



*From His Majesty the King
Fifth of Martz, the year of Lionel, 2463*

*Dear Compatriot of Tarlè Kingdom:
Join us this weekend for the celebration of the Claiming. This year's pick, Penelope Farris, daughter of Jesha and
Marvus Farris, will step forward to be claimed in lawful ceremony to all possible male candidates.
Male matches take heed. The spirited dancer will require a gentle touch to capture.*

*His Majesty,
Lionel Edward Richard Hargrove
King of Tarlè*

The font, elegant and crisp, thick and black, scrawled across the fine parchment paper in curving sweeps. Occupying the lower right-hand corner of the letter rested the royal seal stamped in viscous, ruby-red wax, like blood.

Ryon Amadeus Ward read the royal missive word for word before crumpling the letter in his fist.

“What is the meaning of this?”

The messenger who’d delivered the letter stepped back at the edge in his voice. Of course the messenger wasn’t to blame, but that didn’t keep anger from rising like a volcano about to erupt.

“W-well, you see, the king—”

Forget it, he thought, instantly regretting asking the boy. Even worse than this omen in written form was this boy’s bumbling.

The general dismissed him with a wave and the boy escaped with a mumbled “Thanks.”

The sun had yet to reach mid-day and already an ache blared at his temples in full force. This was shaping up to be a bad day.

He took a seat at his desk and pulled his silver-edged knife out from the bottom drawer, locking the drawer again afterward. Leather handled and sharpened weekly, the blade could cut through skin without added pressure.

Meanwhile, his mind churned, ticking by like a well-greased clock.

Penelope Farris would be available for claiming.

An uncomfortable pressure filled his chest, making him rub the spot. These emotions she’d always managed to suck out of him never ceased to surprise him. His feelings for her were too strong, he knew; fierce with possession and greed. He must have her. No other woman had ever given him such pause for thought.

I will have her.

She would be his. Completely his.

She must have known the king had selected her for claiming in advance. And she hadn’t come to him to tell him. Was this some sign? A challenge from her? But she knew where he stood, knew that he had no qualms about claiming her. It had been his intention all along. Even if he’d never voiced as much, he’d made his attentions well known through his actions. It was she who was hesitant with him. If only he could figure out how to surpass her defenses— something he’d been attempting for two years now. All this time he has waited for her to come around.

Certainly she must know he’d find out. What did she get by not telling him herself? Just what was she up to?

Surging to his feet, he nearly toppled the chair backward, but caught it. He shrugged into his worn, brown, suede overcoat before heading out into the chilly air. The door should have slammed behind him, but he had far more control than that. His hands nearly trembled with the focused, calm mindset he kept. He was the general. It was his duty to keep his composure at all times.

Wait until he got his hands on her...he’d like to wring her thin little neck.

Ha! He’d laugh if he could. As if he could ever lay a hand on her in anything other than care and passion.

Penelope Farris was the only woman he’d ever fancied for his own. She’d been as impenetrable as a fort to his advances. And that was on the best of days. Normally he might have moved on by now, but she had lodged a place in his heart two years ago and had never left. The

elusive dancer proved difficult to trap for something as simple as a conversation. Penelope seemed to forever be eluding him to slip back into the shadows and disappear. All the while her eyes flashed with open, sensual invitation at him like she wanted to climb atop him.

Frustrating barely began to cover how he felt about Pen.

She'd pushed his hand with this. These weren't normal circumstances anymore. Not even close.

Now she was at risk for any male who wanted her. Anyone could stand up there during her Claiming Day and fight for a chance to have her as wife. The Claiming Ceremony, and the winner of it, won exclusive rights to the female. He had a time limit now. Until week's end.

It was only the first of the week. Five days was not a long time, but he was general of King Hargrove's army and his ability to strategize better than anyone made him exceptional at his job. He wouldn't let anyone touch her, anyone but him. Even if his life depended on it.

Slipping his knife holster across his chest, Ryon untethered his horse from the post out front of his house and took off. His destination: *Prima Donna's*. The dance club where Penelope worked as part of the last known ballet troupe.

The Avagarians had nearly eradicated their entire human culture through savage warfare. Ballet dancing was one of the last few traces of art the Tarlèans still had. The ballet dancers were revered to the likes of celebrity gods by the people.

Evening blanketed the land in gloomy shadows. Pale glimpses of moonlight peeped through the trees in flashes of light.

The night seemed an apt representation of his mood, he thought bitterly.

A line was already formed out front of the dancing hall, not exactly typical for an early weeknight. But it looked like everyone had received their missive from the king and wanted a fresh look at the famous ballet dancer up for claiming.

Ryon stifled a curse as he tethered his horse. There were far too many men in line for his liking. Patting Dominic, his horse's head, he lingered for a moment before slipping past the known security guard with a glance. Murmurs sounded around him.

"*The general*," buzzed the crowd like agitated bees.

Inside *Prima Donna's* dance hall the swinging cabaret music resounded in full force: a mixture of jazzy saxophones, hooting trumpets, and deep baritones of a thumping upright bass. Above it all was a husky woman's voice crooning about tulip fields and other nonsense. A troupe of women wearing colorful leotards, tights, and ballet slippers kicked their legs high in the air to the jazzy tunes. Ballet had changed and shaped over the years. The music they danced to had changed and morphed just as they, as people, had. The plies, sautes, and glissades were all there, but the dancing was quicker and more robust.

The woman he searched for was not on stage.

Ryon pushed himself through the crowd. The heavy digestion of people made walking a chore as they shuffled shoulder to shoulder into the club. The music grew louder as he came closer to his target. He surveyed the crowd, his gaze skimming across a figure in a dazzling sequined outfit and tutu that barely covered more than the necessary parts, before locking on.

She was the center of attention once more; a crowd having grown around her at the news of her Claiming Day.

Her beauty took his breath away. She was the kind of woman you wanted all to yourself. He wanted many things from her, and to give many things to her. He wanted her looking up at him with soft-eyed passion after a good kissing. He wanted to feel her arms wrapped tightly around him as they make love. Too many things to name.

He'd tasted her exquisiteness once.

Once.

Before it'd been ruined.

A scowl slashed his features and in the next moment he charged through the crowd with determined strides. People parted for him, instant recognition on their faces.

"The general," someone whispered excitedly. Others piped in too. He grew tired of the whispers, but the people knew him as a hero and that was all he was to them. They didn't know him personally, therefore they didn't treat him the same. Such was life. He'd learned to deal with the attention, to ignore it, as saying anything usually made the situation worse.

The news must have gotten to her across the room, for Penelope Farris, looking utterly womanly in her outfit, stood from her leaning position, and locked eyes with him. As always when he looked at her, his heart lurched in his chest like a spring-loaded weapon.

Down, boy; she doesn't feel that way about you.

Yet.

Her eyes widened, alarmed, as she turned to face him. The man she'd been leaning over appeared behind her and a noise much like a growl climbed from Ryon's throat.

Duke Patrick Gaines, a wealthy, entitled yuppie of a scoundrel—he couldn't say enough good things about the man—slumped against the wall near Penelope looking like a hungry cat waiting to be fed by hand.

Fierce jealousy surged as it always did when he saw men leering at Pen. She was *his*, even if he had yet to claim her.

Ryon didn't stop to say a word, couldn't have spoken even if he wanted to. His lips were pursed tighter than a wet seal, his biceps contracted with the urge to throw his fist into the duke's pale, smug face until it turned purple and blue.

"General. What are you doing here?"

He heard tension in Penelope's voice. Her eyes skated down his torso then back up. Did she have any idea what her greedy copper eyes did to him? When she looked at him like he was a large, intimidating man and she liked it.

Lord, she drove him mad.

If only she'd stop running from him.

"Please, do tell. What's your business here, General Ward?" the duke asked. "I don't believe it's every day you find the general visiting a dance hall." Mocking words had never sounded so obvious.

Tall and slender, the aristocrat wore his black hair pulled into a long braided thong around his shoulder. His lips dipped into a twisted scowl, disdain dripping from every pore of his body. He wore expensive clothes made with fine etchings in gold and silver thread. The red velvet cape draped across his narrow frame must be worth more than Ryon's current ensemble.

Ryon and Patrick had never been friends. They'd done some military combat training together during their education years. In that time, they'd managed to compete and learn to loathe each other. They both had one thing in common though—an interest in Penelope Farris.

Penelope, or Pen, as he preferred to call her, no matter how much it rankled her nerves, put her hands on her hips in a move he recognized all too well. Anger. “Yes, what is this interruption for, *General?*”

His fist twitched. He hated when she called him that. They both knew it. Thus why she did it. The little devil.

“We need to talk.”

That surprised her. “About what?” She fidgeted with the lace of her tutu, one thin slipper lifting to scratch her calf with the toe.

Ryon pulled the folded missive out of his pocket and flashed it at her.

“Oh...that,” she said vaguely, cheeks turning redder. They both knew why he was here. She was the only one pretending.

The duke wouldn't have any of it.

“Listen here, General, I've come with good money here so let the girl dance.” The duke leaned forward and wrapped an arm around Penelope's small waist. His hand dipped even lower to grab a feel of something he had no right touching.

Ryon told himself that what he did next was because of that inappropriate grope and not because of his possessive feelings for Pen.

Murmuring a brief excuse for what he was about to do, Ryon whipped the duke's hand away and ducked, pushing his shoulder into Penelope's midriff in the next second. He lifted her up and over his shoulder so easily you'd think he did it often. In fact, a feeling of *déjà vu* struck him.

They *had* done this once before under similar circumstances. And look where that had landed them.

There was no stopping him now. He had everyone's attention trying to steal their most talented dancer. But no one dared to stop the general. Not even the duke dared to stop him with the hard look Ryon sent his way. Everyone by now had heard the tentative history between Ryon and Pen.

Tonight it was all coming to an end.

He could feel the tightness in her muscles as he waded through the crowd, could feel her nails scraping into his back where she hung on for dear life, possibly puncturing his skin—on purpose. Ryon made it through the dance hall and out the back door, one arm latching Penelope's rear-end to him.

It wasn't the closest he'd ever held her, but it was the most he'd touched her in a long time. He'd take it. Having her touch him felt far better than not.

Outside he hitched her higher on his shoulder, not even feeling her slight weight, and marched to the woods with only one place in mind.

Maybe in a way it was *their* place. It was the only time she'd ever opened up to him and admitted her feelings for him. He'd been stunned stupid by her honest, raw statement, and staggered by the passion of their kiss. After their first kiss, like a young fool, he'd been unable to speak for a long minute. And, typical to any naïve fool, he'd said something he still regretted to this day.

“Do you mind telling me what you're doing, General?”

Penelope's anger jerked him swiftly back to reality and out of his reverie.

There it was again. The nickname, not his real name. She never used it; it was too personal. If she gave him a chance, maybe she'd see how much he knew about her, how much he cared.

For this he needed to be face to face, so he readjusted her in his arms so that he cradled her to his chest like a baby. She reluctantly wrapped an arm around his neck—and resumed glaring at him like she wished he'd drop dead.

"You shouldn't frown like that," he told her.

"Why not?" An instant, snapping response.

"Because it makes me want to kiss you."

Her breath hitched. He'd surprised her. Who knew he was a man of surprises, aside from using his cleverness in military strategies. He'd never thought before that he could use those same skills toward wooing Pen. But the idea sounded better and better the longer he thought about it.

Slender fingers toyed with the hair at the nape of his neck. He nearly stumbled a step when she pressed her cheek against his. Gentle breath teased his ear and his grip tightened around her reflexively. She always managed to catch him by surprise. Just one of the many things he appreciated about her.

The effect she had over him had been there from the moment he first saw her. Any move she made touched him like a bolt of energy, left him aroused and edgy. Even the simplest touch such as her wrapping her arms around his neck and pulling closer made his vision hazy.

From how they must look you'd think she'd asked to be carried out of the club and not forced. He didn't have much further to go.

They were nearly there. Not much longer, then he could put her down—a bittersweet thought.

"Do you want to kiss me?" A teasing whisper blew across the shell of his ear with each word.

He didn't hesitate. "You know I do."

The quiet woods surrounded them in solitude. Only the light from the stars guided them on this fortuitous night.

She caressed his cheek with hers, rubbing like a cat, grazing the stubble on his jaw with her soft skin. Chills swept down his spine. As always her touch aroused him, hardening his cock.

Thank God. They finally made it to his destination. Ryon set her down near the edge of the pond. Their pond.

Pen looked around and laughed, her smile lighting up her face.

"The pond? I suppose I shouldn't be surprised." She kicked off her heels and stepped into the water before he could say a word. "Do you want to see me get wet, General?" A playful light graced her sparkling eyes.

He stifled a groan, or maybe a curse. "You are a tease, Pen. Always have been." Here he came to talk privately about the royal missive he'd received and she was already taking control of the situation. She always managed to rip the power from him with careless ease.

Or maybe he allowed her to take control, he supposed.

Her face lit up with delight at his proclamation and not with a touch of shame. He loved that about her.

Tossing her head back, she laughed throatily. “You make it sound like a bad thing. Look at you all grumbling about because you heard about my Claiming. You know you’re my favorite. Surely you know that.” Her pretty, almond-shaped eyes softened.

“That’s as close to a confession as I’ve ever heard. I suppose I’ll take what I can get,” Ryon said.

Pen looked away avoiding his gaze. “You received the missive then?”

“You should have told me yourself.”

The statement hung out there like an accusation.

He wasn’t afraid to admit what she did bothered him. She should have come to him, should have told him. Everyone in the kingdom knew he’d been trailing after her scent for two years. He had thought that he simply needed more time to break down her defenses.

Not for his lack of trying. But he could only get so far while trying to temper his aggression. His tightfisted nature shook her up and he’d yet to soften enough for her apparently.

She already thought he was too dominant for his own good. Or so she’s said. Didn’t she see how badly he wanted her? He needed her to end his torture and finally put him out of his misery.

“I suppose I was too nervous to tell you myself. I only learned that I’d been chosen last week.” She waded deeper into the water, raising her sequined dress higher to reveal shapely thighs. The water level rose to lap at her tantalizingly milky calves, shapely with muscle from years of dancing. He watched her move gracefully through the water on the tips of her toes, riveted.

“A cowardly move,” he chastised.

“Perhaps. But I’m not the only one here who’s a coward. Am I, General?” Her teasing banter was punctuated with a heated, low-lidded look. She looked at him from dazzling copper eyes.

When she had fun it was contagious. That laughter threatened to weaken Ryon’s own defense; his mouth twitched to laugh. Something he couldn’t let happen.

“I’m here right now. I don’t think that makes me a coward.” He was daring her to be honest. But would she rise to the bait?

“Do you like my new dress?”

The question took him by surprise. But no more than what she did next.

With a laugh, she flicked one of her dress’s strap off her shoulder. The material slipped down to reveal a whole glimpse of overflowing mounds of supple flesh. This sight of her breasts barely being contained by her tight top had muscles tensing in his neck until they felt ready to snap.

He advanced toward her. “Stop this and come out of there. We need to talk about this.”

“My darling General, why don’t you join me instead?” She took one long look at him and that was it—she had him pinned. Nothing was worse than a beautiful woman getting the hold of you and Penelope had him lined up in her sights. Gentle, taunting laughter almost succeeded in coaxing a smile from him. Almost.

“No,” he answered, the denial not coming easily.

“Now who’s the coward?” Her chin lifted in challenge. She squared her shoulders like a soldier, all the while fighting a smile.

“You shouldn’t taunt me with how I feel right now, Pen.” Like a string too tightly wound, that had been cranked and cranked beyond capacity. The pressure was full to overflowing. All it would take was the faintest crack for the pressure to burst. He’d explode.

A crash of water sounded as she dropped down into the water then surged up to her full height. She looked like an exotic enchantress with water cascading down her body in the moonlight. Already her magic was weaving itself around his bones, beckoning him to do her will.

“Taunt you? Why, oh why, would I ever do that? General.” She added the last part like she couldn’t help herself.

His muscles coiled like a loaded spring. “What did I tell you about calling me that ridiculous name?” He recognized that dangerous glint in her eye; it was the same look she wore before chaos ensued.

Ryon stepped into the water, moving to stop the impending destruction.

That didn’t stop her. “It’s what I want to call you, so I will. There’s no changing that. Why do you continue to fight a war with me that you can’t possibly win?” she asked.

He closed in on her, mere feet separating the distance between them. Warm supple female to hard aching warrior.

She slipped the second strap off her shoulder.

Bare skin, mounds of palpable flesh with hardened tips bobbing gently from her chest. Her sleek ribcage flared out to wide hips. Beckoning him like a magic spell. Exquisite. She bared her breasts to him like an ancient offering. The mouthwatering sight didn’t stun him as he might have expected, but empowered him instead.

Ryon charged forward, catching her startled intake of breath a moment before he snatched her by the shoulders and pulled her into his arms.

“Say my real name,” he demanded.

He couldn’t catch his breath; neither could she. His control was a thin piece of thread tethered to an anvil, fragile strands softly snapping as the weight proved too great to hold. She knew what he wanted to hear, but refused to give it.

“General.” A breathless hitch hung in her answer.

Bare breasts pressed against his crisp shirt and he captured one with his rough palm, snatching it. It felt incredible. Better than he could have imagined—soft, warm skin and a mound that filled his hand. His fantasies couldn’t live up to the real thing, not even close. He palmed her with growing intensity, molding her and learning her shape, the texture of her skin, the firmness of her tit and nipple. His shaft throbbed with undisguised longing.

Indecision skewed across her face: the need to obey and disobey warring in her mind. He could see her thinking, struggling to choose the right path.

Her breast heaved in his hand, yet she kept herself tightly guarded against him. He could see it in her hesitant scrutiny. He’d need a battering ram to strike down those walls—and he had only a few days to do it. He had to make his mark now.

Ryon pinched her nipple between two fingers, applying pressure until her eyes snapped back to his. Then, as he held her attention, he gave her an order as he had to many a soldier.

“Say my name.”

Chapter 2

General Ryon Amadeus Ward was a hulking beast of a man.

He befitted his stature as General of the Tarlèan military to perfection.

He was a hero to all. Even to her. Though she doubted she could ever admit as much to him.

Thanks to him, the Tarlèan people had managed to stave off attacks from the Avagarians.

The Avagarians are their deadliest enemies; an uncivilized tribe of horrifying beasts that lived on the eastern-side of the country. They called it the Wastelands. Only one hundred acres of forest separated the Tarlèan kingdom from the Avagarians' Wastelands. Living on infertile land at extreme temperatures left few resources for the savages. They tried to survive by murdering and pillaging from Tarlèan resources.

Many now regarded Ryon as a war hero. Before Ryon was promoted to general, the raids on their kingdom had occurred monthly with dire costs. The Avas had targeted the silver mine and attempted to blow it up. Silver was their greatest weakness. When in their deadliest, bestial form, silver acted like acid to their flesh. Silver was now the Tarlèans most sought-after resource. It was used on all manner of weapons and even embroidered into clothing as a sign of wealth.

The attacks didn't just come at the mine. The Avas attacked homes of innocent people. They looted their meager belongings, like the animals they were. Penelope lost her parents in such an attack. Ryon's younger sister, Faye, later came to the same fate. They all shared a common enemy.

The matter between Ryon and Penelope was a difficult topic. They were both demanding people and neither of them wanted to cave in and change. Ryon lived his life by leading a charge using his intelligence to win, instead of his brawn.

Penelope was similar, yet different to him. She used her charming wiles to enamor people. With her dancing she could bring joy and happiness to those who normally don't feel it. She created art with her body through straining poses and leaping movements to music. She told a story through dancing. The power she felt while dancing made her feel like a god. It was no wonder why she and Ryon clashed so often—even while they fought their burning desire for each other.

Such was the crux of their almost non-existent "relationship." She might have moved on by now, as a matter-of-fact, she would have, if she could've. That's the thing. There was no moving on from Ryon. He was embedded deep her skin. He'd lodged a place inside her years ago, and like a girl harboring a pathetic crush, she'd been unable to rid herself of the *General's Affliction* as she liked to call it.

Aptly named, she thought. For he *was* an affliction. An affliction on the senses, on the mind, and on her heart—which he tested the hardest.

Because of her uncertain, volatile feelings for Ryon, Penelope had kept him at arm's length. Whether he liked it or not—he clearly loathed it. She saw it in his angry eyes, in the narrowing of his pitch black eyebrows, in the disappointed frown that dented his full mouth.

There were certain “things” Penelope had never dared attempt with Ryon. Everyone knew who he was and what he did. This made things between them ever more complicated. The man threw her world into disarray every moment he entered the room with her. And while she loved having fun, she did not like the kind of trouble that Ryon brought. That trouble being one of desire. Whenever he was near, she felt the most irresistible urge to touch him, even kiss him.

Dangerous thoughts for such a dangerous man.

At the thought, her gaze dipped to his mouth, then caroused over his flexing arms where muscles rounded and bulged in pleasing ways. She nearly sighed at his strength. Something so purely physical and it made her feel giddy as a schoolgirl.

Her gaze continued over his torso down to his tapered hard hips. She licked her lips as warmth gathered in her body. Hulking and strong, he was big, making her feel so much smaller by comparison. His bottom lip was slightly puffier than the top which formed two perfect mountain peaks.

A lump formed in her throat somewhere around the time he grabbed her nipple like he owned it. There could be no kissing of the general. Even if his mouth was a sight for sore eyes. Last time she’d kissed him, she’d barely managed to get away with her senses intact, let alone her heart.

She couldn’t go through that pain again. It still hurt. And that night transpired two years ago. Here in this very same spot. Of course he would bring her here. To *their* spot.

Ryon wrapped his hand around the nape of her neck and gently tilted her chin up. Their eyes met and locked. He had dark brown eyes like wet mud—and they saw through her—scaring her far worse than any Ava ever could.

He was large and virile, tougher than a bull. All things she wasn’t, but craved in a man. Those deft hands covering her body could hurt her in an instant, could steal the life from her body, or crush her heart into a million pieces. The last he’d already proven he could do with a few choice words.

He may be strong and all-powerful, but she wasn’t. Her strengths were limited and she knew where they lie—and relished in them, as a matter of course. But she didn’t have the power to deal with Ryon every day. He was dictating. He’d crush her spirit whether he meant to or not. He couldn’t even deal with her profession. On more than one occasion he’d asked her to consider other work because he didn’t like the way men ogled her. When she’d tried to explain that they were *supposed* to watch her, he’d shaken his head in disapproval.

That happened years ago. And here they stood today, still fighting the same battles.

She’d played the different possible scenarios in her head too many times to count, and each time it came out with a bad ending for her. And so, she stayed away from the tempting general as much as she could. When she didn’t see him for days on end, she found herself laying up at night in bed thinking about him, wondering what he was doing, wishing he was there next to her.

Yes, she had it bad for him.

But she couldn’t bring herself to be with him.

Penelope recognized, thanks in part to her sisters’ constructive support, that she was too strong for Ryon. She and Ryon were both demanding and strong-willed and too stubborn to back down. It would never work between them. Still, he did possibly have a few qualities she liked very, very much. Which made him all the more dangerous to her heart. General Ryon Amadeus Ward had a special, albeit strange, place in Penelope’s heart. But that’s exactly where he needed to stay.

Ryon dipped his head low. The close proximity snapped Penelope back to reality. She froze as his mouth neared, waiting on bated breath.

Agony. Their soft breaths collided and mixed, his moist breath wickedly close. Every muscle in her body pulled tight in anticipation for what was to come. A kiss. Would he really dare to try after two, long years? And would she let him?

Ryon closed the final inches separating them, giving her all the time in the world to move away. Her stomach was a jumble of nerves. She still had yet to decide what she was going to do if he actually tried to kiss her.

Then it came. Warm lips grazed the corner of her mouth. He turned a touch into it, smearing his lips across her, a brush of heat that was there, then gone so quickly she might have imagined it.

“Say my name.” He spoke in a harsh voice.

This game between them had never gone this far before. To give in to him would be to lose. She had too much at stake to risk.

“Say my name,” he repeated much slower and with more force than before.

Her legs trembled. “General.”

This was her *other* problem with Ryon. With the simplest of touches he had her panting and ready to submit. Liquid heat pooled between her legs as tensions grew. She wouldn’t live her life under the thumb of a dominant man. Not like her mother had. If Penelope did one thing right in her life it was this. She could not be with Ryon. He didn’t know how to give an inch, let alone give her the kind of freedom she needed to thrive.

There was a ruthless tug on her nipple. She couldn’t fight a moan as pleasure warmed her skin.

He was winning. Slowly she was slipping under the spell of his seductive touch. He kneaded her breast while he held her close, lips strikingly close. If only they swayed together they would be dancing.

She had to even the odds.

With a sudden turn, she spun and planted her arse against his groin.

They both gasped.

His hands latched onto her hips as he thrust forward once, hard. His cock was a thick shaft pulsing against her. He was so large—her sex dripped at the thought of him sliding deep inside her.

Ryon grunted in response before his arms closed in around her. He touched her everywhere, hands sweeping up to capture her breasts and pull at her nipples, before sliding down past her hips then up her spine. Again and again he repeated the torture, his touch burning pathways across her heated flesh.

Her mind turned foggy with haze. Pleasure overwhelmed her body bringing out the animal inside her. She wanted so badly for his hand to slip between her legs and touch the moist folds of her sex. A part of her that only she touched. Ever since their shared kiss two years ago, she’d not let another touch man touch her. She couldn’t bear the thought of any man touching her—any man but Ryon.

Must take control, she reminded herself.

Her arse pumped against his cock, working him. The thrill of tempting him and knowing she was driving him out of control was the headiest sensation.

“Are you really going to fight to claim me?” The question she thought had been buried in her psyche suddenly came out.

Ryon kissed her neck sending a cascade of shivers down her spine. Then he opened his mouth further and the sharp press of his teeth prodded her neck. Whoever won the claiming would not only mate with the chosen female, but keep her forever as his own.

“You know I will,” he said confidently, his voice having gone deep and raspy. “No one can stop me.”

No doubts in his mind. No questions. The loyalty was both humbling and a touch frightening.

“This weeks’ end, we’ll be doing this without clothes between us, Pen. Just you and me. I’m finally going to taste all of you.”

Panting, her breaths came out choppy. Her head fell back against his shoulder, giving him even more room to kiss her neck and shoulders. “So certain you’ll win?” she countered.

His grabbed her hips in a brutal clasp. “I *know* it.”

Her sex was worked up and blood rushing with excitement. His words connected erotic imagery of him claiming her. The claiming was a rough and wild ride. To do it with Ryon...

“I can’t stand it,” he growled in her ear. “You’re wet and I can smell it drenching you.” He almost sounded angry at her. Like he wanted to punish her for arousing him. “I have to touch you. Give me permission.”

“To do what?” she breathed, no longer able to keep her eyes open.

One hot hand slid down her stomach over the sequined costume. The leotard ran tight between her legs. In an instant he cupped her there—hard and firm, fingers enfolding her sex. Hot spasms twitched as he caressed her. She teetered on the verge of something searing and explosive.

“To make you come.”

A single finger trailed over her sensitive flesh. Even with the barest of pressure, she quivered in need. What would it feel like to have skin on skin contact? Maybe she’d combust and the whole kingdom would hear her cries.

“I’ll make you come right here, right now, Pen. Just allow me...” he said, his deep voice hypnotic. “Tell me yes, that you want me.”

That’s it. Just tell him she wanted him. Oh, how simple he made it sound. To admit so, would be to accept his dominance, to relinquish control and give into submission.

The idea tantalized her wicked sensibilities, but her reservations kept her in check. His touch scraped over her sensitive bud of nerves between her legs again making her hips jerk. She needed more than that little scrape. Though not much more.

“I’m going to claim you one way or another, Pen.” His voice dropped even deeper, speaking soft and low into her ear. “I’m going to slide my cock right inside you here, where you’re juicy and wet for me.” With that bold statement he cupped her firmly over the costume.

A mewl tore from her throat, eyes rolling to the back of her head. “Ryon!”

He sucked in a sharp breath. “What did you say?”

Her throat was so dry she couldn’t repeat it again, could only arch into his hand. That was the final straw for him.

With a growl, Ryon deftly slipped his fingers inside her costume and cupped her sex. Skin to skin.

“So wet,” he said, sounding delirious and not at all like himself.

He claimed her mouth in a wild kiss. His tongue sliding deep, she tasted him and all his erotic heat. She matched him beat for beat while his fingers danced between her legs, plucking and petting

her sex. He circled her sensitive bud, the touch scattering and feather-light before pressing near her entrance. He broke apart to growl against her lips, "I'm going to be buried deep inside you. *Soon*. I don't want to wait."

His bold statement was punctuated by a feverish kiss as he circled her bud again. Penelope stood on her toes and swung her arms over Ryon's neck to hold on for dear life. She felt completely exposed; his touch was so simple; it shouldn't excite her so much, yet it did.

"I want you to say my name when you come."

In her mind she refused to agree. No way would she give him the satisfaction. *If* he could even make her come.

But then his touch grew intent and with his hard cock a reminder at her backside—Penelope came apart, ripped asunder.

Her husky cries called out into the dark night. Her core exploded at the pinnacle; the power of the peak took her by surprise, sweeping brusquely through her in undulating waves. Hot, wet bursts released inside her energy passing through her at his commanding touch.

Ryon stroked her like a perfectly tuned guitar, his teeth sinking into her neck. He was claiming her in his own way, marking her with his dominance as she came.

After the hardest shivers died down, he caressed her sex like he might caress a kitty cat. The deep satisfied sounds coming from his throat nearly made her swoon. The power he could wield over her was too strong. He could devastate her.

"You didn't say it," he remarked.

She couldn't even open her eyes yet. "Say what?"

"My name, if you'll recall." Oh, that. Luckily, he didn't sound like he cared much.

"I didn't," she agreed.

He chuckled against her neck.

"Is that laughter I hear?" That sound opened her eyes and she turned around to see a smile faltering from his face.

"I do laugh on occasion, Pen."

It was hard looking at him. Hunger was written across his face in his low-lidded, sexy expression. His erection tented his pants with pent-up, virile desire. Penelope licked her lips before meeting his gaze again.

Ryon looked like he knew exactly what she'd been thinking. He was studying her nipples when he added huskily, "I do take repayments. I've always wondered what your mouth would feel like on my cock."

She sucked in a sharp breath. He'd never dared to speak to her in such a way before. The words didn't shock her. It was *who* spoke such words that did surprise her. He normally had such a prudish mouth.

Invariably her gaze dropped to his waistband. She had been teasing him tonight. He *did* make her orgasm which was quite wonderful. Her muscles felt loose and relaxed now like she'd just finished a long rub.

Maybe she should return the favor...

Penelope cupped his cheeks and pulled him down for a lasting kiss. She ran her hand down his chest. Mounds of hard muscles rippled over his abdomen. The skin at his hips was tight and

firm, the color tanned and perfect. Such a fine specimen of man. She lifted his shirt up to reveal his stomach. The muscles bunched and rolled under her inquisitive gaze.

“What are you doing?” he asked gruffly. Hearing him sound unsure brought a wicked smile to her lips.

“I thought you wanted me to suck on your cock?” asked the predator to the prey.

He glared at her, not trusting her one iota. She couldn’t blame him.

Then he dropped a bomb that made her stagger. “I’ve dreamt of it.”

“You’ve dreamt of it?”

He paused, then, “More times than I can count.”

She squirmed and pressed her thighs together which in turn applied more pressure to her sex. Who knew the general could surprise her with such wicked thoughts. “And did I suck your cock in these dreams?”

He looked like he might smile. “Sometimes. Other times I was eating your quim or fucking it.”

Her *quim* twitched with arousal. Penelope ran her hand down the length of his shaft, grazing it over the prickly material of his trousers. With a single finger she stroked him to test his girth and strength. Quite viral and unyieldingly stiff. She licked her lips but didn’t admit that she’d had dreams too. Fantasies, all of which involved Ryon Ward, *her* general, and them naked.

“And how do you fuck me in these dreams?” she asked softly. Her touches were growing bolder.

He struggled to keep his breaths normal. “Every way imaginable. But each times ends up the same.”

“Curious,” she said. “I do wonder...how’s that?” Wetness leaked from his blunt cockhead, moistening his trousers. His cock must ache to be released from their confines.

“With you holding onto me, taking all my thrusts. Then I fill you with my seed.”

She couldn’t think of anything else to say. He’d stunned her stupid with his sensual imagery. His fantasy sounded deliciously appealing to her. Her arousal made her flush and her breasts ache with heaviness. The thought of having such a big male rutting above her until he finished made her insides gooey.

“Sounds...exciting.”

“Not as exciting as feeling your hand on me.” His head rolled back to expose a masculine expanse of neck. She wanted to kiss and nibble it while she stroked him. She wanted to suck on him until he spurted his seed all over her tits.

He must have caught her contemplative look. “What are you thinking about?”

She didn’t hesitate to tell him. In fact, she grew excited thinking about what his reaction might be. So she repeated her dirty thought to him in a rushed whisper. “Sucking your cock until you come on my tits.”

He cupped the back of her head, unnervingly pulling her toward him. “Please,” was all he said. A dark glint sparkled in his eyes.

It sounded like a dying man’s plea.

Penelope could only resist so much; even she had her breaking point. And apparently that point was seeing Ryon’s look of unadulterated pain across his face. She reached inside his trousers and found the hot rod of flesh waiting for her. She pulled him out to meet fresh air.

His cock was long and thick, the skin tight but soft. And so hot, he nearly singed her palm. Ridges and veins were vivid from unrepented arousal. She stroked him once with a loose-fingered grip. She preferred her seductions to move slowly, teasing ever more until she built him up to a fever pitch.

Poor Ryon looked like he'd been at a fever pitch for hours.

His hand came up to curl in her hair as his breaths quickened. His eyes were wide with surprise at her mouth so near to his cock, gazing at her with hunger and wonder. She darted out her tongue and licked gently around the spongy tip of him. His cock bobbed for more.

She opened her mouth to finally suck him deep and feel him down the back of her throat—when someone called her name.

“Penelope!”

Branches snapped and again the voice called out. “Where are you already? Penelope! Are you out here?”

Penelope stood in a rush. “My boss!” She'd completely forgotten. “I'm supposed to be working. I have a whole show planned for tonight. I have to get back to work!”

Ryon grabbed her elbow before she could dart away. He looked wild and irritated. It was incredibly sexy.

Knowing she was leaving him unfinished sent a thrill through her blood like electricity. Penelope fixed her top, then shimmied away with an apologetic smile. “I have to go.” A giggle escaped at his frustrated grimace.

“Now?” he growled. His jaw slid side to side.

She flashed one last look at his mighty cock before nodding. “I have to go. Truly! I'm sorry.”

And then she was gone, leaving Ryon at the pond with his cock locked and ready to blow. Lord, he loved that woman.

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