



LAURA TOLOMEI
THE PRINCESS
VIRTUS SAGA BOOK 7

The book that reconnects it all—love, sex, lust, but also the princess to her power. Don't miss the seventh chapter of the Virtus Saga.

Alone. The future of his world on his shoulders, Prince Duncan Caldwell has to connect the dots. To pick up the pieces of broken love. Before the new edition of the Game. Before the terrible loss awaiting him at Black Rose. But not alone. Not without his angel. Certainly not without his princess. For only her power will save him.

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The Princess
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*The Princess
Virtus Saga 7*

By

Laura Tolomei

Chapter One

D*amn!* As the door shut behind Chris, Duncan's heart stopped. Then he had to wait for the beat to resume.

When it eventually did, the unbearable pain cut it off again. Like a sharp knife, it split him in half, torn by the loss of not just one lover. Of both.

Glancing at the unconscious form on his bed, Prince Duncan Caldwell, Leader of the High Council, wondered whether he had indeed betrayed them, like Chris had just accused him of doing, or whether he simply deserved to be alone, like never before in his life.

From his earliest years, he had been with at least one, if not both, of the two special people he had chosen.

And loved.

Yes, deeply loved.

Christopher Templeton, his phase mate, and Ylianor Meyer, his father's heart child, had always been his reference points, the two fixed stars of his evolving destiny. His insane lust for both had further strengthened his bond to them during the apparently endless time they had already spent together. And yet...no matter how much he got of them, it was never enough. Not of Ylianor, his adored princess, born and raised in Black Rose, his own home. Certainly not of Chris, his beloved angel, met as a mere eight-year-old on the hills of the same Black Rose that had brought Ylianor to him.

And it made no difference that Duncan could remember nothing of his initial years with the princess. Chris's little

trick of erasing his memory in a fit of jealousy had affected nothing of his feelings for her. Or for his angel, whom he had eventually forgiven. Not Chris's fault he lived emotions like nobody else, love especially.

The blond angel's greatest passion to date had started the moment he had laid eyes on Duncan, soon complicated by the hottest sex ever – the burning kind the phase induced in adolescents as a natural passage into adulthood, even if not everyone experienced it. For Prince Caldwell, it had been utter devastation of the senses, with Chris exploding and shattering his very being to bits.

Literally.

Chris clouded his mind while exalting his body. All he had thought about had been Chris, the need to possess him overriding any other concern. And nothing of this craving had lessened over the thirteen or so years that had passed since. *Still hooked on him like the first day I saw him.*

No, he had never recovered from hurricane Chris.

However temporary phases were supposed to be, it was just too strong a link to break. So it had stayed, despite Duncan's effort to sever it during the two-year separation he had forced between them, which had only tightened it in the end, also after he had found Ylianor again.

Against all odds.

Against Chris's misgivings.

Duncan's heart still raced at the unanticipated consequences of a reconnection that had raised the level of their entanglement, not to mention the heat. Amazing, above all, how Chris and Ylianor had antagonized Duncan's every attempt to bring them together, only to have their alleged hate bloom into the most seductively sensual heart-pounding passion ever. One that blended perfectly with his own brand, in such a way that completed and fortified it beyond their three separate selves. As a result, up to five

minutes before, they had been one, further tied by their very out-of-the-ordinary pledge.

So why was he alone now?

Best-case scenario—too absorbed by Virtus, he had allowed his focus to slip away from them. Not that the damn machine needed less of his attention now that he was leader and knew the blasted device turned his people's violent impulses into sexual ones, which meant he had to stop it before it became too powerful and compromised the little freedom still left. Already, Computer Virtus—as it called itself—had eroded generous pieces of it.

Too many, as it turned out.

By its own admission, it had picked up Duncan from the spirit realm to unclog its ass from the evil it could not get rid of anymore. A perfectly understandable request, given how much violence it had to process over the stars only knew how many centuries. So Prince Caldwell had obliged. What other choice did he have anyway?

The buildup of negative energy was threatening to destroy his world. Through his unconventional three-way pledge, he had cleansed the mechanism and restored a balance of sorts. But that was as far as he would carry his obedience.

Duncan had very definite ideas on what life should be like on his lands, and they did not include Computer Virtus breathing down his neck while acting as the control center of everyone's emotions. He just wanted to switch it off, then eradicate its unbalanced influence once and for all. It was Duncan's main objective, no matter what. Despite the consequences. Because the fucking piece of metal was so deeply embedded in his people's awareness, its removal could very well destroy them all.

Not if he could help it, though.

To prevent part of the damage, he had established a very personal and intimate bond with the new keeper, the only person, besides him, who had a direct link to the device. When Laurely Damon had walked into his room claiming to be Carmel Moore's successor, he had seized the opportunity to change things.

Because Leaders were not supposed to know about Keepers, much less have sex with them like he had with Laurely.

A crucial piece of information he had not shared with either of his lovers, preferring to fuel the distrust, rather than have an openhearted talk with the two of them. No wonder he was alone now.

If he had to sequence events in any sort of consequential order, he would have to start two years back when Virtus had killed Lord Arthur Fairchild, the old leader.

No, not Computer Virtus.

Its evil projection, born out of the prince's indissoluble connection to Chris and Ylianor. A twin in shape and name, this second Virtus had wreaked havoc, going as far as nearly killing his angel, until the three of them had crushed it barely nine months ago. Right after, Computer Virtus had snatched Duncan away from his two lovers and brought him inside its core to endow him—and him alone—with the full leadership.

But Duncan did not intend to be the solitary leader Arthur had been. His force and strength, his very Virt, rested on Chris and Ylianor. They were *essential*, not just to him, but to the leadership. Nothing Virtus said or did would deter Duncan from sharing his power and knowledge with them, especially in front of the council.

True, he had not yet proclaimed them co-leaders. Not out of any mistrust in their capabilities. Rather, out of concern over the residual link that still tied them to the machine, the

one he had perceived while inside the pyramid's metal core. If Chris and Ylianor were his greatest asset, they could also become his greatest liability, pawns in Virtus's capable grasp, when not turning against him outright. And since Virtus's survival was at stake, who could tell how it might use them?

The one most at risk was Ylianor.

Nearing his bed, Duncan checked her over one more time. Settling next to her, his gaze fell on the finely worked golden bracelet on her right wrist, and he fingered the blue sapphire shaped as a rose, as blue-gray as the angel's intriguing eyes. Chris wore a similar one on his left wrist, only the color of the stone as smoky green as the princess's arresting eyes. Both bracelets had been Duncan's personal gifts to them as a reminder of them of their promise, of Black Rose and of him. Both given on the eve of their first pledge, the one that had gone awry. And thank the gods for that.

Broadening his touch to the rest of her arm, Prince Caldwell snapped out of the memories and focused on her again. Her resemblance to him was uncanny and made more striking by the guilty twinge of his heart as he brushed back her long black hair, caressing her pale cheeks gently.

By the gods! She was so fucking beautiful!

And it hurt like crazy to see her like this, a victim of Arthur's terrible lash-out. So vicious, it had forced him and Chris to disable her body. *Damn Arthur and his fucking meddling into what should've stopped concerning him the moment he closed his eyes forever!*

And why did she always have to be the one caught in the middle?

If it was completely unfair, it was also further proof that her Virt of reading auras and minds left her wide open to anyone's prying intrusion, Virtus's first of all. Since she heard voices no one else could and saw lights people did not even know existed, he was certain Virtus had taken full

advantage of it. So much that he had begun wondering whether Arthur Fairchild and Charles Caldwell's ghosts were in fact Virtus's shadows and not what they claimed to be. This had been the reason he had wanted to keep her close to him. So close, it had sparked the angel's jealousy and triggered his turn of heart.

No, Chris was hardly immune from his own issues, the ones that had prevented the leader from being forthcoming with him, too. The problem with Chris was that he was all fire. Literally. What Duncan most loved about him could easily turn into a threat faster than Prince Caldwell could control it. Virtus would have a field day had he managed to get its paws on what made Chris tick, so Duncan had steered clear of any chance to deliver his angel's secrets to the exasperating device. Too bad it had not prevented their ugly scene or Chris coming out with all sorts of legitimate questions that required the explanations Duncan had avoided so far.

His silence had been the wedge between them, and he could not be sorrier now.

The heat had further complicated matters. The insane, blind passion that drew the three of them toward each other had blocked their usual flow of information, getting in the way of any serious talk. No way around it, either. Not when his cock required plunging into Ylianor's pussy – and hers alone – while rubbing against Chris's erection, both having to possess her together at once. Like with the phase's irresistible urges, one simply had to obey and allow the tide to drown out everything else.

Which was exactly what happened to Duncan.

Granted, not the best way to handle things, and he regretted it. Still, he could not tolerate his angel's outright defiance if spurred only by the void of his enraged fury. *No,*

can't do. Particularly now that both his lovers' great potential was growing beyond anyone's wildest imagination.

As a matter of fact, their three-way pledge had increased all their Virts—Chris with his new head-talking abilities, Duncan's with his distorting space to move in seconds from one place to another, and the princess's...Arthur, Charles and Virtus's interferences held hers back. Not that they could really stop her. Duncan was sure she was acquiring a deeper perception of things by using her aura reading as the stepping-stone to unveil people's secrets without any effort. Like that bit about an alleged daughter of his—if she existed at all, which he had his doubts, for it made absolutely no sense. But if she did, he could only wonder where Ylianor might have picked up her trace.

From the Hall?

No one, apart from him and Chris, had that much Virt to convey such a unique piece of information, providing also an image of the child herself.

From Arthur?

Duncan's trust in the deceased leader was at an all-time low. After everything the old man had said and done to remain next to Chris, the love of his life, Arthur had destroyed whatever credibility he had held in life.

Which left Computer Virtus as Ylianor's only source, however unreliable it was turning out to be.

Truth or lie?

It was hard to tell, even for him—The Leader. Simply too many things did not fit with this claim. For one, everyone knew—no pledge, no children. The mating ceremony alone ensured reproduction in a world that kept the male and female energy separated at birth. So far, he had pledged to no woman except Ylianor, and she was definitely not pregnant.

The second oddness was the child's age – three years old. Now that was really a mystery. Even had the child been his and Laurely's –

Yes, it must be her to the exclusion of all the other women he had sex with at the Hall, because he had not seen her since their night together.

That night had *not* been three years ago, rather before winter last, no more than six months ago, which was the usual gestation period. So, yes, in theory, the child could exist, only not as grown-up as Ylianor made her out to be. Then again, Virtus could have messed up with the keeper's timeline, same as it must have with Carmel's. Who had died prematurely, way before her time, worn out as if she had lived an accelerated life.

Well, now that he thought about it...who else, besides him and the princess, could blend his male and Laurely's female energy if not Virtus? To obtain the leader and the keeper's own flesh and blood? To use as leverage against Duncan's schemes?

In the end, it could all prove to be another of Virtus's machinations, like its evil Virtus alter ego or its callous manipulation of Ylianor's birth. When it had stolen Charles Caldwell and Mary Jane Elspeth's energy to make his princess a virtual twin of himself, so that everyone thought there was a relation between the two of them while in fact he and Ylianor shared not a single drop of blood. That had been Virtus's aim all along – to have everyone doubt the sanctity of the pledge and question a system that had worked for ages in order to create chaos, therefore acquire more violence and more sex, thus more control over his people. All the more reason for the leader to shut it off forever.

But he could not do it alone, not without the only two people who could help him sort out everything with their

unique perspectives and tip the scales between him and Computer Virtus. *Fuck!*

After a few more loving strokes on Ylianor's cheeks, Prince Caldwell rose from the bed and moved to the opposite side of his room. Opening his closet, he chose a stunning red suit and began dressing. Tonight, the Hall was celebrating the Summer Festival, and he could not miss it.

Rowena Sentry, his longtime acquaintance and Oliver Sentry's mate, had been organizing it for the past week or so, putting in all the effort she was not required to spend on other tasks. She was not a council member, after all.

The gods knew there were enough of them already. Between the permanent and the temporary, or temps as they were called, twenty-four people to manage would have been a handful for anybody. Hence the need for a leader, one capable of assessing individual worth of council members and in general, of all the people filling the Hall during the better part of a year. Like Oliver Sentry, who was the most qualified expert on agriculture and farming Duncan had underhand, and who was teaching his incommensurable knowledge to his very crowded classes, together with his assistant, Steve Templeton, Chris's brother. Or like Rowena, who had an undoubtedly great advantage over everyone else in the Hall—she was the vice-leader's phase mate, which opened a whole lot of more doors.

This was the one crucial bit of information Duncan had fast learned about how things worked at the Hall, which had to do with sex and sex alone. Who had sex with whom and in what terms determined social standing and influence. Fortunately for him, it also got things done. Though only if they went through the right sexual channel. Small wonder that Chris, as his phase mate, stood at the highest step of the ladder, just one below him, or that Rowena had become the Hall's entertainment organizer.

Prince Caldwell had no objections. Entertainment, together with sex, was a big part of the Hall's day-to-day life. In the end, it kept everyone happy and more productive. And since Duncan still did not have a substitute for Virtus, he was fine to play along with it, while encouraging training courses that would eventually make people aware of outside meddling and facilitate their detachment from it, sometime in the distant future, hopefully.

Wearing his pants and jacket, he looked at himself in the mirror. His long, dark hair, so identical to the princess's in color and texture, came down below his shoulders and framed his very masculine face, with the black eyes, straight nose, full lips and square jaw. The red contrasted with his complexion, heightening it, the fabric clinging to his broad chest tapered down to his slim waist and long legs, leaving nothing to the imagination.

No wonder it was one of Chris's favorite suits.

And he wished the angel could see him now.

One last look at the sleeping princess, then he went to the door and stepped out.

Chapter Two

After descending the stairs that led up to his isolated tower bedroom, Duncan noticed only a few people in the hallway. Late goes to the Summer Festival much like himself. So he hurried but on turning a corner, a very familiar voice stopped him on his tracks.

"Sir, have you found her?" The look in David Smith's hazel eyes was extremely worried.

"I have." He kept his tone even, already anticipating how his faithful valet and longtime friend would react to the news.

"So where is she?" David glanced behind the prince's shoulders expectantly.

"She's lying unconscious upstairs, in my bed."

"Not again!" His eyes turned cold. "What happened this time?" The man took a step forward, as though to challenge him outright.

"It's a long story." Testily, Prince Caldwell imposed a tight control on his emotions to avoid another disastrous confrontation.

Not David's fault he was so hostile. He only wanted to safeguard Ylianor.

"And I'm already running late."

No, this definitely would not do. He could see how his tone and dismissive air were fueling David, and that was the last thing he needed at the moment.

"Listen, David." So his voice became softer, losing the hard edge it had before, "I know you're upset." To calm him, Duncan squeezed one of his shoulders. "I don't blame you. But her kind of Virt leaves her open to far too many threats for any of us to shield her properly."

"With all due respect, sir, I don't believe you."

So what else was new today?

His trusted valet had just decided to join his angel's ranks.

And the two could not even stand one another!

"I warned you I wouldn't stand silent anymore. Not while you and Lord Templeton keep using her as a private battleground. To fight against evil that is after you. Not after her. Yet, she's always the one getting the worst of it." Taken by his passionate speech, David was on him. "How many times does she have to be unconscious before you realize you and Lord Templeton may be what's really hurting her? Not you as people. The connection you share!"

Well, he may have a point, after all.

If encroachments from the outside accounted for some of Ylianor's breakdowns, most times they had to do with either his angel or Duncan, when not both.

"How else to explain the fact that you can't keep her safe? Whether it's that Virtus monster or some other evil out to get her, why does she always end up like in Harbor Town?"

If Duncan did not like David's accusatory tone, he ignored it.

David simply loved her way too much. Maybe more than either Duncan or Chris liked to admit.

"Or right after her pledge?"

"Enough!"

Which did not mean Duncan was happy with either of them.

"If you believe I'd ever hurt my princess on purpose, you're crazy. Even crazier, if you think for one instant I'd let

the angel harm her in any way. It would be like you've learned nothing of me. And after all the years we've spent together, I refuse even to consider such possibility." His voice gentler, "I'll let it slide, 'cause I understand you love her so much that worry makes you aggressive. And maybe you're right. I should take better care of her." *Even if I'm open to suggestions on how.* "She's our weakest link. Whatever we face hits her the hardest, and no one's to blame." His tone became deeper and more serious, "But just for the record, shifting blames isn't going to make her better. Nor is your goddamn attitude!"

And if Arthur and Charles's ghosts were indeed by-products of Computer Virtus, she was in deeper trouble than he dared breathe.

"If you love her, like I know you do, stop haggling and help me bring her back."

"Sorry, sir. I didn't mean to..."

Suddenly sobered up, Duncan saw the black cloud leave David's gaze.

"What can I do to be of assistance?"

Practical and down-to-earth again, David's frank expression told Duncan he could count on him again.

"In order to wake her, I need to fetch a device away from the Hall. I'd be most grateful if you escorted me on the two-day trip. Nothing more."

"Like old times?" His grin was a tentative one. As though David was not sure the leader had forgiven him.

"Exactly." So Prince Caldwell treated him to his most dazzling smile, to show he had forgotten everything.

"When are we leaving?"

"Tomorrow at dawn, if it's all right with you."

"Absolutely."

The matter settled, Duncan moved off toward the Summer Festival, already in full progress.

About the Author

Laura Tolomei lives in Rome, Italy and is the author of 27+ books. She has been traveling the globe since age five and has no intention of quitting. After having been an avid reader her entire life, she decided at age forty to write her own stories and has not looked back since. Writing novels that are on the edge of accepted conventions is her trademark, and she guarantees an erotic earthquake with each book! Among others, they include the Virtus Saga books, all eight of them, not to mention the Soulmate and ReScue Series, along with several horror novels and a few historical ones, too.

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