



LAURA TOLOMEI
THE PLEDGE
VIRTUS SIGA BOOK 5

At the end of the road, only one promise—to be as one whilst remaining three.

While love and passion rise, enemies and misunderstandings become stronger. While resolves strengthen, the world and its nightmares stand in the way until one thing, and one alone, will save them—the pledge.

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The Pledge
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ISBN: 978-1-77111-294-9
Cover art by Angela Waters

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Published by eXtasy Books
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The Pledge
Virtus Book 5

By

Laura Tolomei

Chapter One

She rushed through darkness, heart pounding in her ears, breathing scarce as her lungs burned from the lack of air. Too bad she seemed unable to take the giant steps she had before. Then again, not her fault her frame had shrunk to that of a child.

Stumbling, she accelerated, however unsure of the direction, the certainty they were after her fastening wings on her tiny feet. But who would want to harm her? And why?

Until a second before, she had been in the light, about to grasp true happiness. Now she was racing for her life, deathly afraid that something wanted to take it away from her.

After tripping on yet another half-hidden shrub, Ylianor turned to check on her pursuers. At the noise of their footsteps closing in, she sped away in the deserted place. No one was around, nobody to catch her cry for help.

Had she really screamed? In doubt, she opened her mouth again, but nothing came out. Flustered, she kept running against her tense muscles' better judgment. Breath shorter, heart bursting—soon she would collapse and lie flat on her face, at anyone's mercy.

"I'll protect you," a well-known voice rang out.

Raising her gaze, she peered at the blackness that lifted like magic or rather like a vibrant light appearing out of nowhere that made her realize she had been scurrying through a forest of tall, ominous trees.

"Do you understand now, little girl?"

"Yes." Unafraid, she nodded at Virtus standing between her and the shiny beam, his hooded form blocking part of it. With a sigh of relief, Ylianor fell into his open arms to hide her face in the folds

of his black robe.

"Here, little girl. Rest your load on me." Lovingly, he caressed her long hair.

"I'm so tired..." Her voice faltered.

"Then sleep."

"But they're after me!" Abruptly remembering the reason she had to flee, she jumped back and shuffled in panic.

"I'll take care of them." Stretching out iron finger-like hooks he grabbed her. "Don't worry." Dragging her close, he smothered her against his impressive structure.

"Princess, why are you running away from us?" A man's voice boomed behind her.

"Go away! She doesn't want you." Menacingly, Virtus's intermittent red spark flashed like in a malignant scowl. "Leave her alone."

"We're not going anywhere without you, Princess." Steadfast, the man stood his ground.

"Get lost!" Half turning her head, she took a quick peek from under her eyelashes. "You've used me long enough." But catching a glimmer of gold, she could not resist looking at the familiar, very familiar, blond man approaching behind the dark-haired one.

"That's a lie, sleeping beauty." The blue-gray eyes blazed, highlighting his arresting features.

Something in that earnest gaze threw her off balance, twisting her stomach in a knot before a cold wave of recognition sliced it in half. "You're a fine one to talk." She sneered, confronting him. "After all you've done to get rid of me." All right, maybe not, yet it felt liberating to say it.

"But I want her." The human-like machine pressed her head to his lap. "She'll stay here with me, where she belongs."

"No, she doesn't." The striking man with the long and raven black hair took a step forward. "She's mine." Not possessively, he stated it as a matter of fact.

"You're wrong, Leader. She was never yours, right, little girl?" His metallic stump clutched her shoulder.

"Yes, Father." Raising her head, Ylianor embraced the dark figure. "Take me home."

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“Right this way, daughter.” With something resembling a smug snarl, he began to lead her away, but she spun around for one last look at the piercing black eyes fixed on her. Now she remembered, and the proper response was a knowing glance of her own that only he would understand. Then, squeezing the icy cold claws, she looked in front of her and walked away from the gorgeous prince and his even more attractive lover.

* * * *

Prince Duncan Caldwell knelt on Ylianor’s unconscious body, Christopher Templeton hovering on his shoulder.

“What was that all about?” Chris, his beautiful shiny angel, bent further down.

“Our nemesis catching up with us.” They had been in the middle of the most sacred ceremony of all, the pledge, when she had fainted. “What else?” Had she answered the leader’s ritual question, Ylianor Caldwell, his adopted sister, would now be his lover’s mate.

“You mean what else is new?” Alas, the unfulfilled promise would hinder a connection Duncan had tried to establish ever since rescuing Ylianor from her run-down shack a year ago...no, closer to a lifetime it seemed. “If she didn’t want me, she could’ve said so.” Then again, why did it happen at such a crucial moment?

However much he had expected it, Duncan could not feel sorrier. “Things have been kind of hectic lately with the Fitting and all.” The fact he, Duncan Caldwell newly fitted leader, loved both with a passion he could feel for no one else complicated matters all the more. “She may have forgotten to inform you,” he joked to lighten the heavy mood weighing on him at the sight of the pale face at his feet looking much like the sleeping beauty of Chris’s sardonic nickname, with her long, dark hair scattered disorderly around. “Or wanted to surprise you.” Gently, he pushed away the hair while checking her breathing.

“She’s alive, all right.” The healer in Chris was quick to kick in. “So we can wake her—”

“Not yet.” Unlike other times and unknown to his angel, he had

been ready for Virtus, their archenemy. *Fuck him!* The mark on his left shoulder, the insignificant childhood scar mysteriously awakened by the leadership itself and transformed by the ceremony into a tiny three-sided pyramid, flared up in agreement. Things were going to change now that he controlled all life, now that he and the Nephis Valley Tower were one and the same, now that the Fitting had passed him down every past leader's experience.

"But..." Chris looked perplexed as though wanting to question the leader's decision, then dropped it. After all, why doubt the man to whom the Fitting had transferred the world's Virt? "At least, now we're sure what their connection is, even if the mere thought makes my blood cold."

"You were the one who thought of it first." One thing about his angel—he was the most insightful person he knew, quick to grasp the heart of the matter however unbelievable or painful. "Didn't you see he turned her into a little girl?" Duncan shook his head, his own long hair, similar to Ylianor's in color and texture, flying around his shoulders. "That's how I saw her when I had to enter her mind in Harbor Town..." He turned to Chris. "And how I'd have remembered her if you hadn't erased my memory, Angel." The fact remained he and the princess shared a history prior to Chris's arrival in his life, having grown up as siblings, despite the lack of any blood relation between them.

"I know." The blond head lowered briefly in shame. "She looked exactly like that back then." Shyly, he glanced at Prince Caldwell as to apologize once more. "But why is she convinced he's her father?"

Because she has to make him fall for it, but it's too long to explain now. "Let's get her out of here first, then we'll talk." He bent over to pick her up. "We still have to finish up here."

"Finish what?" The blue-gray eyes scanned the premises, returning on Duncan with a confused expression. "Lover, what's happened to everyone?"

"Another of Virtus's tricks." Unlike Chris, he had not forgotten they were in Rhapsen Hall's underground chamber, in front of hundreds of people come to see Prince Duncan Caldwell

proclaimed leader.

"It's like everybody left, only forgot to take their bodies with them." Chris chuckled.

"You always beat me to the answers." Grinning, Duncan stood up, already knowing no one was staring at either him or the lifeless body crumpled on the cold stone. They simply could not. "Actually, they're frozen. Their lights..." He checked on Chris to see if he remembered his complaints about the chaos of flickers and sounds he had learned were the distinctive signatures of every living being.

"They don't bother you anymore?" Of course, his angel had not forgotten.

"Had to wait for the Fitting to sort them out." *And what a relief.* "Only now every light is dark and silent except for yours..." No, there was no mistaking the brightest of them all, which unfortunately concealed a dimmer spark that testified someone else had not been put out—a person whose humming had felt discordant even before every sound died, someone he knew for sure. *Carmel!* A mere thought and she was gone. "As for them..." His arm circled the great chamber. "They're in a state of suspension."

"Like sleeping beauty over here?"

"No, different. Virtus has taken her mind and spirit like he did in Harbor Town, while they're just asleep." To be honest, he had felt Virtus dimming lights and energy the moment he had started to run after his little princess. "But I can snap them out of it without too much of an effort."

"And what do you suppose they'll remember?" Chris gestured at the hundreds of human-like statues staring blankly into nothingness.

"That's your department, Angel." Despite the situation, Prince Caldwell could not help a cynical snarl to twist his lips. Then again, it was part of Chris's Virt, along with the healing, which made him the most powerful being around...after him, of course.

"Still your call to bring them out of it." As though reading his mind, which lately the leader suspected he did, Chris scoffed. "So what will you tell them?"

Catching Chris in his arms, he crushed the lithe body against his. “What do you want me to tell them, Angel?” Duncan whispered seductively in his blond lover’s ear, his heart going out to him. Apart from any other consideration, and Prince Caldwell had a lot of those on his mind, Chris came before everything else, especially with destiny, if not the leader himself, playing him such a cruel joke. Either way, it did not seem fair.

First, the death of the last leader, Arthur Fairchild, another victim of the evil they knew as Virtus, deprived his angel of someone he loved deeply, however loud he pretended otherwise. Then James Templeton’s retirement required his third son, Chris, to fill the vacant council seat. Not a usual procedure, but since the High Council was a place of power, none more than Chris was entitled to it. Then again, the leader had final say, so Duncan would have no other. Tough luck if his lover had to take an official mate as part of the same bargain. Nor was it the prince’s fault pledges were the sole way to ensure heirs, or that his blond beauty had little taste for women. Chris and Ylianor were meant for each other, and none more than he who shared their bed was sure of it. He would never have pledged them otherwise or given both his very personal gift, the bracelets with the central rose-shaped stone that his angel’s left wrist was pressing on his back. And though Chris did not dare give a name to his raging feelings for the princess, he had wanted her and would have taken her had the vicious beast not intervened...ironic to have come so far and lose it all in the blink of an eye.

“What can you tell them?” Chris buried the blond head in his chest, lowering his gaze. “Whatever it is, will they believe it?”

“Look at me, Angel.” Tilting up his head, the prince felt the tense muscles and the heartache beneath them. “They’ll believe whatever I tell them. It’s really up to you.” Lovingly, he squeezed his shoulders. “They heard you make your pledge, so they’ll take for granted she accepted it. With a little convincing, they’ll have no doubts.” He paused to search the worried blue-gray depths. “If not, I’ll tell them the princess fainted before she could give an answer and—”

“No, tell them the pledge was completed, please.” Placing his

head on the leader's shoulder, the one with the mark, Chris heaved. "I gave my promise, and I meant it, however badly it turned out."

"Don't worry." Even more touched, Prince Caldwell caressed the short blond hair gently, filling him with his dark energy in an attempt to compensate for what he had temporarily lost. "I will."

The *energy business*, as his angel called it, had come as another surprise to Duncan. But with teachers like Chris and Ylianor, he had quickly mastered the Virt, as his ancestors called the power, which he guessed was the reason for the tight connection between the three of them, more than sex and love anyway. No question about it, both his lovers had used their abundant supply since childhood, an oddity as Arthur had confirmed, for it usually came out late in a person's life, if at all. So having dealt with his angel's fire and his princess's head talk for almost as long had made him accept what Ylianor had awakened only recently. "Right after we've taken care of the princess." Feeling Chris relax, he dropped on his heels again.

"Let me, lover." He stepped forward. "You have a job to do here." Without any real effort, he picked her up.

"Take her to my room, Angel."

"All right, but first give me a kiss." Glancing around, he shifted closer. "It'll be fun to know you've kissed me in front of all these people."

"Even if they won't ever know?"

Chris shrugged. "It'll be our little secret."

Their lips met, slowly at first, then more deeply. Ylianor between them did not seem awkward. In fact, she was as much a part of it as their tongues twisting heatedly or sweeping each other's mouths to get as far as the throat. Had it been up to Duncan, it would have never ended, the spell too intense to break, had Chris not pulled back eventually. "You know, the ritual question you asked..."

"Yes?"

"Well, my answer was meant for you, too, now and forever."

"I know, Angel. No need to spell it out."

Another kiss, then carrying his precious load next to his heart, Chris was gone. Duncan returned to the leader's seat, a wooden

throne on top of an upside down three-sided pyramid. A strong link to the Nephis Valley's structure, no doubt, it immediately charged the prince with a surge of power so strong it coursed through the bloodstream and tingled at his fingertips as he turned to face the silent lights. Like he had told Chris, it would not be hard to revive them—enough to concentrate on each and every one, and the assembly came back to life. “Now that we’ve seen our newly pledged leave the chamber, I invite you all to join me and the council members for refreshments upstairs.” Unsurprisingly, dazed eyes stared at him in puzzlement before people piled at the many exits, moving slowly as though uncertain of their legs. *Sorry folks.* Nothing more could be added, so he moved on to his next task. “Ceci...” Catching sight of his freshly appointed vice-leader, he raised his voice. “I need a favor.” Coming down from the throne, Duncan went to her.

“Of course, darling.” Bright gaze expecting things he would never give her, she faced him. “What is it?”

Not what you think. “I need you to find David and tell him to detain Carmel Moore.” No, he could not satisfy her need for deeper feelings, in or out of bed. “She’s not to leave the Hall until I’ve talked to her.”

“Carmel Moore?” A disoriented look crossed her eyes. “I’ll get to it immediately.” She went off in a hurry.

“Hem...” With bafflement stamped all over his face, Lord James Templeton approached. “My leader, I’m a bit confused about what happened. Did Chris pledge?”

“He most certainly did.” And it was no lie. Not his angel’s fault Virtus had to intervene before she could promise, too. “Except he couldn’t wait to be alone with her, if you know what I mean.” Naturally, he charged the words with all the sexual innuendo he could muster. “Also ‘cause I’m afraid she’ll be leaving soon.”

“Already?”

“I’ve asked her to check on a few private matters of our family, and she might be away for a while.”

“Chris will be devastated.” James frowned. “During our dinner the other night, I couldn’t help noticing he’s developed an attachment for the girl.” He took a deep breath. “You can’t

imagine how glad I am he didn't pledge just to honor his family obligations, but because he feels something for her."

"That's why I agreed to it, Lord Templeton." Duncan grinned. "Like I told you, I'd have never pledged them if I didn't think their hearts were in it." Catching a question in James's gaze, he was quick to continue. "And I assure you. I had nothing to do with it." So what if Lord Templeton had never believed his denials? "They did it all by themselves." *Well, with a little push and shove, here and there.*

"Knowing Chris like I do, please allow me to be doubtful. He loves you too much to have—"

"As hard as it is to believe, he loves her, too."

"Yes. It was strange to watch because I never thought—"

"Your son would pledge."

"Exactly." From the awareness in the clear blue eyes, Prince Caldwell knew he had struck a sensitive chord in the old man. "And he's turning out quite a man."

"That he certainly is." *And one I'm falling in love more deeply with every passing day.* "Now, if you'll excuse me..."

"Sure." A glint of regret, perhaps at the thought he was not part of the council life anymore, glazed the ex vice-leader's expression, but was quickly suppressed.

"Oh, one last thing." So Duncan could not let it go. Instead of leaving, he remained to squeeze James's shoulders. "Have I thanked you for your invaluable services to the council and to our people?"

"Yes, Prince, you have during your public speech." His eyes lit in pleasure. "And it was very touching."

"No, I meant personally." The leader edged closer.

"I..."

The chamber now empty except for the two of them, but Duncan would have done it anyway—to wrap his arms around the man he considered a father and pull the old frame to him, infusing him with all the cool energy he deserved. "Thank you for everything, and you know I mean *everything*." *Your son in particular.*

James buried his head in his chest, which he probably would not

have done had they not been alone, and opened his heart. “No, thank you, for being there for us.” Of course, he had understood perfectly.

Then Duncan had to go. Gently, he untangled from the eldest Templeton and left, heading for his room. When he entered, Chris was hovering on Ylianor, lying on the bed under a couple of blankets. “How’s she?” Concerned, he approached.

“She’s...unconscious and very cold.”

Yes, she was freezing. “Maybe we need something more to keep her warm.”

“Like magic?” There was no surprise in the blue-gray eyes. “I was wondering about the same thing, mostly how to use my fire to—”

“So she’ll be kept warm for a while.”

“How long exactly?” If the angel sounded annoyed, Prince Caldwell ignored it to the point of not replying, watching him focus on her.

For a moment nothing happened. Then Duncan saw it, a ray of burning fire wrapping in tight coils around her body, like a blazing snake taking possession of her. The prince lent his own energy, giving Chris’s structure a solid support and a feeding source to keep burning indefinitely. “It’s working, Angel.” Touching her forehead, he found her warmer.

“She really looks like a sleeping princess.” After shaking his head half-amused, Chris went to the couch in front of the roaring fire. “Now, would you mind telling me what’s going on?” Dropping on the seat, he did not seem angry, merely resigned to the fact he would not like his lover’s explanations. “I mean it’s obvious you expected this to happen.”

“You’re right.” There was no point in beating around the bush with his angel’s phenomenal intuition. “I sent her to him.” Going to the couch, he plopped down next to him.

“So that knowing look you two exchanged before she left with him was a signal?”

“You noticed it, eh?” Not a question, it was a statement.

“Lover, I’m anything but stupid. A little slow perhaps, ‘cause I wasn’t aware you planned it all until I saw that look.”

"I'm sorry, Angel." He reached out to grab his hand, but Chris moved away.

"So what was the purpose of this charade anyway? To lure that monster? And you didn't see fit to tell me this pledge was a hoax because..." Barely suppressed, anger dripped from the words, along with fiery disappointment.

"I didn't know when Virtus would strike. I just prayed the gods he would after you both pledged." His voice turned colder. "Or do you think I gave you the bracelet and said all the things on my heart as part of the show?"

"All right, now I'm confused." And he looked it, too, as he fingered the rose-shaped green gem of the golden band on his left arm.

"Listen, Angel, I know it appears like a set-up, but it isn't. We just had bigger things on our minds, like her switching from one person to another—"

"Arthur and Charles have nothing to do with it." It was another of the unexplained occurrences that had plagued their days before the Fitting—Ylianor falling prey either to Lord Fairchild or to Charles Caldwell, and they still had no clue about what exactly set them off or how to get rid of them. "Virtus is the problem, and the last thing she needed was a trip to his sadistic world—"

"Do you think I like putting her in danger?" He brushed off the hair on his face exasperated at Chris's sneering tone. "Or you for that matter?" Taking a deep breath, he tried to calm down, regretting the fact he had given up the only form of controlling negative emotions. "Yet sometimes it's going to be necessary, like when I had to ask you to clean up Virtus's mess, which nearly killed you." *And I'd have never forgiven myself.* "You two remain the most powerful beings." Unable to stand the forced distance, he clutched Chris's arms. "Your abilities determined who you were long before our connections defined our obligations." Letting his hands fall on the couch, Duncan glanced briefly at the sleeping princess. "Unfortunately, now it's her turn." Again, his gaze was on the angel. "What other choice do I have? She's the key to him. She's the only one who can learn enough to allow us to defeat him once and for all." He searched the blue-gray eyes for support.

“You know how he is. You know we face an enemy that lives in a dimension we cannot reach easily, who uses his power as a weapon, determined to have his way, particularly with our girl. That’s why she agreed to go along with my idea, regardless of the risks.”

“All right, I get it.” Chris’s eyes flashed in understanding. “You sent her to do what she does best—spy.”

“Well, I didn’t think of it that way.” Despite his mood, Duncan laughed dryly. “But I suppose you’re right. And since you’ve always accused her of it, it was high time to use it to our advantage for a change.”

“Can’t argue there.” Imperceptibly, his angel moved closer.

“But it was a last-minute decision.” Becoming serious again, the leader stressed the point, wanting no misunderstanding to come between them. “Neither the princess nor I were sure when Virtus would strike, so we couldn’t really be ready for it. Fact is we didn’t even talk about it, just exchanged a few worried thoughts.”

“Then why did it have to be during the pledge?” No matter how he tried to rationalize it, the betrayed expression was still there. “I thought Virtus was more powerful when the three of us were apart, not all together...and with you becoming a leader, too, with greater Virt than ever...”

“That was the problem. We were all there, yes, but each focused on himself.”

“Even if we were disconnected during the Fitting itself, we had to be linked for the pledge—”

“No, Angel, it’s not how it works.” Apologetic, Duncan reached out for him, and this time Chris let him take his hand. “Unfortunately that was the perfect moment. Too bad I had no idea it would be until I knew how to perform a pledge.”

“Which is something that came to you with the Fitting, right?”

“Among other things, yes.” *And I’ll tell you all about them when we have time for it.* “In order for me to pledge a man and a woman, I need to extract their energy and blend it together. This way, I can lift the restraint we have since birth, which prevents us from having children every time we have sex.”

“So it works at an energy level, like Cecilia guessed.”

“Basically, yes.” Sure, Lady Hurst had been obsessed with the need to know why reproduction did not seem to follow any natural law. So she had stolen the three-sided pyramid that was the heart of the system, the same Arthur ordered Duncan, Chris and Ylianor to retrieve.

“Which means you were distracted by the ritual.”

“Exactly.” So what if he was revealing secrets belonging to leaders alone? He had made his choice at the Fitting’s eve and would follow it to its end. “I was taking the energy you were giving me—”

“Through the formal words.”

“That’s what they’re for.” As usual, Chris went straight to the finish line. “To surrender your essence and allow it to blend with the woman’s.”

“But she never got to the point of giving hers.”

“No, Virtus got to her before she could.” Shaking his head, Duncan squeezed Chris’s hand tighter. “It was perfect timing ‘cause we were separated.”

“Not enough to prevent him from pulling me, too, into his dream dimension.”

“Yeah. That was a first.” Duncan sat back, gazing at the bright flames. “Until now, he used the princess and me because of our channel. But having you there only proves David took you off Virtus’s control.” *Which makes you all the more unpredictable, beautiful angel.* Free of the mechanical device that transformed violent emotions into sexual impulses, it was impossible to tell how it would affect someone as highly volatile as Chris. For Duncan and Ylianor, it was hard to cope, as it was, although theirs had been a choice—his angel, instead, an accident.

“At least he confirmed what we suspected—”

“It was your guess from the start, Angel.”

“Yeah, but there’s one thing I don’t understand. If we’re all born connected to the damn device, the one inside the three-sided pyramid, why would he need a double link to tie her, and her alone, to him? I mean he could’ve just as easily controlled her from the sphere without going to all the trouble of making it like he’s her father.” Of course, Chris was talking about the heart of the

pyramid Cecilia had stolen, the one with all the plaques controlling every human being, the same one Duncan ordered David to shift around and almost caused total chaos to break loose.

"I never thought of it." The leader frowned. "She definitely has more than one mystery to solve."

"As long as he doesn't use her against us."

"We'll be ready for her." He had sort of a plan for that, too, simply needed to work it out better. "Don't worry. I just hope she learns as much as she can before she returns."

"When exactly? When do you plan to call her back?"

"Not until she sends us a sign that her mission is done."

"But she may die in the meantime." There was no disguising the anguish in his angel's voice.

"Not a chance. Virtus needs her alive. If he kills her body, he loses her mind as well, which is the last thing he wants." *At least for now.* "Besides, if you remember, I left our channel wide open during the Fitting in order to pass on to her as much energy and information as I could." Ruffling the blond hair, he ran his fingers through the thick mass. "Like me, she received the knowledge of all our past leaders in every feasible field."

"So for the first time, we have two leaders," Chris mused ruefully.

"No, Angel, we have three." The prince took his face between his palms. "Listen, you share this, too, right along with her. I don't want to be a solitary leader, like Arthur was. I want to divide everything with you, both of you, my friends and lovers. That's why I'm telling you about how the pledge works, like I'll tell you about everything else in due time. As for her..." Another look behind his shoulders told Duncan she had not moved a muscle. "She survived in Harbor Town. I don't think she'll have any trouble now that we'll watch over her. And we'll also enlist David's help—"

"If he's not too pissed off at both of us." Chris chuckled. "You know what he said after you brought her back as the ghost of herself."

"He...cares for her, too." It was no lie. Prince Caldwell had seen the expression in his faithful valet's eyes every time he

glanced at Ylianor.

“That’s an understatement.” Evidently resentful, Chris would never admit it, not even to himself. Then again, it was obvious Ylianor felt something for David, too, which his angel could not stand. “I’d go as far as saying he’s shifted his love for you onto her.” That was another ongoing argument between them—Chris believing David to be in love with him, which perhaps he was. “Only with her, he also has sex.”

“Since when have you become jealous of the princess?” Duncan teased. “I could understand when it concerned me, but her—”

“Shut up, lover.” With a curious smirk, Chris waved a hand in the air. “It’s got nothing to do with being jealous. I was merely stating an obvious fact.”

“Either way, we need his help, even if he scolds us for the way she’s now. You and I will have other pressing matters to attend to and won’t be able to do much besides give her a steady supply of energy to keep her safe.”

“No problem.” Chris, too, ran his gaze to the bed. “It’ll be like old times, with us sleeping and fucking next to her—”

“Except she won’t spy on us this time.”

“And, boy, will I miss it!” Well, his angel was definitely changing.

“Me, too.” He remained in silence to stare at the immobile figure with the long black hair scattered on the pillow. “But we’ll get her back, and the first step is to find who helped Virtus. He didn’t pull this off by himself.”

“But you said we were distracted—”

“However distracted, it was still the three of us at our most powerful, so he enlisted Carmel’s aid.” Prince Caldwell pulled the angel close, the need to hold him intolerable.

“Carmel?” Resting his head on the leader’s chest, the angel stretched out on the couch. “Are you sure?”

“You and her were the only ones not dazed out.” So Duncan massaged his neck. “The princess told me to watch out, but there was no time to deal with her.” To be honest, the warning dated back to the Festival, when the blonde showed up at Black Rose, his home, to have sex with both him and Ylianor in turn. “Anyway, we

have to find her and ask her directly.”

“Isn’t she here?” Settling more comfortably in Duncan’s arms, Chris glanced at Ylianor. “Sleeping beauty had sex with her last night.”

“How would you know?” His angel was truly amazing. “Last night we left our princess with Tyrell and Emilyan after we were done with her.”

“And it was a nice...doing.” Chris snickered, evidently recalling at their heated night with the other two men, who had once been part of Arthur’s boys. The truly incredible thing was not having left her alone with them. No, what had been beyond words was their simultaneous come—he, Chris and Ylianor—without even touching. “But she had sex with Carmel before I got her. I smelled her all over sleeping beauty while I was...hem...convincing her to join us.”

“Must’ve been some...heated convincing.” Prince Caldwell’s lips curved in a smile.

“You should’ve been there.” Chris grinned back. “Anyway, it proves Carmel was here, and if you think she helped Virtus, she must’ve stayed for the ritual, too.”

“She did, but I have the feeling she left right after we returned from Virtus’s dream.” Absentmindedly, the prince’s hand traveled down his angel’s chest. “In any case, I asked David to detain her should he find her.”

“Detain her?” Sliding downward, Chris turned to lie on his stomach. “Does this mean you have to go?”

“Hem...” Spreading his legs, Duncan managed to bring his crotch closer to his lover’s mouth. “Not necessarily.”

“Well, well...” A malicious gleam crossed the blue-gray eyes as he worked to open the fly. “How long will he keep her in custody?” It took less than a minute to free what he was after and jerk it into a vigorous erection.

“Indefinitely.” Or for Duncan to push the hot mouth over the bulging head. “I’m sorry tonight you should’ve been with her, not me.” He could not help saying it despite the fire enveloping his demanding piece and making it hard to focus on any other concern.

“I forgive you, lover.” Raising his head, Chris slid the skin

along the rigid stem. "I always wanted to pledge to you anyway." He was about to swallow the cock once more, pausing to gaze at Ylianor. "We'll celebrate when she returns."

"That's for sure." And Duncan knew he was already missing her, inevitably. She was part of them after all, whether they had wanted her or not. Now, being without her was like having a giant hole neither could hope to fill. Still, the wet cavity sucking him to the hilt was making its best effort to wipe out the memories, so good its intake to the throat, thoughts fled the prince's mind, leaving only the burning desire to come inside his angel.

The hand play had a lot to do with it, too. Its rhythmical up and down was driving the sperm from the balls to the tip of the erection faster than Duncan's wish to enjoy the cheeks pressing on every side or the tongue curling around the thickness to increase the snugness. That Chris was trying to make him come sooner rather than later seemed obvious, only... "Not so fast, Angel." Yanking his hair, he pulled back the head and held it so as to stare into the blue-gray eyes. "I said I had some time."

"You did?" A cunning grin curved Chris's lips. "Must've missed it."

"I have a hot reminder for you, if only you'd care to remove your pants." Letting go of the blond hair, Duncan watched Chris take off everything. Well, there was nothing he loved more than his angel's sensual body, lithe and elegant, seductive simply in the way he moved. The hard shaft added its own bit of erotic intrigue, though nothing was more sensual than his straddling the prince and spreading his buttocks to receive the cock waiting for him. "I said not so fast." After sticking two fingers in Chris's mouth, Duncan tested the ass hole. "First, I need to check if you're ready for me." He shoved, and the narrow entrance wrapped to suck them deep.

"I'm always ready for you, lover." True enough as Chris thrust back, then bent to claim the leader's mouth.

With the angel's heady taste filling his senses, there was no reason to procrastinate. Nudging the tight opening, he enlarged it with one swift hip swing that brought his huge shaft inside the cramped behind. Not all, of course, it would have been impossible even for his slut lover. Still enough that a few more pumps got it

all inside except for the balls.

Chris adapted, his ass giving in to the whole of him and more if necessary. Much like his mouth, it felt like plunging into liquid fire, the sensation urging Duncan to melt into him and never reemerge again.

As their tongues twirled, his cock slammed in the yielding rear. Duncan's hands ran along Chris's back, then tried circling to the front where the other large erection rubbed on his belly. Impossible to reach it until his angel pulled up, releasing him from the fiery kiss. Then the prince grabbed it and jerked its long length.

Unlike Chris, cocks did not make him lose his head, with the sole exception of his angel's taut equipment. Now that was a piece he loved to fondle. And increasing the pressure right below the bulging head was the way to make his lover come. Prince Caldwell was close to a climax himself, the crammed walls drawing the fluid up to the tip in a tide Duncan knew he would not be able to stop. So to prove who was the master, he tightened his grip, speeding up the ramming at the same time.

"Lover..." Chris never got to finish the sentence. His first jet hit Duncan on a cheek, then spilled all over his chest with the same intensity of the leader's release in the snug ass. There was no time to recover either, his dark energy wrapping around the pyre in which he hoped to lose himself, never to return.

"Fuck, lover!" Returning, the blue-gray eyes blazed partly annoyed. "Not fair. You wanted me to come—"

"So I did." Stretching upward, he clutched Chris's head. "What's the problem?"

"It should've lasted longer." Coming down, the angel licked his cheek clean, then plunged the tongue into his mouth to share the taste. Duncan pressed his head to him, drowning in his sweetness, deepening the kiss until Chris drew away.

"Because I so fucking love you, I wish it would never end." The husky whisper tickled the leader's ear.

"I know, Angel, but I've got to go now."

"What's the hurry?"

"It's not just Carmel." Sliding from under Chris's legs, Duncan took off the shirt full of semen. "I've also got to attend the rest of

The Pledge

the celebrations, remember?”

“While I suppose I should stay here.”

“Connecting to your new mate.” Duncan nodded, pulling out a clean shirt from his closet. Then he returned to Chris’s side and cradled the blond head on his chest. “I’m sorry, Angel, about all this. Like you asked me, I told everyone the pledge was completed.”

“And they believed it...”

“Well, everyone’s a bit confused, your father in particular. Anyway, they all expect you to be with her.”

“What are you going to tell them about—”

“Sort of the truth...that I had to send her on a mission without knowing when she’ll be back.” Bending, he pressed his lips to the blond head before sliding to the angel’s mouth for another roving exchange. “Have I told you lately how much I love you?” Prince Caldwell breathed eventually, after licking his neck and nibbling his ear.

“Mmm...not in so many words.”

“Trust me.” He went to the door. “By the time I return, I’ll have so many you’ll get tired of listening to them.”

“Then I’ll count the hours.”

And Duncan had no doubt he would.

Chapter Two

“She told me to burn down the stables, so I did.”

“She?” Sitting at his desk, the leader raised a brow, studying the boy in front of him. Then he turned to Chris briefly, the only other one in his office after David brought the youngster accused of setting fire near Rhapsen Hall.

“Yes, the dark lady who’s been visiting my dreams for the past five nights. She looks a little...” He glanced shyly at Duncan. “Like you, sir.”

Fuck! The unexpected outbreak of nightmares had caught him unprepared, and all he could count on were a handful of council members who had remained once the Fitting was over. *As if things with my angel weren’t bad enough already.* “Does she now?” Of Carmel, instead, there had been no trace. David had searched everywhere, coming up empty handed as Prince Caldwell feared. One servant reported having seen her leave the Hall at one point, although he was not sure when. In his words, “It was like I was waking up from a dream, and she walked right past me, sir.” Small wonder!

“Yes, sir, she does and...quite a bit.” The boy retreated in the leather chair as if afraid Duncan might scold him for suggesting the resemblance.

Now, after days of fruitless scouting trips, Prince Caldwell was convinced an aura reader alone would be able to trace her. Of course, as Chris had snapped, theirs was asleep at the moment.

“What about the horses?” The angel leaned in the boy’s direction.

“Oh, she insisted I spared them any harm.” The boy’s huge eyes

fixed on Chris. "She told me more than once I was to take them out in the open before I set the fire."

Duncan and Chris exchanged a glance. That sounded like their princess, all right, the one he had not tried to awaken, which was the reason for the estrangement between him and Chris.

"So she visited you other times, right?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did she always ask you to set the stables on fire?" Prince Caldwell stretched out across his desk.

"She...kind of did, only I never did anything about it."

"Then why did you obey this time?" Relentless, the leader fixed his gaze on the boy.

"I..." Blushing violently, the boy bowed, guilt probably tormenting him along with remorse. "I don't know."

"I know you feel bad." Duncan's voice softened. "But we need as much information as possible."

"Because I had it while I was awake, the dream I mean," he finally blurted. "But I wasn't really awake. I mean I was and...I wasn't." In helpless frustration, the boy shook his head. "I know it was broad day, so I wasn't sleeping." Wriggling his arms, he twisted them nervously. "I was standing in front of the stables when she appeared. It was like I was in a dream, like I wasn't really there...like it wasn't really me, but someone else entirely." He raised an earnest gaze. "My leader, I didn't want to do it, I swear! She told me it was the right thing to do and...I believed her."

"Then now believe me." It was not his fault. Still, the boy had to grasp the enormity of what he had done. "You're going to use all your free time to help rebuild the stables, and who knows?" Duncan suppressed a grin. "This might even teach you to think twice before following your dreams."

"Was this the sign you were waiting for?" Chris's wry inquiry was quick to echo the boy's departure. "Can we bring her back now?"

"No, we can't."

"Can't or won't?" Threateningly, the angel confronted him standing in front of the desk, muscles tense.

“What’s the difference?” Duncan tried to downplay it. “She didn’t ask to be brought back.”

“So you’re just going to sit there and let Virtus use her against us—”

“Do you have a better plan?” But he was not sure he could handle the pressure either. “Better than trying to reach her when you think I’m not watching?” Prince Caldwell sneered, getting up to lean forward.

The blond angel blushed. “I haven’t tried to—”

“Save it!” Rounding his desk, he was on Chris. “I’ve seen the way you look and touch her, and I bet whatever you tried failed like all my attempts.”

“So you bothered to check?” Chris raised a defiant gaze.

“Do you think I don’t miss her?”

“It certainly doesn’t look that way.”

“Well, think again.” An angry shove and Chris was pinned to the wall. “I fucking miss her.” Duncan spelled it out, so there would be no misunderstanding about her silence being a black void that ate his heart and smothered his energy. “But I sent her to Virtus with a definite mission she just began.”

“How much more damage do you figure she needs to cause before you deem her task is over?” Heavy sarcasm dripped from every word.

“If I summon her now, she’s not going to have the information to nail that bastard once and for all.” He pressed his weight on Chris. “Like it or not, it’s her call. All we can do is wait.” And the sooner his angel understood it, the better.

“What if she can’t send any sign?” Or maybe Chris did not want to get it.

“Then I promise we’ll try something in a few days.” He made it sound final.

“Sure we will, so you’ll have no qualms in using her again next time there’s an emergency.”

That did it! “I’ve had it.” With a harsh jolt, he tackled Chris down on his back. “If you can’t learn your manners around the leader, I have no choice but to teach them the hard way.”

“Pulling rank now?” The angel did not stand for it.

“Damn right I am!” It was difficult to keep him down as he twisted on himself. “In case you’ve forgotten, you’re supposed to obey my every command.”

“Fuck you!” Rebounding, Chris managed to wriggle free enough for Duncan to have to throw him back on the ground. “Correct me if I’m wrong.” Rolling frantically, the angel was on top of him. “You’re learning to use people, and you’ve started with the most convenient ones—the fools who love you.”

“You’re a jerk just for thinking it.” Arching his back, Duncan unsaddled Chris. “If I’m using either of you, it’s exclusively to help our people.” Then with a quick return, he wrestled Chris until he crushed his face to the floor.

“You’re not doing them any favors if Virtus turns her into their worst nightmare.” Weighing on his elbows, the angel tried to get up, but Duncan’s knee digging his back prevented further attempts.

“I may have a solution, if you’d only stop yapping and listened to me for a change.” With a vicious tug, the prince pulled down Chris’s pants.

“I’ve heard enough!” Chris tightened everything all at once.

“No good, Angel.” After wetting a couple of fingers, he stuck them in the butt that, for the first time, did not yield so easily. “Think you can stop me?”

“From yourself?” The angel spat. “Hardly.”

“No, from ramming your ass like it deserves.” But it did not work like that. No one better than him knew rage would get him nothing of what he wanted, not after he had tried burning Chris’s back on learning the angel had wiped his memory clean of Ylianor during their childhood. “Fuck!” He had not learned to master Virtus’s lack of control either, and being with someone as explosive as Chris heightened every emotion in the negative and positive sense. “I can’t do this.” Dropping on a side, he freed Chris.

“I’m sorry, lover.” Quick to come to him, the angel lay on his chest. “This missing her is messing with my heart and mind, too.” Not talking about the feelings for the sleeping princess had clouded judgments and tensed everything, sex included, which was the sole cure Prince Caldwell knew against an angry temper.

“And as you see, I’m not immune either.” The prince traced Chris’s lips before raising his head to press his mouth to them, sticking his tongue in a long, wet sweep. “I love you, and I love her. I’d never let anything happen to either of you.” His arms wrapped around Chris. “If I do the things I do, please trust me.”

“I want to, but your attitude is going to make her an enemy.” Returning the kiss, the angel curled his tongue around Duncan’s, going down to the throat before retreating. “This is just the start. Since Virtus has no power in our dimension, he’s going to use hers more and more, until there’ll be so many fires you’re not going to be able to control them all.”

“No, but you will.”

“Me?” Clearly surprised, the angel sat up. “What are you talking about?”

“About tailing her, sniffing her out, so to speak.” The leader scrambled to his feet. “And stopping her.”

“Not me, lover, you’re the one with the channel, remember?”

“One I certainly can’t use because Virtus will expect me to.” Pulling him up, Duncan crunched Chris’s lithe frame against his more muscular one. “What he doesn’t anticipate is you going after her.”

“I don’t know the first thing about her or—”

“Hey, it wasn’t me who knew about her favorite cheese.” And Prince Caldwell still wondered how Chris had managed to store such a minute detail about a person he claimed to detest at the time.

“So what?” The blue-gray eyes flashed in disagreement. “It was nothing—”

“Nothing?” He could not believe his ears. “If I know anything about you, Angel, it’s that you don’t bother to remember things of people you don’t give a damn about. Of most, you don’t put enough attention to catch their fucking names—”

“Still doesn’t mean a damn thing, just came in handy—”

“Handy, my ass!” His mouth traveled to Chris’s ear. “She’s gotten under your goddamn skin, no use denying it anymore. And the way you live your emotions, like no one else I know, tells me your senses can trace her wherever she might be.” Pausing, he

licked the tempting ear. “Because she’s seeped so far down to your balls that you can’t stand her absence—like you had a giant hole devouring you from the inside.”

“Even if it’s true...” And it was undoubtedly so, judging from the muscles’ barely perceptible relaxation. “I don’t think I can do it alone. I mean my power can never equal hers added to Virtus’s.”

“That’s why I want you to lead a group that will go after her and prevent her nightmares from becoming real.”

“A group?” Chris’s eyes flew wide open. “Lover, I don’t think it’s going to work.”

“Why not, Angel?” Taking him by the shirt, Prince Caldwell dragged him to the couch.

“Because I’m anything but qualified to be a leader of anyone, much less a group of people experimenting with Virt for the first time in their lives.”

“Nonsense.” Flinging him down, Duncan made Chris sit, then plopped besides him. “I’ve always known you have great potentials, however little you care to show them, especially here at the Hall.” He snorted. “You’d rather pass off as a vain slut.” He grabbed the beautiful face between his palms. “Instead of proving yourself like you did when you jumped to save our world without any hesitation.” He let his hands fall. “What I’m asking now is much simpler.” He could have easily ordered it. He was the leader after all, though he wanted cooperation, not blind obedience.

“What people are we talking about?” Mollified, the angel moved closer.

“Well, Richard Ellis for one.” Duncan frowned as he sorted out the different lights flashing in his head. “Then Stephen Penbroke...” One of the Virts he had acquired on his coming to power was recognizing people’s different gifts, something partly inherited from his mother and partly passed down from ancient knowledge. “Chloyse Reddenthrow...” Now it picked out the kind of powers he believed would work better for the task he planned to assign Chris. “And Laurely Damon.”

“Why those in particular?”

“Because of their Virts. Chloyse is a healer, Richard and Stephen can restrain emotions while Laurely can inhibit dreams.”

Chris was silent for a moment, evidently thinking over the names. "I'm not sure I can work with all of them," he admitted at last.

"Why not?"

"We're too different, and that might get in the way."

"How?"

"Remember what sleeping beauty used to tell us?" Chris raised his gaze. "You have to let all barriers down before you attempt any sort of connection or energy flow. In this case, I'm not sure the people you mentioned can get close to each other, much less try something as complicated as combining their powers." He chuckled. "I mean take Chloyse, for instance. She can't stand me. From the moment I had sex with her mate—"

"Which I'm sure you made no mystery of."

"All right, I may have dropped a few hints here and there, but not my fault I sucked him better than she ever will."

"The news must've spread—"

"And fast, too." The angel smirked, probably recalling how much he enjoyed Chloyse's embarrassment and rage.

"Does anybody mind their own business in this damn place?" Prince Caldwell could not help wondering.

"Not a chance, lover." Chris grinned broadly. "But the fact remains. Chloyse might object to being completely open with me."

"Then it'll only be a greater challenge for you to win her over." The leader peered at the blue-gray eyes. "But somehow, I don't think she's the real problem. If I remember correctly, Richard—"

"All right, all right." Frustrated, Chris drew back. "He hates my guts."

"I know."

"How can you possibly?"

"I read it in his eyes."

"He couldn't stand me from the moment Arthur introduced us, a long time ago."

"While you've had a crush on him ever since." Knowing his angel, it was not hard to figure it out.

"I did not!" The deep blush said otherwise until, obviously catching the prince's sarcastic gaze, it lessened. "All right, maybe

I...liked him...not that I'd call it a crush..."

"He's so distinguished," Duncan provoked on purpose.

"Shut up, lover. He's definitely not interested in men."

"You know it for a fact because..."

"He scorned Arthur's habits. More than once, I caught a few of his disparaging remarks about Arthur's boys. I'm sure he thought we were all stupid and too sex-prone to be any good to the Hall or to society in general."

"People change."

"I doubt this one ever will. He's so...rigorous and a true believer of his opinions."

"Then this group will be your chance to redeem yourself in his eyes." Merely imagining the way Chris would have to seduce them stirred his loins. "And Chloyse's, as long as you get over your issues."

"Not just mine, like I said. Everyone must link in order for it to work."

"Well, we three managed it, and I don't recall you being very enthusiastic in the beginning." His lips curved in an ironic snarl.

"We already had a connection." Chris snapped. "Remember?"

"Not with the princess."

"We had sex all the time. How could we not be connected?"

"This goes beyond sex."

"Yes, but it's a starting point. Where do I start with them?"

"You'll have to feel your way through." Duncan ruffled the blond hair. "Like sometimes I have to feel mine with you..." His lips claimed the angel's mouth again. "Who are so damn inflammable, I should never let you out of a bed."

"That's the smartest idea you've had all day." Sliding down to his knees, Chris's mouth pressed on his crotch.

The hot breath playing on his stirring bulge swelled it, though not as much as when the angel took it out and swallowed it. The intake was so sudden and pleasurable, the cock jerked on its own, more as Duncan pushed it down his lover's throat. Chris opened wider and drew more inside, accommodating what was fast becoming huge.

Pinning the blond head to the tip of his erection, the prince

slipped down to the floor until he was able to gobble up Chris's thick shaft. As the fat crown hit his cheeks and palate, imperiously demanding to plunge deeper, he sucked it avidly, brushing his tongue forcefully on the attachment holding the top on the stem, pampering it with luscious strokes on all sides, much like Chris was doing to his. And playing with the rigid rod kept both twitching for a fast come.

Well, there was no need to slow it or make a game out of it. The gods knew they needed it and badly, too. So the leader accelerated the jerking as he let Chris fuck his mouth with the rapid hip swings bringing the stone-like cock closer to the throat with each shove. At the same time, he was getting his way down the wet cavity yielding to his faster thrusts, until it all came together in one explosive burst that flooded both their mouths at once.

"Tomorrow you're going to lead the group..." Prince Caldwell did not make it sound like a question, rather a certainty.

"Of course, lover. For you, I'd do anything."

"Not good enough, Angel." Propping him on all fours, he stuck his fingers in the tight ass hole that this time made no resistance whatsoever. "It isn't the right attitude." Sliding down the narrow path, Duncan felt it open up to his probing, inviting something bigger.

Chris groaned, pushing back the round buttocks to signal his readiness. Just for the fun of it, to increase his craving, Duncan bent and rimmed the tiny entrance with lavish strokes, designed to set it on fire. The angel responded by doubling his throw back in a rhythmical swing that tightened the prince's cock with the desire to take the ass belonging to him.

"I want us to be clear." Straightening, Duncan penetrated to Chris's guts, and the sheer pleasure took his breath away.

"Aren't we now?" Rocking to the leader's tempo, the angel screwed the stiff equipment to the hilt.

"No, it's a question of why you're doing it." Duncan stepped up the beat with a few well-aimed shoves that arched Chris's back. Actually, it all went so fast, there was no time for talking anymore, merely to fuck the most deliciously crammed space of all that rubbed on every side of his swollen piece, burning to release the

fluid barely held down.

As if sensing his need, Chris jerked off at the same frantic rhythm ramming his behind to bits. When Duncan knew he was reaching the finish line, he reclined on his heels and carried the angel with him, having him sit on his cock, literally. Maybe it was because he had never felt deeper inside the butt he knew better than the back of his hand. Or it was having the buttocks pressing and touching his balls in a slide that swallowed him whole. Either way, he lost it.

A gasp and he sprayed it all in several ecstatic convulsions. It was over for Chris, too, coming all over the couch in dense jets. Not letting go, Prince Caldwell wrapped his arms around his waist to hold him in the position.

The angel understood. “Yes, lover, I’ll do it for you, but mostly for her.” Falling back, the blond head buried in his chest. “The funny thing is lately you and her are one and the same for me. I just haven’t come around to admitting it out loud.”

“Not even to yourself,” the prince realized.

“Dumb of me, I know.” Chris shrugged helplessly. “Like you said, I feel her the way I feel you, which is what’s driving me crazy.” The limp cock flopped out of the snug hole, but neither stirred. “So forgive me if when I say *you*, I mean *her*, too.”

Thus the matter was settled.

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. And while you're at it, don't miss my series—the dark and bloodier *ReScue*, the contemporary and romantic *Soulmate* with *To Seduce a Soul Mate* and *The Pirate's Surrender*, and finally my ongoing fantasy series, the *Virtus Saga* now at its fifth chapter after *The Sex*, *The Game*, *The Festival* and *The Leader*.