



Beauty's Kingdom

By A. N. Roquelaure, Anne Rice

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Mega-bestselling author Anne Rice, writing as A. N. Roquelaure, returns to the mysterious kingdom of Queen Eleanor in this new chapter of her Sleeping Beauty series. When the great queen is reported dead, Beauty and Laurent return to the kingdom they left twenty years before. Beauty agrees to take the throne, but she insists that all erotic servitude be voluntary. Countless eager princes, princesses, lords, ladies, and commoners journey to Beauty's realm, where she and her husband usher in a new era of desire, longing, and ecstasy. Provocative and stirring, Rice's imaginative retelling of the Sleeping Beauty myth will be adored by her longtime fans and new readers of erotica just discovering the novels.

This book is intended for mature audiences.

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Editorial Review

Review

PRAISE FOR BEAUTY'S KINGDOM

“**Voluptuous imagery and graphic scenes**...Roquelaure pulls no punches (or holds back no spankings). The fairy-tale setting provides an apt stage, and the magical world clearly marks the erotic action as fantasy.”

—**Kirkus**

“[A] thumbs-up.... BEAUTY’S KINGDOM is a delightful, immersive read, all at once **playful, campy, explicit, erotic, and provocative.**”

—**Publisher’s Weekly**

"Rice’s lush prose is **elegant and enchanting**, reminiscent of classic historical fiction in its lyrical structure and elaborate description"

—**Library Journal**

“**As Rice returns to the realm of BDSM, we are eager to learn what boundaries she has left to push.**

New and old readers alike will surely enjoy submitting to some quality time with these books.”

—**RT Reviews**

“Anne Rice has drawn with her ever beautiful prose an erotic domain built around freedom, choice, acceptance, and assent. **It is a safe place that encourages the reader to find his/her own path of sensuality and sexual fulfillment.**”

—**Pop Mythology**

“This is not a traditional romance; Beauty’s Kingdom is a fierce, fearless BDSM fantasy read; erotica at its BEST, written by a master storyteller. What’s not to love? **Provocative and stirring, Beauty’s Kingdom is an uncompromising erotic work start to finish.**”

—**Book Crack** (5 out of 5 stars)

“**The story is a grandiose, liberating dreamscape** that lets anyone that suffers from different insecurities about their sexual identity, feel freed by Anne Rice’s experienced guiding hand.”

—**Air of Mystery Reviews**

“**approach it like triple chocolate cheesecake; take it in slowly, one sliver at a time,** and perhaps even share it with someone special.”

—**I Smell Sheep** (4 out of 5 Sheep)

“If you are looking for a H.O.T., well written story, and love fantasy reads...**you won’t be disappointed** in Beauty’s Kingdom.” *Flirty and Dirty Book Blog* (3.5 stars out of 5)

“**BEAUTY'S KINGDOM** is a treat and **should not be missed.**”

—**Fresh Fiction**

“Rice writes excellent, interesting, sympathetic characters... this is **guaranteed to put a bounce in your britches.**”

—**Romance & Smut**

“**BEAUTY’S KINGDOM** is a refined erotic gem for the sophisticated adult.”

—**Agents of Romance**

“**This book is no joke**.... Yep, this story centers around dominate and submissive characters, bondage, and discipline. Throw in the complexities of relationships and friendships and you have a pretty intense story.”

—**Shelf Addiction**

“A feast for fans of fantasy play, dress-up, power exchange in wild settings, **BEAUTY’S KINGDOM** is sure to be a knock-out once again for Rice.”

—**Dawnamatrix**

“I found that I actually wanted to know what happens to these characters—I was no longer in it just for the sex. And I was not disappointed.”

—**Bookshelf Bombshells**

4 out of 5 stars, **Sexy Book Reviews**

About the Author

Anne Rice is the author of many bestselling novels, including the hugely successful Vampire Chronicles. Her first novel, *Interview with the Vampire*, was made into a film in 1994 starring Tom Cruise and Brad Pitt. Her other books include the Mayfair Witches series, the novels *The Mummy or Ramses the Damned*, *Violin Angel Time*, the Sleeping Beauty trilogy, and, most recently, *Prince Lestat: The Vampire Chronicles*. Born and raised in New Orleans, Louisiana, she now lives in Southern California.

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Ah, such a long and wearying day. And no one in the great kingdom of Bellavalten had heard a word from Queen Eleanor or the Crown Prince in a year.

As the mistress of naked pleasure slaves in the Queen’s absence, I had spent hours inspecting all the slaves of the Court and then had traveled to the Queen’s Village to make sure that those unfortunates exiled there were being severely disciplined and vigorously worked as always. I loved my duties, loved the training and care of so many beautiful and abject naked royal servants of both sexes who were kept in the kingdom strictly for the amusement of their masters and mistresses, but I was as discouraged as everyone else by the Queen’s long absence from the realm and her silence. And I wanted only the peace and quiet now of my own quarters.

I had to stop at Prince Tristan’s manor house, however, before returning to Court. And I welcomed a moment’s rest and something to eat there as well, and of course I was eager as always to see Prince Tristan.

Prince Tristan had lived for over twenty years in the kingdom.

He was the handsomest of men, tall, robust, with blond curling hair and clear blue eyes, always properly and richly dressed, and the image of the proud and pampered courtier of Queen Eleanor. He welcomed me graciously into his private salon where a cheerful little fire fought the inevitable damp of the stone walls, and I could see wine and cakes laid out on the polished wooden table.

“Ah, Eva, our precious Eva,” he said earnestly. “What would we do now without you? Have you had any word from Her Majesty?”

“None, Tristan,” I said, “and frankly, though I do all I can—and Lord Gregory and the Captain of the Guard do all they can—the kingdom suffers.”

“I know,” he said, gesturing for me to take the chair opposite his. “We’re the envy of the world for our system of pleasure slavery, but without the Queen, the slaves are anxious, fearful as the rest of us that something may happen to disturb the peace of the realm.”

We were alone and Tristan himself filled my goblet. I savored the fragrance of the red wine and then drank. Delicious. Tristan’s wine cellar was the best in the kingdom.

“You are so right,” I replied. “In the village, Captain Gordon and Lady Julia have everything in hand. She is as good a mayor as ever a man was. I don’t mind saying so even if she is my aunt. And Captain Gordon is tireless. But something’s wrong, just wrong. I can sense it at Court, no matter how many entertainments I devise. All feel the Queen’s absence.”

“What can I do to assist?” he asked. He held out the plate of cakes for me.

“Well, this refreshment for the moment is splendid,” I said. “I’ve traveled the entire realm today and I need these moments to recollect myself.”

I might have added that looking on Tristan was always a refreshing pleasure.

For years Tristan had lived in his manor house with my uncle Nicholas, the Queen’s Chronicler, and Lady Julia, my aunt, and Nicholas’s sister. But Lady Julia had gone down to be the mayor of the Queen’s Village two years ago. And my uncle Nicholas had gone off into the world a year before the Queen and the Crown Prince embarked on their interminable sea voyage.

Tristan had grieved over the loss of Nicholas miserably. But letters came from my uncle regularly, and though he never promised to return, we maintained the hope that he would do so eventually.

Some months ago, I’d given Tristan a magnificent pleasure slave, Princess Blanche, one of the Queen’s old favorites from the castle. I’d hoped Princess Blanche would delight Tristan, as he had not found his other slaves to be of lasting interest. And Tristan had written notes to me more than once to say that my gift was most pleasing to him.

“And where is my exquisite Blanche?” I asked now. “Are you keeping her quite busy?”

At once he snapped his fingers, and Blanche appeared on her hands and knees moving cautiously and silently from the shadows.

“Come here,” said Tristan in a low firm voice, “and stand before Lady Eva for inspection.” His cheeks colored slightly as he studied her. How he loved her.

Blanche was a tall princess, with very full breasts and a rounded bottom that was irresistible. She had beautifully turned legs. And though she had fair skin, she did not mark easily, and could be disciplined severely and appear none the worse for it. I’d spanked her bottom many a time, amazed at how the redness so easily faded.

“I work her relentlessly,” said Tristan, as she approached. “Kiss Lady Eva’s slippers first, Blanche, and then

you may kiss mine. You should do that without my telling you.”

He sounded stern.

I patted Blanche’s head as she obeyed him. “Now stand up, little girl,” I said, “with your hands behind your neck and let me have a look at you.” “Little Girl” was my favorite endearment for woman slaves, just as “Little Boy” was my favorite endearment for the males. And I’d often observed that this pet name produced singularly good results.

As Blanche rose to her feet, I could see she was flushed and trembling. Inspections are easier for some slaves than others. Blanche had always had a natural shyness to her, a sweet submissiveness that melted hearts even as it invited punishment.

“I find her graceful and polished,” said Tristan. “Whenever she is in my presence I have a paddle or strap in my hand. I can’t imagine ever tiring of her.”

“Come closer, Princess,” I said and pinched her smooth plump thigh as I drew her towards me. Blanche was indeed a princess in her own homeland but she’d been sold outright, at her own request, to Her Majesty many years ago. She’d been one of many chosen to serve in the Queen’s bedchamber. And in the last few years, she’d suffered from Queen Eleanor’s indifference.

“She sleeps at the foot of my bed,” said Tristan, “and she kneels at my feet when I dine. I have her punished regularly by her groom if I’m too busy to do it. I adore her.”

Blanche stood very still, her eyes down, eyelashes fluttering, hands at the back of her neck as was proper, her exquisite silver hair falling down her back.

I liked her firm shoulders, her shapely arms. I pinched her nipples to make her blush, then told her to kneel. I inspected her pretty white teeth, and then forced her to stand again, this time with her legs wide apart, for a quick, gentle finger inspection of her privy parts which left her in tears of shame and happiness. Her little secret sanctuary under its smoky veil of hair was tight and hot as ever.

Tristan gazed at her adoringly. He couldn’t help himself. But that was always Tristan’s way, to love and to love deeply. His large blue eyes had a remote yet dreamy quality and again there came that flush to his cheeks as he regarded Blanche. He shifted in his chair uncomfortably.

“You love your master, Blanche?” I demanded.

“Yes, Lady Eva,” she confessed. She had a soft low voice, a beguiling voice. Suddenly, her bosom heaving, she said, “Please, please, don’t separate me from him.”

“Hush!” I said. I spanked both her breasts. “You’ll be whipped for making such a request.” I looked to Tristan who silently nodded in agreement. “But I can assure you, Blanche, that Tristan may have you as long as he finds you interesting.”

She started to cry. She had not been able to control her outburst, and she knew full well it was bad manners. But this is how it had always been with Blanche—small imperfections which more often than not offended no one though of course they had to be promptly corrected.

Tristan snapped his fingers again, and the groom appeared, a fair young man I did not know well, named Galen. He was, like all the grooms and pages of the realm, chosen for his beauty, his grace, and his devotion to the Queen.

“Take her into the bedchamber, Galen,” Tristan said softly. “Spank her hard over the knee for her impertinence and scold her when you do it.”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Then chain her to the bedpost. She’s to have plain water and only bits of bread for supper. I’ll punish her further myself this evening.”

At once the groom took Blanche in hand and led her out of the chamber. She was crying freely.

It must have been an hour that Tristan and I talked softly—about the state of this small realm that was our shared home. Tristan had been my friend since I’d come here—the niece of Nicholas the Chronicler, drawn to the kingdom, to the ways of the Queen, and the ways of pleasure slavery. It was Tristan who had presented me at Court, urging the busy and distracted queen to put the matters of naked slavery in my hands.

We had our little repast now, but before I left I asked for a moment alone with Blanche. As the ruler of the realm, I was exercising my right and duty to see to Blanche’s state of mind for myself. Tristan didn’t protest.

Alone in the bedchamber, I found her in a flood of tears. She’d been severely spanked and the paddle hadn’t spared her thighs or her calves either. Her resilient skin was surprisingly red. She kissed my slippers over and over again.

“Kneel up and talk to me,” I said. “I unseal your lips.” I took out a lace handkerchief and wiped her face. She had the palest cheeks, and her large drowsy gray eyes burned bright through her smoky eyelashes. Why her hair was silver I had no idea, except that there are people in this world who have this kind of hair, white or silver from an early age, and they are often exceptionally beautiful.

“Now tell me, do you love your master?” I said. “I want to know your secret soul.”

“Oh, yes, Lady Eva,” she said breathlessly. “I never knew such happiness at Court.” And then she let it all slip out again. “I don’t care if the Queen never calls me back to the castle. Please, you must let me remain here. I don’t want the Queen to come back.”

I cradled her bowed head in my hands. “What am I going to have to do, whip you myself here and now? I would never have unsealed your lips if I’d known you were so foolish, so disobedient. You know what is permitted and what is not permitted,” I said. “The Queen decides where slaves live and whom they serve. You can reveal your soul to me with a wiser choice of words, you know that!” I lifted her chin. She bit her lip despairingly as she looked at me. I winked at her. “I’ll do everything,” I whispered, “to see you remain with Tristan.”

She flung her arms around me and I allowed it, pressing her lips against my sex which I felt keenly in spite of the thick fabric of my gown. I gestured for her to rise and I wrapped my arms around her, kissing her deeply. Not all slaves know how to kiss. Some of the most subservient and finely trained simply never acquire the knack of kissing. But Blanche knew how to kiss.

I could feel my own nipples hardening inside my gown and my own sex growing moist. But I couldn’t pull away from her. I covered her eyes with my kisses, licking at her salty tears.

“But Lady Eva, why does the Queen stay away so long?” she whispered in my ear. “There is talk. Slaves are afraid.”

“Tell me what they say,” I coaxed. I smoothed her hair back from her forehead.

“A small group of punished slaves from the village were brought here yesterday by Captain Gordon—to work in my master’s garden. Three women and two men. I don’t remember their names. At feeding time, they were whispering fearfully that the Queen was sorely missed, that even Captain Gordon and Lady Julia could not keep the village entirely in order in the Queen’s absence. They speak of the Queen no longer loving the kingdom. They speak of the Queen abandoning our servitude.”

“That’s idle foolishness.” I sighed. “I’m not surprised, however, that they talk of such things. They miss the Queen’s presence even though they seldom ever caught a glimpse of her. Well, I’ve spent the day in the village. I had at least thirty slaves soundly spanked on the Public Turntable. And I went through the pony stables inspecting every pony for myself. All is well. I suspect those grumbling slaves will sleep well tonight . . . or for the time being. But surely everything will be better when the Queen returns.”

“Yes, if she allows me to remain with Prince Tristan,” she ventured as she kissed my cheek. “Beautiful Lady Eva,” she said.

“Manners, my girl,” I said. I pressed my finger to her lips. “I assure you, when the Queen returns, I’ll do all in my power to make sure you remain with Tristan. Now repeat that to no one, not even your master, and when he punishes you tonight, if he gives you leave to speak, be contrite for your outbursts.”

She nodded gratefully and opened her tender mouth for me to kiss her again, which I did. “But now you let me go, you vixen,” I said. “You’re too sweet and I’m too tired and must go back to the castle.”

I squeezed her warm bottom hard and felt her sigh against me. How hot the flesh was, how deliciously hot.

“Yes, Lady Eva,” she said. And I allowed myself one last slow and deep kiss.

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It was a short ride to the castle, on a narrow winding road that skirted the Queen’s Village. The full moon made the homeward journey all the more easy. And tired as I was, I was glad that I’d seen Tristan.

Tristan had been brought to the kingdom decades ago as a young royal naked slave, and all knew the story. The Queen demanded such tributes from all her allies, and many other realms sent their spoilt and unruly royal young ones to serve the Queen as a matter of course, welcoming the enhancement of their young rebels by their strict pleasure training, and the gold purse that always accompanied the return of such slaves to their homeland. Some noble families did the very same thing, but the majority of slaves were princes and princesses. Oh, what I would give to have seen Tristan then, handsome Tristan, naked and standing ready for service.

But I had not yet been born when Tristan was first enslaved. I was twenty years old now, and it was difficult to grasp that he, with his boyish smile and innocent blue eyes, was actually forty. His story was well known to me.

He’d proved rebellious with his young master, Lord Stefan, the Queen’s cousin—a former lover who could not master him—and been packed off to the Queen’s Village for harsh punishment for his disobedience. There he’d been bought and trained as a pony boy by my uncle Nicholas, the Queen’s Chronicler. Uncle Nicholas had loved Tristan. And all might have gone well from that time onward, given Nicholas’s penchant for taming those he loved, if soldiers of the Sultan hadn’t raided the kingdom, kidnapping some of the finest slaves for the sultanate.

Tristan had been one of those taken off with the famous princesses Beauty and Rosalynd and Elena and

Princes Laurent and Dmitri.

Now the Sultan, long gone from the world, had been a close ally of Queen Eleanor. Her ancestors and his had started the custom of naked pleasure slavery over a century before that time. But in Queen Eleanor's realm it had fallen into decline, and when she mounted the throne, emissaries from the Sultan had come to help the Queen revive it and make Bellavalten once more the talk of the world.

Occasional slave raids were part of a game played by the Queen and the Sultan from time to time. And any slave of Bellavalten learned much under the customs of the Sultan's pleasure gardens. So nobody would have thought much of this latest raid had not it ensnared the fabled Sleeping Beauty. Her parents demanded that Queen Eleanor rescue their daughter and return her to them at once. Servitude to the Queen and her son, the Crown Prince, they could approve but not the loss of Princess Beauty to a foreign lord.

So Captain Gordon was sent with a few handpicked soldiers to reclaim Beauty and what other slaves he might rescue easily with her. Alas, scandal followed. Beauty, and her companions Tristan and Laurent, had not wanted to be brought back; indeed the three of them had fussed, rebelled, and all but kicked and screamed as they were recaptured.

And the beautiful and irresistible Laurent, one of the worst of the rebels, had even been so bold as to kidnap one of the Sultan's most devoted stewards, Lexius, and insist that Captain Gordon bring him back as a trophy to serve Queen Eleanor.

Queen Eleanor had been furious with her recalcitrant brats. Beauty she could not punish further, as she was at once freed to go home to her parents' kingdom. But Laurent and Tristan the Queen condemned to a year in the village stables—to the hardest labor a slave can know: perpetual servitude as a pony. As for the mysterious and seductive Lexius, the Queen was outraged that any slave should presume to offer himself to her as Lexius proceeded to do. Yet she had relented, later making him a favorite as dear to her as her own Prince Alexi, whom she'd famously broken in harsh ways.

Before the end of that year, Laurent had been freed due to the death of his father. Home he had gone to become the King of his realm, and no sooner had he received the crown than he had ridden out to the home of Princess Beauty, who had served naked beside him under Queen Eleanor, to make Beauty his queen.

Ah, it had been another great scandal in Bellavalten as word spread that two former naked slaves were now married and ruling the most powerful house in Europe. Queen Eleanor had thought them brazen and disgraceful, but what could she do? King Laurent was a proud and able ally; and Queen Beauty became the jewel of his Court.

"I will not tolerate talk of them ever," the Queen had famously declared, "and their names must never be mentioned to me." Royal slaves, when freed by her, should return with heads bowed to their kingdoms, never speaking of their naked servitude in her opinion, quick to slip into the demands of royal life. But here were a pair of legendary incorrigibles married to each other and presiding over a glamorous kingdom.

My uncle Nicholas told me that the story of King Laurent and Queen Beauty had not been easy to suppress. Indeed, it spread wildly amongst the slaves of the castle and the village who were heard to comment that it served Queen Eleanor's son, the Crown Prince, right for bringing the awakened Sleeping Beauty here as a slave in the first place and not making her his bride.

Cursed by a wise woman to sleep for a hundred years with her entire family and Court, Princess Beauty had been awakened by the kiss of the Crown Prince—who had brought Beauty naked and submissive to his mother's feet.

The Queen had boldly disregarded the legend, and her son's remarkable achievement, treating Beauty like any other abject erotic toy of the Court, and exiling her to the village for her first real disobedience.

But once King Laurent had taken Beauty as his bride, the Queen sang another song. "If anyone should be the husband of the wench," said the Queen, "it should be my son, not that impudent and unruly Laurent. How did such a thing ever happen with those two disobedient and rebellious slaves! I tell you I am confounded."

"And Laurent was such a handsome prince," my uncle Nicholas told me. "You cannot imagine. Laurent was brown haired, brown eyed, amazingly tall and strong, with features molded by the gods, perhaps one of the most impressive slaves ever to serve at the castle. Lady Elvera was his mistress. Every day she whipped him. Every day she set him to taking two or three princesses in her presence for her delight. He was tireless. His cock was enormous. And when he ran away only to be condemned to the village it was out of boredom. That's what these slaves do, you see, and the Queen never caught on. They pick and choose what they will do and where; and the Queen simply doesn't understand it. She doesn't understand the allure of different punishments for different slaves, or the allure of different masters and mistresses, and that clever slaves have always had ways of defeating her for their own amusement."

This was true. Queen Eleanor did imagine herself always to be in full control. I had seen this as soon as I'd arrived. Old Lord Gregory, the Queen's venerable minister of slaves, fell into the very same error. And so had some of the more rigid and scolding squires and pages, and members of the Court.

Whatever the case, the Crown Prince had never married. It was said he hated his mother for not allowing him to wed the Sleeping Beauty. But that seemed hardly fair. He'd stripped her naked and brought her barefoot and trembling into the kingdom. What had he expected his mother to think or do?

But King Laurent and Queen Beauty had passed out of the Queen's clutches and into history. And there was nothing to be done.

King Laurent and Queen Beauty had gone on to rule for twenty years of unparalleled prosperity until a year and a half ago when, placing the crown upon the head of their beloved son, Alcuin, they had retired to a southern land to live in seclusion.

Queen Eleanor had heard the news as she and her son were preparing for a sea voyage. I had only just been chosen to be head mistress of all slaves in her absence.

"I wonder why the famous pair have retired," she asked. "And whether or not they will come here soon for a visit. Now that young King Alcuin rules in his native land, what will Beauty and Laurent, both in the prime of life, do with themselves?" The Queen had looked at me with her sharp, cruel black eyes. "Do you think they ever speak of their time together here?"

The following day she went on to declare, "You know, Eva, that I had hoped, well, hoped that someday those two—Laurent and Beauty—might come to live at Court here, and inaugurate a new era."

The Crown Prince had been shocked. "What's wrong with things the way they are!" he had demanded.

"Nothing," said Queen Eleanor, "except I'm tired of them and so are you. Just think how very pleasant it would be to give the entire kingdom over to those two and be done with it. I have achieved a great thing here with pleasure slavery, yes, as my ancestors did before me, and as the Sultan had done in his land before his unfortunate ruin . . . but I am weary of managing anything."

The Crown Prince had grumbled. He'd told Lord Gregory, the elderly minister of slaves, to be ever more

strict, charged me to do the same, and then gone to make certain his trunks had been packed properly.

And then they had headed for the coast.

But not before the Queen had given me a sealed letter. “If some misfortune should befall us, Eva, you are to open this,” she’d said. And with a cold kiss, she walked out of the castle and towards her waiting coach.

I’d been only too glad to accept the responsibilities given me. I had a knack for governing naked slaves, both male and female, and had used it well since my arrival. By the hour, I’d read my uncle Nicholas’s *Chronicles of the Kingdom* and knew the stories of many slaves and how they had been broken and trained and how they had loved and wept when forced to return to the “outside world,” as my uncle called it.

I understood slaves. I loved studying them and disciplining them and wringing from each a perfection that the slave had thought impossible. I had a great gift for it. I found their most subtle responses fascinating, and I was thrilled by the endless variety and freshness surrounding me as I wandered the castle corridors and gardens.

At night on my pillow I sometimes dreamed of King Laurent and Queen Beauty; what had they truly been like in their naked servitude?—the King so strong and spirited, and Beauty with her fabled flaxen hair and blue eyes, a dainty slave admired by all? And I dreamed of Tristan too, Tristan who had spent most of his life here.

Of course there had been a time when Tristan did go into the outside world. He’d served out his year as pony in the village as punishment for his disobedience when rescued from the Sultan’s palace.

But his family had called him home not long after Laurent was called home. Tristan’s older brother the King had been killed abroad in a battle. And Tristan had to take the crown. Such was the way of the world. He had not protested.

Yet three years later, when Tristan’s brother had returned much to the surprise and happiness of the family, Tristan had traveled night and day to return to Bellavalten.

It was no longer meet that he should be a naked pleasure slave, of course. Queen Eleanor would not hear of it. And Tristan did not ask for such a thing. But yes, he could restore and outfit the manor house he’d purchased and lodge there with Uncle Nicholas and Aunt Julia. And he might have as many naked slaves as he wished. Queen Eleanor welcomed him as a shining member of her Court. And the Queen’s cousins—Lord Stefan, Lord William—and her uncle, the Grand Duke André, were glad to have Tristan in the inner circle.

After all, it was common for royal slaves to become members of the Court in later years. Princesses Rosalynd, Lucinda, and Lynette had all been slaves long years ago and they made up proud and beautiful members of the bored contingent of ladies-in-waiting gathered with their embroidery around an empty throne in the great hall of the castle. From my uncle’s pages, I knew their stories, and those of others too numerous to name.

And Prince Alexi, a favorite of the Queen long years ago, had only lately returned, welcomed by the Queen only six months before she’d left. He’d been very happy to rejoin the Court and the royal cousins.

“Is it so surprising that they come back?” my aunt Julia had whispered. “They were happy here when they were nude playthings. And those who’ve been trained often make the finest trainers.” My aunt now ruled the Queen’s Village as ably as any male mayor ever had. “I knew,” she said, “that Queen Eleanor would forgive Prince Alexi any old offense and allow him to stay.” There was some story there which she did not confide.

But she and Prince Alexi often walked out in the evenings together, talking of old times, apparently. Prince Alexi had auburn hair, and small delicate features and dark skin, and what a beauty he was now, as handsome as he'd ever been, said my aunt, who remembered him well as the Queen's favorite. "How she punished him night and day. But then there were rumors . . . and tales . . . but then we can't talk of those things."

Something there that none would confide about Prince Alexi befriending the mysterious Lexius, the steward of the Sultan brought back by King Laurent as a slave, something about Lexius and Alexi displeasing the Queen, but try as I might, I could never get the full story.

And now my uncle was gone wandering the world, and the Queen and the Crown Prince were beyond reach, and I dared not ask Prince Tristan to let me see the *Chronicles of the Kingdom*, which Nicholas had shared with me when I was a girl.

Prince Alexi was still boyishly handsome, with smooth dark skin and quick dark eyes, and an easy laugh, but I found him strangely provocative. Never did he smile at me without my thinking he wanted me to be his mistress, wanted me perhaps to strip off his fine velvet and gold braid, and smack him hard with my belt. He had a way of lowering his eyelids and looking up at me even though he was taller than me, which many former slaves possess. And when our hands now and then touched, I felt a great shock over all my skin as if he were sculptured from sizzling fire.

One could never know quite what was up with the former slaves who came back to Court.

Had Tristan been the secret slave of my uncle Nicholas behind closed doors in the manor house? And what about Lord Stefan, the Queen's cousin—the indecisive one who had failed to master Tristan years and years ago, prompting Tristan to run away? Lord Stefan had always been here, but how afraid he seemed of his quiet blond-haired slave, Becca, as if she held some secret and immeasurable power over him. I'd caught a glimpse of them in the Goddess Grove one afternoon, that old neglected garden on the western side of the castle that the Queen ignored.

It was late afternoon, and so quiet I could hear only the birds singing. And I'd come upon them in the high grass, the naked Becca with her long flaxen locks straddling the fully clothed lord who lay thrusting and twisting on his back, her oval face upturned and her cold blue eyes on the sky, whispering as she rode his cock, "You will come when I say you can come, and not before! Do you dare to disobey me?"

I had hurried away. The old neglected Goddess Grove had always seemed a haunted place with its vine-covered marble statues and broken arches. And I avoided it after that. Such a shame, for it could have been a beautiful place.

But I had more than ever the sense of the torment of those finely dressed lords and ladies who longed to serve with the abandon of the naked slaves but weren't permitted to do so. As for Becca, she often spanked other slaves for Lord Stefan's amusement. And it seemed it was Becca who picked the slaves Lord Stefan drove with his paddle along the Bridle Path. Did Becca ever shed a tear? No, nor did she ever look unhappy. And it seemed to me that even the elderly Lord Gregory, the archdisciplinarian of slaves, avoided her. I'd been tempted to borrow Becca of an evening for my own amusement. But why disturb what is best left alone?

And now in the Queen's absence all struggled for some day-to-day equilibrium.

It was full dark when I reached the castle, and I hoped to reach my quarters without any further interruption. But I found Prince Alexi outside my door.

His youthful face was contorted with pain, and even in the feeble light from the small lamp in his hand, I could see he'd been weeping.

"What is it?" I asked. I unlocked the door, and putting my arm around him, I drew him into my parlor.

The fire had been started by my devoted slave, Severin, and the candles on the table had been lighted as well. I took the lamp from Alexi's hand and set it on the sideboard. He looked utterly lost.

"Come, sit down, talk to me," I said.

"Eva, this is unspeakable . . .," he said, shaking his head. He drew a stiff parchment letter out of his velvet doublet. "The Queen . . ." and then he broke off, unable to continue.

At once, I opened the letter and read it.

It had been posted from a distant city in the south seas, and was addressed to the Grand Duke André, uncle of Queen Eleanor. The writing was clear and official.

"It is our sad duty to inform you that your sovereign, Queen Eleanor, and her son, the Crown Prince, are indeed dead, and the search for the wreckage of their vessel has been called off, as their bodies have washed up on our shores, along with several other bodies from the unfortunate vessel and all hope is lost . . ."

The letter went on and on as to the identification of the bodies and that of others, and there was a brief description of the storm in which the ship had been lost. Two early survivors of the disaster, Princess Lynette and Prince Jeremy, who'd been traveling with the Queen, were on the way back to the kingdom now.

Alexi sat with his face in his hands, weeping softly, his auburn hair hanging down over his eyes.

I pondered what I'd always known of him, how he'd been the Queen's favorite slave for so many years, and how he'd somehow displeased her in the end. This was not the time to ask for that story.

"Who else knows about this?" I asked.

"They all know—André, William, and Stefan. They've sent me to you. None of them is fit to take the reins of this kingdom. None of them is willing! As soon as the slaves find out there will be panic. You don't know how many dread the day they'll be sent home free to their families."

"Yes, I do," I said softly.

I looked up. The Grand Duke André was standing in the open door. He was not an old man, though he was the Queen's uncle, and his hair was still jet black for the most part and his rectangular face was still handsome.

"Lady Eva, what are we to do?" he asked. His voice was ragged with emotion.

I rose at once and invited him to take a chair between mine and that of Alexi. And quietly I went to my desk near the window.

There was a lighted candle there as it was often my habit to read or write late into the night, and Severin had

set out my ink and quill pens and parchment.

I unlocked a small gold casket that sat on the desk, and I removed from it the sealed letter which Queen Eleanor had given me on that last day before her departure.

I came back to the table and sat down without asking the bereaved Duke's permission. He didn't care. He was comforting Prince Alexi.

"It is the end of our world," said the Duke softly now as he looked at me. He did not resemble the Queen, but he had the same black eyes, which often appeared as cold as her eyes, though they did not now. His heavily lined face was wet from his tears.

"I fear you're right," Prince Alexi answered. And he took the Duke's right hand in his and clasped it. "Bellavalten cannot survive without our gracious Eleanor."

I looked down at the letter in my hand. It was addressed in bold and beautiful script to me with the notation "In the Event of My Death."

I showed it to both gentlemen. The Grand Duke had never learned to read or write, but Prince Alexi was well educated. After they had taken notice, I broke the seal and tore open the letter.

My beloved Eva,

You have been a great consolation to me since your arrival for you have a passion for the realm which I myself have lost. I am well aware that our custom of pleasure slavery is now the vital heart of the kingdom. The visitors whose gold fills our coffers daily come here to see and live amid the spectacle of our well-trained and beautiful slaves. Indeed, many of our finest townsmen, scholars, scribes, craftsmen, and weavers might desert us if deprived of their naked slaves. Our soldiers would likely desert, and even the lowliest of our common people might wander beyond our borders if the old customs which distinguish our realm from all others were abandoned. Even my own great wealth would not sustain the kingdom in such a decline. Therefore, let us pray that I will return from this journey with a new sense of purpose and regard for those dependent on me.

But should I not return, should some accident befall me and my son during our trip, it is my wish that you present this letter, carefully written in my own hand, to my beloved uncle and cousins.

It is my wish that our ways not perish, and that before they abandon Bellavalten to her ever voracious allies and neighbors, they approach King Laurent and Queen Beauty with an offer of the crown and the scepter. If King Laurent and Queen Beauty will honor the custom of pleasure slavery as I have established it, if they will preserve my realm according to those precepts and customs which have made it famous throughout the world and even to the shores of unknown lands, I bequeath to them all my wealth, my property, my castle and my manor houses, my lands, and my entire kingdom.

Eva, I solemnly charge you to approach King Laurent and Queen Beauty yourself, and implore them to take the reins of Bellavalten. And I solemnly charge all my family and all my Court to prevail upon them to accept full authority and to make them welcome.

Only a monarch who has known the wisdom and pleasure of naked erotic servitude in Bellavalten can know the full worth of the laws of our realm. In Laurent and Beauty we have two such monarchs. And it is my hope that they will take the kingdom in hand for the benefit of all who live in it and more—that they may have a fresh view for its continuing prosperity. I am convinced that they will not accept this inheritance if

they have no such vision. They are too honorable for that, and too rich to be tempted by wealth alone. On the contrary, it is my belief that Laurent and Beauty have together the force to set a future course for Bellavalten.

If this is not to be, then I leave it to my heirs to disburse the lands and wealth of Bellavalten for their own benefit. All slaves must be freed at once and sent away with appropriate rewards. And Bellavalten shall fade from history as mysteriously perhaps as it long ago entered the written record.

I laid the letter down on the table.

There followed on a second page a long list of plainly small bequests to be made in the event of the Queen's death, but that could all be read later.

And there was her unmistakable signature and her seal.

I looked up into the eyes of Prince Alexi, and then at the Grand Duke.

"You must go to them," said Alexi. "This is our only hope. Eva, you must go, and I will go with you! I remember Laurent well. I remember Beauty!"

"Do you think they could be persuaded?" asked the Grand Duke. "King Laurent is famous for his conquests on land and sea. Why, he's a tireless soldier. Half the world is afraid of him, and half the world is in love with him. Frankly, he made me shiver even when he was a . . . a naked . . . a slave."

"Yes, but the great king is retired now," I said, "weary of war, as all know, having given over his crown to his son!"

"Ah, yes. . . ." The Duke sighed. "There is hope."

"And I've seen King Laurent once or twice in the last ten years," said Alexi eagerly. "Admittedly it was brief, and at a tiresome Court affair in this or that place. We talked for only a few moments. But I know how well he and his queen remember their service here. At least I know how he remembers it. There was something unspoken between us. I wager they've never lied to themselves about how it was." He was becoming ever more hopeful.

"Call Lady Elvera," said the Grand Duke. "She too must go. She was Laurent's mistress. He'll listen to her. And Captain Gordon, he too must go."

Lady Elvera. She was a cold one, very severe, who punished her slaves through aloofness and calculated indifference. And Laurent had served her for two full years before rebelling and having himself exiled to the village.

"What if the King remembers Lady Elvera with resentment?" I asked.

Alexi had to stop himself from laughing out loud.

"He adored her," he said. "He became bored, that's all. Trust me." He leaned forward as if to confide. "He's wined and dined her since at his Court. And laughed about the past. That was about ten years ago. But Eva, I'm surprised at you. You of all people should know the enduring bond that exists between a true mistress and a true slave."

I put up my hand for silence.

“Very well. I ask that you both go to Lady Elvera, and send word to Tristan and summon the Captain of the Guard. But you must, all of you, keep this information from everyone else. No one must know of this calamity until we have King Laurent and Queen Beauty’s decision.”

“Agreed,” said the Grand Duke. “The slaves mustn’t hear a word of this, or the people either.”

“And no one here at Court must know,” I said. “And, Your Excellency, kindly wake your secretaries. We will need appropriate letters and documents for safe travel.”

“Ah, I didn’t even think of it,” said the Duke. “Eva, you think of everything.”

I thought to myself, I know, but I didn’t reply.

As soon as they had left me, I went into the bedchamber to find that my slave, Severin, had obviously been listening at the door. I slapped him hard for his impertinence. But he’d been weeping and he scarcely cared.

“Lady Eva,” he said, kneeling before me with his arms around my skirts, “I can’t be sent home. I can’t. I’d rather die.”

“Oh, do be quiet,” I said. “I haven’t time to whip you now. Pack my trunks at once, and go to the master of the common wardrobe and obtain clothes for yourself for the journey. You can’t very well travel naked. Now hurry!”

“Clothes?” he fussed. “I have to wear clothes?” He was such a pretty boy, with golden ringlets and sweet gray eyes.

But this was the limit. I dragged him to the nearby chair, sat down, and threw him over my knee and spanked him hard until I was tired of it. “And this is just a taste,” I said. “When we’re packed and ready, I intend to whip you so soundly you’ll be sore for the entire journey, and in any inn where we stop, I’ll whip you again and likely invite any innkeeper along the way to share the pleasure of same. As for your cock, I’ll starve it for the entire journey. Now go!”

More often than not, my beloved Beauty was like that, sleeping, sleeping as if she’d never wake. This time it was in that bower in the garden, her bed of silk and lace surrounded by fragrant and nodding flowers, her head to one side on the pale rose-colored pillow, a tapestried cover laid carelessly over her, her mouth still.

Had she looked like this when she’d been the Sleeping Beauty of fable?

All knew the old story. When Beauty had been born, the immortal wise women—or fairies—of the kingdom had been invited to celebrate her birth. Each wise woman had offered the baby girl a precious gift—beauty, wit, wisdom, talent, or so the tale went. But one wise woman, overlooked by the King and Queen, came only to curse the infant, predicting that she would someday prick her finger on a spindle and fall into a deathlike sleep—along with the entire Court. Not to be outdone, yet another fairy came who had pity for the tiny girl in her crib.

“Yes, she will sleep for a hundred years,” said this wise fairy, “but a prince will come to awaken her with his kiss. She will rise from her slumber, along with the King and Queen and all the residents of the castle. And the spell will be at an end.”

Was it a true story? How could I ever know? But I did know that a prince had indeed awakened Beauty from

a long slumber, and he had been the son of the powerful Queen Eleanor of Bellavaltan, and he had claimed Beauty as his naked pleasure slave, taking her to his mother's Court.

Now why had he awakened her and not me? And why had he long ago passed out of her life, while Beauty had become my happy and contented wife of twenty years?

I wondered if she was still happy and contented, or had that not become a fable too.

She'd sleep like this until evening when I went to waken her—I, Laurent, her king—and to tell her it was time for us to dine together, and maybe after our lovemaking, she'd fall asleep again, into those dreams where I couldn't follow. Beauty, my Beauty, my love.

She was bored. I knew it. Because I myself was bored and found our little retreat here so deadly dull. What had prompted us to choose this path—to leave behind the duties of our royal house, to place the crown upon the head of our young son, Alcuin, and establish him with his sweet queen in charge of the land we'd ruled for twenty years? We were tired of it, that was the reason we'd left it. We were glad to send our daughter, Alcuin's twin sister Arabella, to rule in the land of Beauty's late father, wife to a cousin chosen there to be the new king.

And I was tired of battles on land and on sea, mostly sought for adventure, and of the endless rituals of Court life. Let the younger ones take over. Give the young king the scepter. We'd left the coffers overflowing with gold, and yet taken a fortune with us to secure this fine palace of sorts and this gentle coast.

Twenty years was enough, was it not?

But what were we to do with ourselves now, other than wander this sumptuous residence and these colorful and splendid gardens, and welcome the very occasional guest who came to disturb our retreat? The King and Queen of nothing.

I sat at the window, my elbows on the stone sill looking down on her as she lay there in the garden bower, her lady-in-waiting sewing beneath the nearby pear tree, and my queen not even stirring in her deathlike sleep.

Was she slipping back into enchantment because she had married the wrong prince? I'd been a pleasure slave for years in Queen Eleanor's kingdom when Beauty was brought there.

I'd never quite believed the old legend about her. All I knew was that she was indeed beautiful, as dazzling a pleasure slave as any naked and voluptuous princess I'd ever furtively beheld during my sensuous captivity, and when she was sent home I grieved. When finally, I'd been set free to return to my own kingdom, I'd sought her out in her father's house, and married her and brought her to my royal house to rule beside me, my splendid queen.

The secret memories of Queen Eleanor's pleasure gardens united us; we'd whispered on the pillow of those times—of lush bondage and titillating punishments, of gilded paddles and straps, and delicious rebellion, of stolen kisses our cruel masters and mistresses did not see. I was Beauty's master always; and she was my mistress. There were times when her deft and delicate little fingers tortured me as surely as my firm hands tortured her. But did we ever speak freely in all these years of how we'd loved it, those glorious days of true and inescapable servitude, of sublime nakedness and utter submission, of luxuriant humiliation and sweet shame?

I couldn't fathom it.

More and more of late, I found myself thinking of Bellavalten.

Did I actually long for the realm of Queen Eleanor? Was it something I could not admit? I pondered this a lot lately, and why not, because I had absolutely nothing else to do.

It was the loveliest of spring days, the sky a featureless blue above the fruit trees, and, beyond the battlements below me, the endless sparkling sea. The faintest breeze stirred the old orchards, a breeze that cooled my face and my hands at the window, a breeze that refreshed me only to wonder how I might while away these hours until I might wake her, and tell her, yes, time for us to sup once more before the fire.

I was falling asleep.

I made my way to the bed and collapsed there, turning over on my back, my eyes closing as if I had no control. It seemed I felt and heard the breeze but little else was real to me, and I sank down deep towards sleep with bits and pieces of thought traveling like leaves on the breeze through my mind.

I felt lips touch mine. I felt a hand on my forehead.

At once, I opened my eyes. The world was dark around me, and I could see a sky of endless stars. I scrambled to my feet, but couldn't see where it was that I was standing. The bed was gone, the room was gone, and the darkness around me seemed alive. The figure of a woman rose before me, blazing yet indistinct, suffused with an unnatural light.

It seemed she stood right in front of me suddenly—immense, overwhelming, and magnificent.

“Laurent,” she said. Her words flowed slowly and smoothly with a palpable resolution and calm. “You were the one intended all along. Long years ago when my sister cursed little Beauty at her birth to fall into enchanted sleep for a hundred years, it was you whom I chose from the great future for this sweet princess, this tender innocent, whom I would not suffer to sleep forever. It is by my will that she belongs to you and you belong to her as it is now.”

I was stunned yet thrilled. My heart was skipping.

I wanted to ask a multitude of questions. The darkness shrouding the woman's image was filled with the roiling motion of smoke. Her shining face was smiling yet indistinct. A vague and enchanting perfume distracted me. I felt her finger against my lips as she continued:

“You were imprisoned in Queen Eleanor's kingdom, were you not, when the time came for the awakening of my charge. And so the Crown Prince became my unwitting instrument to bring your princess to you in the land where you were held hostage, unable to go to her. Defenseless and given over to your servitude, you found each other irresistible as I knew that you would. Slaves together you loved. Free together you married. And trust in me, my king, that a new adventure awaits you both.”

For one split second, the figure of the woman blazed brighter and more vivid. I saw her shimmering hair, her translucent veils. Her eyes burned through the clearing mist and she spoke again even more distinctly.

“Fear not. Your lovely queen will waken soon to a new destiny just as you will, and those voluptuous embraces of long ago, stolen from your captors, will be yours again. Bellavalten where you first set eyes upon each other has always been your destiny and will open its gates to you this very day. You must be brave, my beloved king, and trust in the love and bravery of your queen. Remember this. Trust in the bravery of your queen, as you trust in your own bravery. You both must have courage to know once more the

freedom and abandon you knew long years ago when you were both enchained.”

The figure faded. Again, I tried to speak, tried to see clearly, but the image of the woman was dissolving, the darkness thickening, as if smoke could become the boiling waters of a roaring sea. The light flashed and dimmed. Indeed I heard the very sound of crashing waves. I found myself sinking, turning, falling, and with a start I awoke in my own chamber and on my bed.

I was shaken. Everything about me appeared real and solid. Yet the dream had been real as well. “Bellavalten,” I said aloud. It had been so many years since I’d even whispered aloud the name of Queen Eleanor’s realm. What in the world could this vision mean?

Only gradually did I realize that someone was knocking hard at my door.

I got up, straightened my rumpled clothes, and turned the knob.

There stood my secretary, Emlin, a young but very capable man, obviously terrified that he’d displeased me by pounding on the door.

“I did tell you not to disturb me for anything, did I not?” I said gently. It was never necessary to be cruel with Emlin.

He held out a letter for me, dripping with ribbons from its wax seals.

I was dazed. I couldn’t think. I stared at the letter. I kept hearing the voice of the dream woman. I shuddered.

“Sire, you must forgive me,” Emlin said. “Your old ally and friend, Queen Eleanor, has been drowned at sea. Her son was drowned with her, and this is an urgent letter from the Queen’s Court begging for your immediate attention. It’s been brought here by a Lady Eva who waits below with the Captain of the Queen’s Guard for you in the great hall. There is also a Lady Elvera in attendance. And two princes, sire, Alexi and Tristan, who say they are your old friends. All beg that you forgive them for journeying here unannounced.”

I was amazed.

I found myself turning around and staring at the empty bedchamber as if I expected to see the magical woman who had only just been talking to me. *Remember this*. For one second, I thought I heard her laugh. I stared stupidly at the letter again and then finally I took it from Emlin’s trembling hand.

“Died at sea, have they?” I murmured.

And Lady Elvera, of all people, had come here, the woman I’d served in Eleanor’s old Court, the woman who’d many a time . . . I was blushing at the thought of it, of myself down on my knees, naked, abject, kissing her slippers. Of course I’d seen her in the past years, entertained her in our old Court. So formal all of it, so stiff, until we’d been very drunk and alone to laugh together. But even then we had not really spoken freely, but merely through vague allusions and little jokes understood only by the two of us. And now she was here on the official business of Bellavalten!

Remember this. Trust in the bravery of your queen, as you trust in your own bravery.

I laughed. I couldn’t help it. So she was here, was she? And the others were here, my fellow slaves! I felt a strange pringling all over the surface of my skin and a stirring between my legs. I heard the crack of the paddle, the smack of the strap. I saw the magnificent Lady Elvera again as she’d been when I first knelt before her, and heard her words as if she were whispering them again in my ear. I saw them all, it seemed,

the merciless masters and mistresses of the castle and the Queen's Village.

I tried to stifle my laughter.

"Well, go and serve them food and drink at once," I said.

"Done, Your Majesty," said Emlin. "The Captain of the Queen's Guard begs you to remember him."

"Does he?" I asked, unrolling the parchment. As if I could ever forget him. Oh, I almost laughed recalling the times I'd had with the Captain of the Queen's Guard in Queen Eleanor's realm, and to think he was here, that robust and commanding individual who'd often disciplined me and scolded me and threatened me as he had the most abject of his slaves.

I opened the letter, passing rapidly over all the titles and blandishments to the heart of the matter . . .

". . . our fervent hope that you and your beloved Queen Beauty may consent to receive and rule the kingdom as Queen Eleanor long ago decreed."

I took a deep breath.

"Wake my beloved below," I said to Emlin. "Bring her to me. And tell my guests that we will attend them shortly. They're most welcome under our roof."

My pulse was throbbing. In a jarring flash I saw the mysterious female figure once more and heard her voice. Then she was gone.

I looked again at the letter. ". . . that surely you will preserve the custom of naked pleasure slavery which has made the kingdom a legend throughout the world."

Dusk. Beauty had dressed hastily, and there had been no time for her to confide in Laurent about the strange dream she'd had when she was sleeping in the garden. She sat beside the King now listening as the others spoke. What an extraordinary moment this was for her.

Queen Eleanor's letter lay before them all, and in a low but insistent voice Prince Alexi spoke of how the wealth of the late queen and all her power were theirs to claim, if only they would retain the famous customs of Bellavalten. Every syllable from his lips brought back warm memories to Beauty, as did the mere sight of his comely face and his dark, entrancing eyes. It was a pleasure to see Alexi clothed and in full possession of the honors bestowed on him by his birth and heritage. But what were these, she thought, compared to the gift he'd possessed as a naked slave who'd once taken her in his arms in secret?

The presence of all these strange guests filled Beauty with a faint and pleasurable confusion. Captain Gordon, commander of the Queen's Guard, was as alluring as she remembered—his blond hair flecked only here and there with silver, and his quick blue eyes filled with a quiet good humor. How many times had she coupled with him? She couldn't remember. And how many times had he whipped her with delicious precision? She could not remember that either. But it seemed her heart remembered for she could feel it racing.

As for Prince Alexi, who continued to speak, she had never for a second forgotten their one night of stolen pleasure in the closets of the sleeping Queen Eleanor. How she'd melted in his arms, charmed by his soft voice, and silken skin. She could scarcely suppress a faint smile as she studied him, studied his dark reddish

hair, and his compact yet strong frame. Yes, he was richly attired, as were they all, but she saw him naked as she had long ago, the respectful and secretive slave of the late queen who seemed to enjoy his subjugation and his secret disobedience completely.

Laurent spoke, interrupting her reverie. As always, her beloved husband had an easy and agreeable air of command.

“And you, Lady Eva,” Laurent asked, addressing the exquisite young woman who sat at his left, “have been in full command of the slaves for the last year?”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” the woman answered, lowering her gaze deferentially, “but should you accept the crown, I am willing, as are all here, to bend to your will entirely—and to the will of your queen.” She glanced at Beauty in the same shy manner.

And no doubt she has been very effective, Beauty thought, and all the more on account of her young age. Lady Eva had full wavy red hair and remarkably clear skin and a well-modeled face with rather luscious pink lips. Her breasts were large and well shaped beneath the silk of her simple gown, and her hands as she gestured were beguilingly graceful. No wonder Laurent was drinking her in with his eyes so boldly. Beauty smiled. Laurent was struggling with all his might not to stare shamelessly at Lady Eva’s breasts.

“We place our greatest hope in you,” the lady said. “And the royal family is entirely behind us.”

Tristan, blond and beautiful Tristan, whom Beauty had so loved, was looking at her from across the table. And when Beauty looked at him now, he smiled without hesitation. There came to her a vivid flash of their time together, naked, their hands bound, in the crude cart that was taking rebellious slaves away from the castle and to hard servitude in the village. How it stirred her blood to remember those moments in which they’d managed to express their love while jostled and tormented among the small gaggle of prisoners! And then there had been that other time, that unworldly time, when, made the playthings of the Sultan’s men, they had been pressed together to make love, their skin burnished with gold, and their lips and limbs hungering for each other.

Beauty felt a keen excitement she could not deny, and a little impatience that the same points were being circled again and again by those gathered at the table.

She lifted her hand for silence but didn’t wait for Laurent to give her permission to speak.

“I understand the wishes of the late queen,” Beauty said, her eyes fixing on Lady Eva who was the obvious leader of the party. “This is all completely clear. And I understand what you’ve said about Queen Eleanor and her son tiring of the old games, the old rules, yet not wanting to abolish them. And of course, if my lord, the King, accepts to rule Bellavaltan we would do it to uphold the ways of pleasure servitude. But surely all of you must realize that we would undoubtedly bring our own refinements to the customs of the past. We would seek to make improvements.”

Silence. Then it was Laurent who responded.

“Yes, surely that would be the case,” he said as if he hadn’t thought of it. He was trying not to smile as he glanced at Beauty and then back to the others. “After all, we would be your sovereigns, and having been slaves ourselves, we may advocate subtle changes with considerable enthusiasm.”

“Oh, yes, this would be most welcome,” Lady Eva responded. She looked directly at Beauty as she spoke. No fear in her whatsoever, Beauty noted. “But these would be improvements to what has always been so

essential to our way of life, would they not?"

"Yes, Lady Eva," Beauty replied. "Improvements to what we all hold dear. Exactly." She looked from Lady Eva to Alexi. "It was my strong feeling years ago that the Queen did not fully understand her slaves, and that at times her slaves played games with her of which she was never aware."

Laurent laughed softly under his breath. Captain Gordon appeared shocked, and Lady Elvera, the most distant of all those in attendance, cold Lady Elvera who had once been Laurent's hard mistress at the castle, remained absolutely impassive.

An awkward pause, yes, and then Alexi spoke. "That's true," he said, looking from Laurent to Beauty. "That is very true. The Queen did not understand fully the personalities or the needs of her slaves, and she was often caught unawares by their conniving."

Lady Elvera looked away as if this were contemptible. Well, so be it, thought Beauty, but it is true.

"Precisely," said Laurent with his easy self-confidence. "We slaves who rebelled did so because we wanted to be sent to the village." He looked pointedly at Lady Elvera, but she did not respond to this. "And our mistresses and masters didn't seem willing to acknowledge that this was the case, as they refused to acknowledge so much else."

At last, a faint smile played on Lady Elvera's lips. And slowly she turned her frigid gaze on the King.

"Yes, Your Majesty," she said under her breath. "There were many things the Queen never understood. And old Lord Gregory—a gentleman who was old already when he was young—never fully understood the tricks played by slaves upon their betters either. And yes, my queen, I think I understand your meaning, when you speak of refinements, improvements. And both words suggest you are in tune with the spirit of the old ways perfectly."

The Captain of the Guard couldn't suppress a short muffled laugh.

"You have something to say, Captain?" asked Beauty. She was enjoying this more and more by the minute. "Speak up."

"Your Majesty," Captain Gordon replied. "We want with all our hearts for you to assume control of the kingdom. Of course you will inaugurate new rules. You will be our king and queen. No one knows better than . . ."

"Yes, Captain?" Beauty prompted. "No one knows better than we?"

"Yes, Your Majesty," he said. "No one knows better than you and King Laurent how vital the customs are and what can and cannot be done to improve them."

"Let me be blunt," said Lady Eva, who was clearly the bravest of the lot. "If Your Majesties do not accept the rule of the kingdom, the kingdom will perish. There will be no more pleasure slavery. And the land will be carved up by the kingdom's neighbors. We are more than willing to accept your complete authority! And as these letters show, so is the royal family."

All agreed to this, it was clear.

Tristan, who had been quiet all the while, spoke up. "Of course you will bring your own ideas to Bellavalten," he said with the air of one who had once been a king himself. "Fresh ideas, innovations,

expansions of the old customs, what could be more welcome? This is precisely what the late queen hoped for. She'd lost all interest. She would have given you the kingdom herself while she was living if you had ever come to visit, because she knew that she and her son had nothing further to give to the realm. The kingdom has suffered for many years from her indifference. You'd be appalled if you knew. You knew it in its greatest time. It's been in a slow but steady decline for over a decade."

The others nodded to this.

Tristan went on. "We're eager for a new wind! What we ask is what all loyal subjects ask: that you rule with discretion and full resolution."

"Yes, precisely," said Prince Alexi in a more muted voice. "Discretion and resolution. But you know what it is we want to preserve here. You know! You know why we've come all this way. You know what our hopes are!"

Again all were nodding and murmuring in assent.

There it was again, thought Beauty, Tristan speaking for those who must serve as to the paramount importance of masters being masters, and Prince Alexi showing the old subtlety. How well she remembered Tristan's old story, of how he'd rebelled against the diffident Lord Stefan because Lord Stefan could not master him, and in the village Tristan had found the harsh punishments by Nicholas the Queen's Chronicler very much to his liking. He'd loved the sternness of Captain Gordon as well. And so had her beloved Laurent.

"Well, now, my lord," Beauty said, turning to Laurent. "Let us perhaps discuss this in the privacy of our quarters so as not to keep our honored guests in suspense any longer than necessary."

Laurent gave her the most confidential and amused look. But he rose at once, and all the others rose as well.

"Yes, my dear guests," Laurent said. "My queen and I will have an answer for you tomorrow, I promise you. Until then, please do enjoy whatever comforts we can offer you. But I ask that all of you remain ready to be summoned again by us at any time, singly or together, as we might require this for further discussion. We will not retire until quite late. And again, I assure you, we will have an answer one way or another tomorrow."

Within minutes, they were alone together behind their bedroom door, the vast chamber warmer than the great hall, and empty of all courtiers or servants.

Laurent at once took Beauty in his arms. She could see and feel that he was feverish with passion, his kisses bruising her lips as they hadn't for some time. It took all her will to hold him off, her own blood heated as it was.

"Ah, but wait, Your Majesty," said Beauty, stepping back, trying not to be entranced by the impish smile on his lips. "You are passionate, of course, your usual vigorous self, I understand that. Seeing your old lovers has done its work with you, Laurent."

"Is that so surprising, and what about you?" Laurent said in a low voice, and immediately he kissed her again and again, his lips sucking the breath out of her, his powerful fingers closing on the back of her head, yet she pulled away, pulled away from him and from what she herself wanted to do with him, and she laid a hand firmly on his chest, though he towered over her.

“Yes, what about me, my lord, the very question,” she responded, looking up into his playful dark eyes reprovingly.

“Well, what do you think?” asked Laurent. “Surely you’re going to give me a quarter of an hour now in that bed before any intelligent discussion can take place! And to rule Bellavalten! Don’t tell me you don’t want it. I know you. I was watching you in the great hall. I know you in a way they can’t know you. You want this, Beauty. Now, must I squeeze it out of you!”

“I want it and I know you want it,” she said. “And I wish I had time to tell you of the strange dreams I’ve had of late, oh, I really do. Such dreams—that something like this was in the offing, so you would realize completely what this will mean for you and for me, for us as king and queen. But there isn’t time for all that. However . . .”

“Dreams,” murmured Laurent. “You talk of dreams.”

“Yes, but I am pressing another point here if you will only listen.”

Laurent stood quiet looking down at her. But the smile hadn’t left his lips, and his brown eyes narrowed as if he were going to laugh again.

“Your Majesty, pay heed to what I’m saying,” said Beauty firmly. “In all these years, I have belonged to you entirely and exclusively.”

“Ah.”

Beauty studied his face carefully. “I have never asked you what you did in foreign lands,” she said gently, “or at sea, or after this or that battle, or even now and then in the bedchambers of our own kingdom. You are the King, yes, and kings will have their way as subjects well know, including that subject of the King who is the Queen. But don’t you see? If we rule Bellavalten, then I must have the very same prerogatives that you have always had. Laurent, that is the way of Bellavalten, that a woman may have what a man has, and men and women must serve men and women.”

Laurent stood silent for a long moment. Then he nodded.

“I know,” said Laurent softly. A bit of color flared in his cheeks. “Yes, how well I remember.”

“And so if we take this step,” Beauty said, “we take it together, and I shall rule beside you with all the prerogatives that you enjoy.”

Laurent hesitated. Then he smiled again. “I realize this, Beauty,” he said. “You will have your slaves, your days and nights of pleasure with them as freely as I will have mine, your days and nights of pleasure perhaps with those who are no longer slaves . . .” It appeared to be sinking in.

“Precisely,” she said. “And this is all the more reason why we must reaffirm our vows to each other.”

“Yes.”

“I will be the only queen of your heart, and you the only king of mine, but the pleasures of the kingdom will be enjoyed by both of us.”

Again, there came that cautious pause, but then Laurent smiled and nodded. The mockery and mischief were gone. A dreamy expression softened his face, an expression of love.

“Oh, yes, Beauty,” he said. He moved towards her and pressed her close again but this time without urgency and with respect, and gently, he kissed her lips, her cheeks, her forehead. “Yes, you are so very right, Beauty. You are often right. And you are right in this now. And this must be the way; it can be no other way.”

Once again she stepped back.

“Do you think I don’t respect you?” Laurent protested. “That I don’t respect that you took the lead with your suggestions in the hall below? I was so pleased to see it, pleased to see you wanted this, and were already thinking of how it must be. I wasn’t merely pleased. I was overjoyed, overjoyed that you remembered the pleasures of our youth, that your mind hadn’t rewritten the story of what we knew in Bellavalten together.”

“Yes, I know. I knew you were pleased, and of course I might have fallen silent if you hadn’t been pleased. But stop thinking about getting into that bed over there just now and let’s continue to talk of all this.”

“Beauty, I had a dream before the visitors arrived, just before . . .” He moved away for the first time, turning his back to her, and then he faced her again. In a low halting voice he told of the strange woman who appeared to him. “I didn’t know whether I was dreaming or awake. It seemed as real as this room is real now. I was lying there on that bed, and quite suddenly, I wasn’t, but I tell you she was as real as these walls, or that bed. And the woman said things, said things that I must—”

“You needn’t go on,” Beauty interrupted. “I had the very same dream, my lord. And I know who the woman was. I know her name. I knew it when I was but a girl and my father and mother told me of her. She is Titania of Mataquin, one of the great immortal wise women or fairies to visit the celebration of my birth. I didn’t believe a word my parents spoke on the subject of fairies coming to bestow their blessings. I was like so many children, certain such things as fairies or wise women did not exist. But when I awoke from my hundred years of sleep to the Crown Prince’s kiss, I believed everything, and I had known the fairy queen, Titania, in my dreams—yet in such vague ways I could confide this to no one. Well, she has come again to me and she says that this is our destiny.”

“Yes, that’s what she said to me,” said Laurent. He was amazed. “She spoke of *our* destiny.”

“Yes, she did to me as well,” said Beauty.

“And that it was I all along . . .”

“And indeed it was.”

“Then we are resolved, Beauty! But are we not resolved, whether these dreams be shared imaginings or something real, aren’t we both wanting this with our full hearts?” He came towards her.

“Stay your passion awhile longer,” said Beauty. “You speak of resolve. Well, let’s use this night to resolve what small unconfessed doubts we may have about this strange future. I want to be alone now with Prince Alexi perhaps.”

He was silent.

“Who knows what I will do or say?” Beauty said tenderly, appealing to him with both hands. “There are delicate questions I would put to Prince Alexi in a whisper, if you will. And there are things I need to know about my own soul. To have been a slave in Bellavalten is one thing. To be a ruler there is another. And I would encourage you, my lord, to do as you please in the same way.”

Laurent nodded. “Brave little queen,” he whispered. “Courageous little queen.” He appeared to marvel.

“I want your blessing, my lord, as I resolve these matters in my heart. I want to be alone, completely alone, with Prince Alexi.”

There was no doubt that he had caught her full meaning. Need she resort to cruder words? She thought not.

“Laurent, in all these years,” she said coaxingly, tenderly, “you have never failed me.”

Laurent’s eyes blazed, and for one frightening moment, Beauty thought the cause was lost, utterly lost, but then the brightest smile broke out on Laurent’s face. “Beauty, you never disappoint me!” he said.

“Ah, yes, darling,” Beauty said. “And if we decide that we are not to accept this invitation, then the heated passions of this night will be forgotten.”

“I agree.”

“I love you, Laurent.”

“And I you, my precious queen, my only queen,” Laurent said. “And as always you are wiser than I.” He shook his head as if still marveling at it. “The great Titania, who appeared to me, spoke of bravery and courage and how we would both need it.”

“Did she?”

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