huge cock. With a groan, Chris deepened the kiss, pushing his tongue into Duncan's cavity to press his body closer. Insinuating a hand, he grasped the hard bulge, twitching in desire, and started a seductive slide from above the clothes. He had missed the rigid shaft, too, dreaming of it often during the long winter nights. Wide-awake, too, the mere thought of it enough to cause Chris a hard-on and the quickest way to a come regardless of his partner. Today, though, he had the real thing, so no fantasies were necessary, no imagination, no bland energy connection, nothing except the flesh and blood he loved more than life itself, filling his every sense.

"Wait, Angel." Duncan pulled back slightly, a wry smile crossing his lips. "I wanted to do this nice and slow, but if you keep touching me like this, I'm going to come while my pants are still on."

"I don't see anything wrong with it." Grinning, Chris clutched the erection more forcefully. "And just for the record, it's exactly how I feel, too." Taking Duncan's hand, he crunched it on his own rigid equipment. "Which means neither of us will last long right now."

Prince Caldwell's nimble fingers traced the overgrown shape. "So you're suggesting we –"

"Exactly, lover." Abruptly, Chris pushed Duncan to the bed, straddling him with a sudden jump, his hand already working to free the cock. "Let me suck you dry now, then

we can take our time in doing everything else, without rushing through it, just like you wanted."

"Sounds good to me, except..." Destabilizing Chris, Duncan tossed him over on his back, the prince's bulge now bearing down on his face. "You've been gone so long I can't wait to have you again." His mouth dug Chris's crotch, the hot breath driving him wild with his lover's same hunger.

But there was no time to dwell over it as he clutched the naked erection and brought it to his warm cavity, wide open to engulf it in one single greedy swallow, tongue circling the bulging head already pushing down his throat. So it choked him, but he would have gladly suffocated. Duncan's taste was worth it, the unspeakable sensation of being filled, mouth and nose clogged by his flavor and piercing smell, running like a hot wave of pleasure straight to his cock, ready to make it burst into a million pieces. Chris knew he could not hold back much longer, not when the prince's avid mouth was sucking him to the hilt, pampering him with luscious tongue laps that squeezed the rigid sides, sliding them rhythmically at an increasing pace.

To last a second longer, Chris focused on the thickness stuffing his mouth, lavishing his wettest licks on it, opening wider to draw it deeper and matching the prince's rhythmical shoving down that made it seem like he was fucking his mouth. But when the tempo accelerated, Chris lost it to the unmistakable twitch that told him Duncan was about to come. Stepping up his own hip swing, they climaxed together, flooding each other's mouths in a rush of hot fluids that almost gagged Chris.

Shattering from pure pleasure, sucking the bulging head dry of the liquid trickling down his throat, Chris would have gone for more had Prince Caldwell's lips not claimed his suddenly, tongue pushing inside to share their seeds, to

mingle the two flavors until it was a single one.

"By the gods, did I miss your mouth!" The leader's deep voice broke the silence. "You're just too good with it."

"Me?" Chris raised his gaze. "You made me come after only two sucks."

"I guess we've been apart too long." Returning to his original position, Duncan stretched out to Chris's cock. "So now's the time for the real fun." Legs pressing to Chris's face, he reached for the limp cock.

Chris immediately set to work on his end, well knowing the prince would recover his full appetite in less than a minute. With a gulp, he took the entire thing into his mouth, his tongue wrapping around it to hold it firmly in place while stimulating its interest. As expected, it did not take long for it to grow again, recovering its previous hardness the second Duncan slid further down to Chris's ass, which made all the difference for both erections, now straining to get into action.

No question about it, the butt was Chris's weak point as Prince Caldwell knew well enough. Just having the moist tongue darting into the narrow hole made Chris groan loudly and spread his legs wide. Then the rimming started, teasing the tight entrance into a submission it was more than willing to grant. So Chris made no mystery of it, raising his hips to signal his readiness, trying also to stuff inside something bigger than the tongue tip tracing the borders in convulsively tighter circles that drove him mad.

Unable to stand the tension, he let the huge cock fall out his mouth. "Fuck me now, please. I can't take another second of your torture."

"You can't?" With a decisive thrust, the prince stuck two fingers inside the narrow hole, which received an immediate enthusiastic welcome from the flesh wrapping around them.

"Just give me your damn cock before I go crazy."

"You just want to suck me dry again." Straightening, Duncan turned to face Chris, kneeling between his spread legs. "Probably as fast as before."

"Oh, no." Chris edged his butt closer to the rigid shaft. "I'd go even faster, if you just allow me."

Raising Chris's legs above his shoulders, Prince Caldwell nudged the entrance with the tip of his erection before breaking through, sliding inside an inch at a time. For the first moment neither spoke, pleasure washing over Chris in repeated waves, which left him wondering how he would manage to resist. All Duncan's fault, undoubtedly. None of Chris's other partners had ever made him lose control simply with a few well-aimed shoves.

"Damn you, Angel." The soft curse escaping his lover's lips caught Chris by surprise.

"Why?" Fascinated, he searched the piercing heart-stopping black eyes.

"You already want to come, and I won't be able to resist either."

"Now who's too good between us?"

"Nah, there's no competition." Dropping down his legs to cover Chris, Duncan's full weight crushed him. "Nobody will ever beat this slut lover of mine." The soft whisper reverberated huskily in Chris's ear. "No one will ever have a more nimble mouth or a more broken-in ass." He shoved harder, penetrating all the way to the balls. "And your ass really takes the cake, Angel."

"Yeah, especially when you're dancing in it."

"I'm just taking what's mine." Another powerful thrust and Chris thought he would reach his throat directly from the back way. "I just wish it would never end."

"Ha, you're not that strong, lover." And reaching for his lips, Chris pulled him into a fierce kiss intended to make

them lose control faster.

Not that there was any need. Their bodies were working their own special magic as Chris swayed against him, his ass trying to match every beat and speed up the rhythmical pumping, so the scorching heat would enflame both of them.

Then the energy play kicked in, and it all became irresistible. Fire overstepping its boundaries, it wound around Duncan's cooler Virt, much like his burning flesh squeezing the cock tighter with each repeated shove. Hardly surprising they came again, together once more, at the end of a powerful slam that literally broke Chris's ass, releasing its load in a muffled groan.

"By the gods, I did miss you, Angel." Recovering his wits, Duncan rolled to lie on a side and pulled Chris on top of him, the big bed almost too small to contain their drive.

"I can't believe a whole winter has gone by without us being together."

"Yeah, never again." Duncan tousled the blond hair. "It was just too painful to have you so far away." Holding him close, the black eyes searched his face. "I never want to repeat it."

Chris kissed him. "Then don't ever send me away again."

"I won't, promise."

The kiss deepened and the stirring began again. Like a starving man, Chris could not get enough of him, the little they had already shared only whetting his appetite for more. And since Duncan was hard, too, Chris wasted no time to screw the scrumptious erection straight up his ass while straddling him. Again, it felt delicious and unreal to have him inside, the pleasure as overwhelming as before, yet this time he could exercise a tighter control on it, sliding up and down to meet the prince's forceful upward thrusts at least until Duncan slung him over.

Changing position, the prince took him from behind—

Chris on his knees and elbows, ass flaunted back. The dance resumed immediately with harder pumping, the friction unbearably hot as the thick shaft penetrated deeper than before, to the point it became necessary to switch again if they wanted to continue. Up against a wall, lying on a table or sprawled on a couch, they moved around the room, Chris tensing the most to withstand the urge to surrender to the intense sensations already wrecking his body, his lover taunting him on his scarce resistance. But it was just for show. Chris knew it all too well, feeling the same urgency coursing through his beloved's powerful frame to increase the force of his ramming. Then it was simply impossible not to fall over the edge.

Standing against a wall, back bent to throw out more tight ass – well, not as narrow as before – squeezing like crazy the equipment stuck inside, Chris perceived Prince Caldwell's quiver of anticipation. Breath coming short to announce the burst, his hand lowered to grab his cock and accelerate his own come, but Duncan beat him to it. With a firm grasp, he wrapped his palm around the long length. Two slides were enough for the blast of pleasure exploding in sweet, exquisite jets flooding the prince's hand and part of the wall just as Duncan drowned his ass in a loud gasp he obviously could not suppress.

At the same moment, a knock cut them short. Neither dared move. Not Duncan – cock still stuck in Chris's ass, however little it was becoming, and his dripping hand continuing to hold the other limp and wet shaft. Not Chris – legs wide open, bent back, one hand to the wall, the other to cover the leader's as if wanting to share the seed.

Then Prince Caldwell breathed slowly, turning to the door, long, hair tickling Chris's shoulders. "Yes?"

"My leader, it's almost the thirty-first hour."

"Thanks, David. We'll be right down."

The sound of feet on the stairs got lost in the distance.

"You told him to call us?" Surprised, Chris swung around, Duncan's cock flopping out of his ass, to look at his lover.

"Of course, Angel. I know when I'm with you, time loses all meaning." Pulling up, he was about to move away, only Chris clasped him, arms slipping under his shoulders to embrace him tightly, face buried in his broad chest. "Come on." Gently, Duncan stepped back, tousling the blond hair. "Your father is waiting."

"And Cecilia, too." The prince threw a pillow at him, which Chris caught laughing. It was just perfect, being with him again, in or out of bed, the only person who made him as happy and carefree as a child, which was exactly how he felt while washing up, getting dressed and following him to the white dining room, ready to take on the world had he only asked.

* * * *

"Sorry we're late." Prince Caldwell eyed at Cecilia and James, already seated and breaking off their animated conversation.

"That's all right, darling." But the envious gaze she sent Chris said otherwise. "And welcome back."

"Nice to see you again, Cecilia." The blond angel bowed.

"I trust you rested well." Duncan focused on James as he sat at the table.

"You look a lot better, Father." After sitting next to the leader, Chris squeezed James's hand.

"I had a relaxing afternoon, thank you."

"Great to hear." Moving aside, Duncan let a servant pour wine in his glass, then waited until he filled everyone's glass

before raising his. "A toast to the Templeton's..." His senses drowned in Chris's, it was the only means he could devise to thank his lover, something he had no chance to do because of the abrupt interruption. "To all they meant..." His gaze fixed on James. "And will mean to the council." *To you, Angel, and our fuckingly incredible afternoon however short it was.*

The flashing blue-gray eyes lingering on his face reassured him Chris understood perfectly as they all drank down the cool liquid.

"Thanks, my leader." Placing his glass back on the table, James waited for the servants to fill his plate with hot vegetables carried inside large trays. "And speaking of the council, I was just telling Cecilia we should start planning the Fitting." He glanced at Lady Hurst. "We need to set a date, know who's to be initiated..." His gaze shifted to Duncan. "If Chris tells me right, there's someone else besides the two of you —"

"Yes, there are three of us." His own plate now full, the prince tasted the roasted potatoes. "I'm going to nominate a second council member to fill the Caldwell seat." With a piercing stare, he fixed James Templeton. "My adopted sister."

"Ah, yes, my son was just telling me about her."

In the good or bad sense? Suppressing an ironic grin, Duncan glanced at Chris. "Was he now?"

"He was, and it was a very honorable thing to do, to uphold your father's claims and make them legal." James leaned back on his chair. "I suppose it was the same girl he used to talk about during the last years of his life."

"Yes, she is, no doubt about it."

"Because of the gift Chris told me about, the one that allows you to communicate through your minds?"

"Your son talks a great deal..." *About someone he claims he can't stand.* Again, Duncan turned to Chris, with a mocking twist on his lips.

The blond angel returned the look, coloring just slightly.

"He's right, Lord Templeton, and in case you're wondering, it's the same gift she shared with my father before me, which is the reason why he wanted her to become a Caldwell in the first place."

"I understand, Prince. Like I said it was very noble of you. Not many sons would've shown that much respect towards a very...delicate issue like accepting a new family member." Evidently satisfied of Duncan's words, James raised his glass slightly as if to toast him, then set it back on the table after a small sip. "But where is she? I haven't seen her around."

"She's not here." Unable to hide a satisfied smug, Cecilia picked up her glass and brought it to her lips.

"Where is she?" Nibbling on a piece of bread, James appeared worried. "Most importantly, when will she get here?"

"I believe she's still in Harbor Town, sir, and should get here by the end of the month."

"You mean you don't know when she'll be here?" Baffled, James frowned. "Forgive me, my dear prince, but if you really talk to this girl without words, shouldn't you know what her plans are?"

Duncan sighed wearily. No, he did not want to have this conversation, not with his angel's taste still reeling his senses. "Unfortunately, I haven't heard from her since she left." But he had no choice except to keep his eyes from catching Chris's.

"But can't you —"

"No, it doesn't work this way." Raising a hand, the prince stopped James's objections. "Silent communication works only until both parties keep their channels open." Nervously

shifting on his seat, he managed to avoid direct eye contact with the blue-gray ones he felt locked on him. "Hers is closed and has been since she left. I certainly can't force it open." *Or I could, but only if absolutely necessary.* Despite the novelty in the handling this particular Virt, he had learned enough to know there were strict rules of conduct to prevent an outright invasion of privacy, a real danger when it came to such gift. Sharing through consent was the value of Ylianor's teaching, and given the many problems it had already caused him in the past, he dared not go against her wish.

"So what date should we set for the Fitting?" There was no hiding Cecilia's tense tone.

"Let's settle on two months from now." Duncan paused to eat another forkful of eggplants. "If Ylianor's not back by the end of the first month, I'll send David to retrieve her." He looked to Cecilia to enlist her support.

"Sounds like a good plan." Nodding gravely, James took another piece of bread. "And you and I, dear Cecilia, will begin the serious planning, the accommodations, the reception, the ceremony, the..."

"Lover, do you suppose it'll be a grand ceremony?" Lying in bed, late at night, sprawled next to him, the blond head rested on Duncan's chest, their bodies seemingly at peace after more rounds of fierce sex.

"Actually, I'm not sure what it's about." After stretching luxuriously, the prince gazed at the ceiling, where firelight played colorful and intriguing games of amber flickers. "I suppose a ritualistic dance of precise movements and steps that disguise deeper meanings." He ruffled the blond hair fondly. "Cecilia tried to explain it, but I didn't listen."

"She's disappointed I'm back." The angel chuckled.

"She hoped winter would never end." Slipping under his back, Duncan squeezed Chris's buttocks. "But mercifully it did."

"What's her problem anyway?" Shifting position, the angel rolled on a side. "Doesn't she have David?"

"I suppose so, but ever since he refused to pledge to her, relations have been...strained."

"Well, we all know who he really wants." Chris's ironic smile curved his thin lips.

"Not that again." Duncan scoffed. "Even if true, we've faced too much together for him to have the same feelings still."

"Especially since she came along..."

As Chris's voice trailed off, the leader went silent, not yet ready to get into what he knew must be said.

"Ah, no, lover, you're not getting off the hook that easily."

"What do you mean?" *Damn! Why does he always read me so clearly?*

"Come on." Chris spat. "Do you think I bought that ridiculous story about you not having any contact with her since the day she left?"

"It's true!"

"Not for the reasons you told my father." His tone softened. "You miss her, don't you?"

So he knows. Prince Caldwell swallowed hard. "Like crazy." Yes, he fucking did almost as much as he had missed Chris. If not quite in the same way, there was still no denying the intensity of the soreness inside, nor the lingering regret her green cheerful eyes left behind each time they mocked him from a dream. He craved to hold the slender body with the sensitive flesh creasing under his fingertips, recalling the uniquely seductive movements he found so damn intoxicating. "When she left, I discovered I loved her." *And what a fucking surprise that was!* Then again,

she was a part of him, like Chris, both of them completing him. "I...didn't expect it."

"I knew you'd fall for her." And he obviously did for there was no trace of surprise or anger in his voice.

"Yeah, you did way before I ever did."

"Since the Game, if not before, only didn't add it up until then."

"What gave me away?"

Sighing, Chris laid down to stare at the ceiling. "The way you held on to her after we left Black Rose, even beyond Arthur's requests, but mostly the way you made love to her..." He turned on a side to level with the prince again. "Because it's love, always has been, not just sex, and I used to watch you, how taken you were with the fact you shared both sides of the give and take—"

"But I stopped doing it—"

"Yeah, I noticed. You were afraid you were getting in too deep and that you'd end up considering her as an inconsequential appendix of yourself, rather than her own independent person."

"Angel, how can you possibly have figured it all out?" Wide-eyed, Duncan stared at him in amazement. "Fuck, I almost didn't catch it myself, and I certainly didn't share it with you—"

"Lover, do you really think there's something about you I wouldn't know simply by looking at you?" Reassuringly, Chris squeezed his hand. "I'm so in tune with you that your every breath is like one of mine."

A rush of pure love so powerful it almost choked him overwhelmed the prince and for a long moment, he could merely hold his blond angel close, cradling him softly. "So you knew all along?"

"How much she blended into you and the danger you

were running?" Chris's dazzling smile warmed his heart. "Or how much you were falling in love?" He smirked smugly. "Either way, when you decided to pull back, it was already too late." He ran a hand through the long hair. "And the Game was a real eye-opener."

"That's why you were so pissed off." He remembered Chris's hot rage right after they had each spent a passionate night pursuing separate interests—he with his princess, the angel with whatever cock came his way.

"I was furious after listening to everyone talking about you and her. The two of you were practically the only topic of that damn Game. They spared nothing, from the way you treated her unlike any other master, to how your slave reacted, up to your passionate kisses in the main chamber, *in front of everybody*. Gods! You couldn't avoid it, the freaking show of feelings when no master in his right mind would ever leave his slave the upper hand, much less acknowledge its importance the way you did." Evidently realizing he was being carried away, Chris took a deep breath and calmed down. "In the end, you played a most memorable, if exclusive, game. Sheer excitement, they said, simply watching you and the way you understood one another without apparently saying a word."

"And you were the only one to know —"

"I was the only one to have seen it all before, so of course I knew. At that moment it made sense, the whole thing I mean, which could only be explained —"

"If I loved her."

"Exactly." Chris fell silent as though thinking back at the painful discovery. "Later, after all the Virtus mayhem, when I lay alone and feverish under her care, I realized you didn't know it yourself yet, which is why I let you keep her when you returned to Black Rose, ready to cast her out."

"I was so mad that day I'd have gladly gotten rid of her."

It had been the lowest point of Duncan's ambivalence toward the green-eyed witch who had taken over his entire self with her voice, thoughts and feelings shadowing his every waking moment. Had it not been for Chris, today she might be a memory. "But you didn't let me."

"You were tired, lover, had too many responsibilities piled on you so suddenly you were bound to let the tension break where the pressure was highest." Stretching up, the blond angel kissed him fully on the lips. "Inner balance has always been your strength, so anything putting it at risk was worth cutting off." Another kiss, this time with tongues entwined in fiery combat.

"And you were right, like you always are when it comes to me and my feelings." Holding his face between his palms, he recalled the time they had broken up, with his angel adamantly refusing to believe the prince's love had just stopped and how true it turned out to be. "You know it's not going to change things between us." Pinning him to the mattress, the prince crushed the elegant frame beneath his.

"Yeah, I figured as much watching you and her during the Festival." Chris grinned.

"You two didn't do so bad yourselves." Prince Caldwell smiled back mischievously recalling his angel had indulged in his favorite bloody game with the princess. "Then the journey, Virtus..."

"Yeah, it made us all come together, didn't it? The three of us...as one..."

"In a way we never expected." *Or understood fully.* Then again, there had been no time to talk about it between them, their ways having parted right afterward.

Slowly, Duncan rolled off Chris to lie on a side.

"So how did you find out you loved her?" The angel's inquisitive blue-gray eyes flashed. "Was it something you

worked out this winter or —”

“Actually, no. It came to me as she was leaving the Hall to get to her retreat.” Lost in memory, the leader paused briefly. “As I watched her round the bend with her hair flying in the wind, it was like something burst inside...like a ball of fire I’d been crunching for who knows how long. And I shouted it out, too, in her head I mean.”

“So you already told her?” The smoky look in the blue-gray eyes was undecipherable. “What did she say?”

“Nothing, Angel, absolutely nothing like she hadn’t heard —”

“Impossible.”

“Whatever the cause, she kept silent, just went on her way like I said nothing, and I haven’t heard from her since.” Shifting position, he placed his arms under his head. “But I’ve thought about it all this time, this love I mean, which must’ve been right there from the start, mixed up with the sharing of thoughts and feelings, only I didn’t recognize it as such. Having her inside made it grow until now I can’t bear this loud silence I’ve had to endure since she left.” Anguished, he clutched his angel’s shoulders as if they could give him a measure of peace.

“I thought your mind was too taken by the other sounds you told me you heard coming from the pyramids in the Nephis Valley.”

“It is, the lights and sounds, they never stopped since I became leader.” He rolled on an elbow to gaze at him. “But like you’ve always been the brightest flame of all, the shiny beacon that’s overshadowed everything else, so she’s been the loudest voice of all, a notch above everyone else’s, as deafening as you are blinding.” With a sigh, he fell back down. “And to think I used to resent her constant presence, her voice inside my head, while now I feel terribly lonely.”

“I’m sorry, lover.” Understandingly, Chris caressed his

face lovingly. "Why do you suppose she closed your channel?"

"I'm not sure." The leader shrugged. "She wanted to be alone, true, but..." He buried his head in Chris's neck.

"Maybe she simply needs time to cope with what you blurted so suddenly."

"Maybe..." Not convinced, Duncan looked away.

"All right, lover." With a decisive move, the angel pinned him down, pressing on his chest. "What's really the problem? I mean it's not normal you haven't tried reaching her in all this time, not once, not since you did it with me and between us it's more difficult." The blue-gray eyes shone. "What happened before she left?"

"I...didn't want to intrude more than I already did."

"How so?"

"I made her relive the death of my father, and it was terrible." The prince brushed off a loose strand from his face. "She had held on to that pain for so long it had dug a hole in her heart only by sharing it was she able to let it go."

"Really?" An interested blaze crossed his eyes. "Something similar happened to me, too." Heaving, Chris pulled back slightly. "After I returned home, I relived my bitter childhood and realized I held on to my rage because it defined me."

"But you're free of it now, Angel. I noticed the difference the moment you walked in my office."

"Yeah, it wasn't easy, but I released it." Edging closer, Chris placed his chin on Duncan's broad chest. "It's just funny..."

"That you two had the same experiences?"

"Not just that." Chris swallowed hard. "What I'm trying to say is that there are common threads in our childhoods—feeling unwanted by the family, feeling different and outcast

from everybody because of the power, which neither of us knew how to use properly, loving the same man..." Pausing, he sent the leader a radiant smile. "Maybe she and I are more similar than I gave her credit for, like two faces of the same mirror."

Then it all came out in a pouring stream—half-confused, half-rational. Duncan listened as his lover told of the angry child, the same the prince remembered seeing the first time in Black Rose, enraged and hurt by a pain so deep he could not help but be more attracted to the blond angel carrying it, the same way he felt drawn to Ylianor, his two other halves whose sufferings had given them the strength that still connected him to them.

When silence fell, the prince grabbed Chris's face and kissed him long and hard. "I love you, Angel, just like I loved that angry, bitter boy you've had to battle against." His kiss deepened with a long tongue sweep. "But I'm glad he's gone 'cause he clouded your judgment at times." Their lips met again. "And now that you're free of him, tell me truthfully, did you miss her?"

"Kiss me again, lover. I need some encouragement to be completely honest."

Duncan grinned, then complied readily, taking his sweet time to ravage the warm cavity opening to his inspection and surrendering to his tongue reaching for the throat.

"Damn!" Pulling back, a fiery spark crossed the blue-gray eyes. "I did miss her, and it bothered the fuck out of me, all those flashes of things we shared like at the Nephis Valley or..." Stopping, he glanced at the prince as though he feared a bad reaction if he said what was on his mind.

"When you sliced her up." It was no secret his two lovers were finding a way to connect Prince Caldwell found questionable at best, a strange attraction for pain he did not share nor really approved. Still if they both liked it—which

they did—and as long as no one got hurt—which they did not thanks to Chris's Virt—he did not have the heart to forbid it.

"That more than anything else," the blond angel confessed candidly. "Whatever she adds to it, and the gods know I've never had anybody like her at the tip of my knife, I crave it more every day. But then the sex is incredible also without the violence, so I want her more than I dare admit."

"Like you did at Brickstone Crossroad?"

"Oh, yeah, I loved it, enslaving her to my whims until I couldn't take it anymore." An exasperated look crossed his face. "Happy now?"

"Ecstatic!" As a prize, the leader kissed him again. "And since you're making a clean slate of it, tell me why I don't have any memory of her during my childhood like I have of you."

"Hem..." Uncomfortable all of a sudden, the angel shifted position. "Why are you asking me?"

"'Cause I have the sneaky suspicion you had something to do with it, just don't know how you managed it. I've been trying to figure it out all winter..." Then it hit him. "You bastard!"

"Lover, don't get mad."

"Shouldn't I?" To be honest, the truth had been staring him in the face ever since he learned of Chris's Virt. He simply had not wanted to see it until his new love had come to the fore. During his winter's loneliness, he had tormented himself with a series of *what ifs* that had fed his hot rage against Chris's deception. "You wiped her out, didn't you?" No, downright fury now that he read the confirmation in the guilty blue-gray eyes.

"I did, but—"

"No buts." With an angry shove, Duncan landed him on

his back. "You stole precious years with someone I found out I'm in love with only now." He pressed his weight. "Did I love her back then?"

"Yeah, probably," Chris retorted. "But believe me. It was an honest mistake."

"I'm listening." To show his good will, he pulled back, but only slightly.

"Well, remember that time you came to Fair Haven, right after your father died?"

Duncan nodded. How could he forget one of the two times he had been to Chris's home during his youth? Ironically, the first coincided with his mother banning nine-year-old Ylianor from Black Rose.

"The moment you arrived, all you could talk about was her. I begged you repeatedly to stop, couldn't stand to hear the name one more time, but no! You seemed to be under some kind of spell and didn't shut up about her until I wished her gone from your mind. It was just a thought, I swear. A very intense one, I admit, but I didn't know that simply wanting you to forget her entirely...you would."

"You did it on purpose. You knew you had the power to erase memory."

"No, lover, I'm telling you. I had no idea I could do something like that and be selective about it, too, 'cause I didn't erase your whole memory, only the parts that concerned her. In fact, I'm still wondering how I managed it at the age of...what..." He frowned. "No more than nine or ten, so how could I have tried it before?"

"Lucky me, then." No, sarcasm was not helping to melt the hard knot lodged deep in his stomach. "You bastard! I can't believe you'd actually try your damn Virt on me."

"I apologize, lover."

"Apology unacceptable." And he meant it, his animosity growing. "She may accept your pitiful excuses, though I'll

advise her not to." Slipping an arm under his back, the prince flipped Chris on his stomach and sat on his back. "As for me, I want you to pay for what you've done."

"Lover —"

"Shut up!" The urge to hurt him now unbearable, the prince grabbed a candle from the nightstand. "Afraid of a taste of your own medicine?" He lowered the flame on Chris's back. "Not much in the way of revenge, I agree..." Slowing the movement, he lingered on one spot at a time, reducing the distance between the flickering light and the body underneath it. "Still better than nothing."

The blond angel did not move a muscle as the flame got closer to the skin, soon to flare up his delicate flesh.

The first drop frizzed and smelled as though Duncan was cooking meat.

"Lover..." Chris opened his mouth again only once scorching hot wax marked his pale skin in a straight line going from his neck to his ass.

"Isn't this your favorite game?" Unable to stop, the prince kept nearing the flame to the angel's body until a drop of wax fell on his own hand, burning a tiny hole that he watched fascinated for a second. Yet when it reached his heart, the horror of what he was doing, the mere thought of recurring to violence disgusted him to the point he regained control in a flash. Scrambling to his feet, he quickly returned the candle to the nightstand to stare at it as if he had no idea how it got into his hands. Then without a word, he dropped on the bed, turning his back to the angel.

"Lover, why didn't you tell me sooner?" Chris's warm breath tickled his ear.

"About what?"

"About Virtus or rather the lack of him."

"I...didn't know where to start...what to say..."

Confused, Duncan grabbed Chris's hand and held it tightly. "I'm sorry, Angel. I don't know what came over me."

"It wasn't you, more like something in you snapped, and you became someone else." With a loving gesture, Chris caressed his head, hand running through the long strands. "But I can help."

"I..." The prince fell silent, wanting to talk about it, yet every time he tried, words escaped him.

"Yeah, it's not easy to describe the anger, the fiery lashes that hit you without any warning and consume you until all you want is to smash whatever's in your way."

"Yeah." Grateful for Chris's understanding, he turned to stare him in the eyes. "It's like my mood suddenly shifts without any rational reason, up one moment, down the next, going from very angry to very happy in the space of a second." Ruffling the blond hair gave him some measure of comfort. "I wish I could anticipate them, put the changes into some sort of order. So far I just dealt with them as the need arose, though I'm sure there must be some logical way to handle them."

"Doesn't work that way, unfortunately, but don't worry. We'll work it out together."

"How? You handle it differently." *So very differently like the princess would say.* Facing the angel now, he remembered the bloody scene in the shelter. "You seem more calculated, more in control also when you're furious..."

"Only because I've had a lifetime of practice, so I've learned a trick or two, some thanks to you and to the day we first met."

"I don't think I'll ever learn." Flustered, Prince Caldwell shook his head. "Like now I reacted the same way I did back when I read my father's letter and discovered how much he loved her."

"So you, too, have a red, hot, explosive ball of fury ready

to burst at the first sign of nervousness?" Pulling him half-up, Chris embraced him close. "Big deal! I learned to rationalize it, never letting it go to my head, which is probably more dangerous than your way in the end." He ran his fingers through the long hair to his shoulders.

"Yeah, and you've proved it amply the night in the shelter when you were cutting her up and making me helpless to offer her any aid except watch you carve her to bits. And all because of your jealous tantrum."

"That was different. Since I didn't want you to intervene, I took advantage of the fact you didn't know a thing about Virt or power in general." Slipping down, his hand traveled to Duncan's crotch. "But I'll teach you how to shield yourself from the hot wave of uncontrollable emotions that may hit you the moment something doesn't quite go your way."

"Now?"

"I'd say your priority now is to get rid of the excessive rage you've built up during the winter."

"I thought that was what we had been doing all afternoon and for most of the night." In spite of the situation, the prince could not suppress a grin.

Unfortunately, lover, sex isn't a means of prevention. Believe me. With all the sex I do, I should be the least violent person in the world, but we both know I'm not." Chris chuckled. "This doesn't mean it doesn't help." His hand pressed on the limp form beginning to stir. "Particularly after you've allowed the violence to burst and leave its negative effects behind." Tightening his hold, Chris moved his mouth to the arousal. "Or have you forgotten how we dealt with your first rage, after you read your father's letter?" Grabbing Duncan's hips, decisive fingertips pressured him to turn around and the prince opposed no resistance. Chris was right. There was only one way he knew

how to deal with it. Luxuriously, Prince Caldwell surrendered to the avid tongue rimming his ass wet with slow, luscious circles that narrowed down to the hole after having gone round the edge in a rhythmical swirl.

Yes, it felt good to leave Chris in charge for a change as he relaxed and pushed up to demand his prize—the hard cock that alone would make him melt the anger in a vortex of blissful sensations. And the angel did not make him wait long, obviously wanting it as much, if not more.

With a firm thrust, the tip of the erection broke through the tight entrance, then plunged further with each, consecutive shove aimed at filling the entire space. Enlarging it to fit its greedy needs, the twitching piece took it as forcefully as possible. The prince opened up entirely, inviting Chris to take more, pushing up to screw the thick equipment deeper, moving at the same tempo his blond angel set to make sure he never lost what he had captured. The narrow walls closed on the long length, wrapping seductively around every inch of available flesh to squeeze it harder. Pumping also worked to heighten the heat from the friction of the increasing rubbing and the slide of his shaft on the sheets that stroked it as steadily as the angel rammed his ass.

As though sensing his pleasure, Chris stepped up their dance to a frenzied beat, hammering faster and harder with each pounding until the fiery ball securely lodged in Duncan's stomach melted and mixed with another flaming mass, this one located at the top of the bulging head. Red hot darts overwhelming even the flames building up in the butt, everything came together in one giant blaze consuming his body, spirit and mind, concentrated on the tip of his erection and bursting out of control the moment Chris slammed down to flood his ass. As both their comes spurted out like from the same cock, they finally cleansed the leader's

tortured spirit from the unwanted emotions he had been forced to battle alone for...oh, too long, and everything went peaceful again.

About the Author

Born 1965 in Rome, Italy, I grew up in Lagos, Nigeria, then moved to Atlanta, GA, to complete my studies. In Rome, I graduated in Political Science and now work in international trade.

I have always loved writing and started in college by working with Emory University's magazine *The Phoenix*. Since then I have been writing and publishing in both Italian and English, specializing in gay M/M erotica in various genres, mostly fantasy, sci-fi and paranormal, sometimes trespassing into the contemporary, not to mention my ongoing fantasy series *Virtus Saga*.