

Lukan stood, rocking the table. Lynx's crystal glass, balanced on the edge, tumbled to the floor. It shattered on the marble tiles, shooting shards across the room. Lynx looked up from her playing, first at the crowd at the door.

It included Axel.

A flush of scarlet swept across her skin, and her eyes dropped to her drum.

Humiliation burst like a storm through Lukan. He strode over and grabbed Lynx's arm. "I think you've played enough tabor. Let's go."

Lynx's flute gave an abrupt whistle as her tune ended. A buzz rippled through the watchers. Her face hardened, and she folded her arms around her drum. "What? But . . . why?"

*"Are you a prince or a low-born?"* Thurban demanded in Lukan's head. *"Drag the Norin bitch out of here. Make her obey."*

Fighting for control, Lukan bent down and hissed in her ear, "Don't make me drag you out of here."

Lynx blinked and then demanded, "Drag me out? Why? What have I done?"

Lukan glanced over at the crowd. Everyone's eyes—including Axel's—were on him, watching him being gainsaid by a woman.

Face like granite, Axel's fists clenched and unclenched.

Lukan didn't think his cousin would dare interfere, but he had to rescue this situation. And fast.

His voice rose an octave. "Because I told you to. Now, move." He fully expected her to obey.

Lynx's eyes turned icy, and rage mounted on her face. "No one other than my king can give me orders and expect me to obey."

*Her king? How dare she?*

She stood and faced him, and he noticed for the first time that they were the same height.

Voice like a whip, Lukan shot back, "There is but *one* supreme ruler in this empire, and he is *not* the Norin king. It's time you, and all your kind, learned some respect for the Chenayan throne. My throne." He grabbed her arm and dragged her to the door.

Lynx dug her feet into the floor. Still, he pulled her along, making her heels screech across the marble tiles. In a blur of movement, Lynx lifted her drumstick and cracked him across the cheek.

Lukan froze. But it wasn't just the sting of maple that enraged him.

Lynx had hit him. In public. With Axel watching.

This was worse than anything his father or Axel had ever done to him. The ultimate humiliation. And it was unforgivable.

Lukan tore the drumstick from her hand, snapped it in half across his knee, and flung the pieces onto the floor. While she gasped with shock, he lunged behind her and gripped her upper arms. "You're coming with me. Now."

She lashed her foot back, clearly intending to impale him with her heel. Her shoe snagged in the hem of her dress. While she wrestled with the fabric—and then with him—Lukan propelled her out the door, over to the ballroom, and out onto the veranda.

It was then he noticed her face. It was feral in its fury. Never before had he seen a woman so angry—or so seductive.

It rendered him speechless. He couldn't fight the compulsion to kiss her.

She punched him on the chin, snapping his head back.