

PRINCE'S GAMBIT

THE CAPTIVE PRINCE TRILOGY

Captive Prince

Prince's Gambit

Kings Rising

PRINCE'S
GAMBIT

C. S.
PACAT

BERKLEY
New York

Prince's Gambit is dedicated to all its original readers and supporters. It's you who made the continuation of this story possible.



Map of
AKIELOS AND VERE

CHARACTERS

AKIELOS

KASTOR, King of Akielos

DAMIANOS (Damen), heir to the throne of Akielos

JOKASTE, a lady of the Akielon court

NIKANDROS, Kyros of Delpha

MAKEDON, a commander

NAOS, a soldier

VERE

The court

THE REGENT of Vere

LAURENT, the heir to the throne of Vere

NICAISE, the Regent's pet

GUION, Lord of Fortaine, member of the Veretian

Council and the former Ambassador to Akielos

VANNES, Ambassador to Vask

ANCEL, a pet

The Prince's men

GOVART, Captain of the Prince's Guard

JORD

ORLANT

ROCHER

HUET

AIMERIC

LAZAR, one of the Regent's mercenaries,
now fighting with the Prince's men

PASCHAL, a physician

At Nesson

CHARLS, a merchant

VOLO, a cardsharp

At Acquitart

ARNOUL, a retainer

At Ravenel

TOUARS, Lord of Ravenel

THEVENIN, his son

ENGUERRAN, Captain of Ravenel's troops

HESTAL, advisor to Lord Touars

GUYMAR, a soldier

GUERIN, a blacksmith

At Breteau

ADRIC, a member of the minor nobility

CHARRON, a member of the minor nobility

PATRAS

TORGEIR, King of Patras

TORVELD, younger brother of King Torgeir and
Ambassador to Vere

ERASMUS, his slave

VASK

HALVIK, a clan leader

KASHEL, a clanswoman

FROM THE PAST

THEOMEDES, former King of Akielos and Damen's
father

EGERIA, former Queen of Akielos and Damen's mother

HYPERMENESE, former mistress of Theomedes
and Kastor's mother

EUANDROS, former King of Akielos, founder of the
house of Theomedes

ALERON, former King of Vere and Laurent's father

AUGUSTE, former heir to the throne of Vere and
Laurent's older brother

CHAPTER ONE

THE SHADOWS WERE long with sunset when they rode up, and the horizon was red. Chastillon was a single jutting tower, a dark round bulk against the sky. It was huge and old, like the castles far to the south, Ravenel and Fortaine, built to withstand battering siege. Damen gazed at the view, unsettled. He found it impossible to look at the approach without seeing the castle at Marlas, that distant tower flanked by long red fields.

‘It’s hunting country,’ said Orlant, mistaking the nature of his gaze. ‘Dare you to make a run for it.’

He said nothing. He was not here to run. It was a strange feeling to be unchained and riding with a group of Veretian soldiers of his own free will.

A day’s ride, even at the slow pace of wagons through

pleasant countryside in late spring, was enough by which to judge the quality of a company. Govart did very little but sit, an impersonal shape above the swishing tail of his muscled horse, but whoever had captained these men previously had drilled them to maintain immaculate formation over the long course of a ride. The discipline was a little surprising. Damen wondered if they could hold their lines in a fight.

If they could, there was some cause for hope, though in truth, his wellspring of good mood had more to do with the outdoors, the sunshine and the illusion of freedom that came with being given a horse and a sword. Even the weight of the gold collar and cuffs on his throat and wrists could not diminish it.

The household servants had turned out to meet them, arraying themselves as they would for the arrival of any significant party. The Regent's men, who were supposedly stationed at Chastillon awaiting the Prince's arrival, were nowhere to be seen.

There were fifty horses to be stabled, fifty sets of armour and tack to be unstrapped, and fifty places to be readied in the barracks—and that was only the men at arms, not the servants and wagons. But in the enormous courtyard, the Prince's party looked small, insignificant. Chastillon was large enough to swallow fifty men as though the number was nothing.

No one was pitching tents: the men would sleep in the barracks; Laurent would sleep in the keep.

Laurent swung out of the saddle, peeled off his riding gloves, tucking them into his belt, and gave his attention to the castellan. Govart barked a few orders, and Damen found himself occupied with armour, detailing and care of his horse.

Across the courtyard, a couple of alaunt hounds came bounding down the stone stairs to throw themselves ecstatically at Laurent, who indulged one of them with a rub behind the ears, causing a spasm of jealousy in the other.

Orlant broke Damen's attention. 'Physician wants you,' he said, pointing with his chin to an awning at the far end of the courtyard, under which could be glimpsed a familiar grey head. Damen put down the breastplate he was holding, and went.

'Sit,' said the physician.

Damen did so, rather gingerly, on the only available seat, a small three-legged stool. The physician began to unbuckle a worked leather satchel.

'Show me your back.'

'It's fine.'

'After a day in the saddle? In armour?' said the physician.

'It's fine,' said Damen.

The physician said, 'Take off your shirt.'

The physician's gaze was implacable. After a long moment, Damen reached behind himself and drew his shirt off, exposing the breadth of his shoulders to the physician.

It was fine. His back had healed enough that new scars

had replaced new wounds. Damen craned for a glimpse but, not being an owl, saw almost nothing. He stopped before he got a crick in his neck.

The physician rummaged in the satchel and produced one of his endless ointments.

‘A massage?’

‘These are healing salves. It should be done every night. It will help the scarring to fade a little, in time.’

That was really too much. ‘It’s cosmetic?’

The physician said, ‘I was told you would be difficult. Very well. The better it heals, the less your back will trouble you with stiffness, both now and later in life, so that you will be better able to swing a sword around, killing a great many people. I was told you would be responsive to that argument.’

‘The Prince,’ said Damen. But of course. All this tender care of his back, like soothing with a kiss the reddened cheek you have slapped.

But he was, infuriatingly, right. Damen needed to be able to fight.

The ointment was cool, and scented, and it worked on the effect of a long day’s ride. One by one, Damen’s muscles unlocked. His neck bent forward, his hair falling a little about his face. His breathing eased. The physician worked with impersonal hands.

‘I don’t know your name,’ Damen admitted.

‘You don’t remember my name. You were in and out of

consciousness, the night we met. A lash or two more, you might not have seen morning.'

Damen snorted. 'It wasn't that bad.'

The physician gave him an odd look. 'My name is Paschal,' was all he said.

'Paschal,' said Damen. 'It's your first time to ride with troops on campaign?'

'No. I was the King's physician. I tended the fallen at Marlas, and at Sanpelier.'

There was a silence. Damen had meant to ask Paschal what he knew of the Regent's men, but now he said nothing, just held his bunched shirt in his hands. The work on his back continued, slow and methodical.

'I fought at Marlas,' said Damen.

'I assumed you had.'

Another silence. Damen had a view of the ground under the awning, packed earth instead of stone. He looked down at a scuffmark, the torn edge of a dry leaf. The hands on his back eventually lifted and were done.

Outside, the courtyard was clearing; Laurent's men were efficient. Damen stood, shook out his shirt.

'If you served the King,' said Damen, 'how is it you now find yourself in the Prince's household, and not his uncle's?'

'Men find themselves in the places they put themselves,' Paschal said, closing his satchel with a snap.

Returning to the courtyard, he couldn't report to Govart, who had vanished, but he did find Jord, directing traffic.

'Can you read and write?' Jord asked him.

'Yes, of course,' said Damen. Then stopped.

Jord didn't notice. 'Almost nothing's been done to prepare for tomorrow. The Prince says we're not leaving without a full arsenal. He also says we're not delaying departure. Go to the western armoury, take an inventory, and give it to that man.' Pointing. 'Rochert.'

Since taking a full inventory was a task that would take all night, Damen assumed what he was to do was check the existing inventory, which he found in a series of leather-bound books. He opened the first of them searching for the correct pages, and felt a strange sensation pass over him when he realised that he was looking at a seven-year-old list of hunting weaponry made for the Crown Prince Auguste.

Prepared for His Highness the Crown Prince Auguste, garniture of hunter's cutlery, one staff, eight tipped spearheads, bow and strings.

He was not alone in the armoury. From somewhere behind shelves, he heard the cultured voice of a young male courtier saying, 'You've heard your orders. They come from the Prince.'

'Why should I believe that? You his pet?' said a coarser voice.

And another: 'I'd pay to watch that.'

And another: 'The Prince has got ice in his veins. He doesn't fuck. We'll take orders when the Captain comes and tells us them himself.'

'How dare you speak about your Prince like that. Choose your weapon. I said choose your weapon. Now.'

'You're going to get hurt, pup.'

'If you're too much of a coward to—' said the courtier, and before he was even halfway through that sentence, Damen was folding his grip around one of the swords and walking out.

He rounded the corner just in time to see one of three men in the Regent's livery draw back, swing, and punch the courtier hard in the face.

The courtier wasn't a courtier. It was the young soldier whose name Laurent had dryly mentioned to Jord. *Tell the servants to sleep with their legs closed. And Aimeric.*

Aimeric staggered backwards and hit the wall, sliding halfway down its length as he opened and closed his eyes with stupefied blinks. Blood poured from his nose.

The three men had seen Damen.

'That's shut him up,' said Damen, equitably. 'Why don't you leave it at that, and I'll take him back to the barracks.'

It wasn't Damen's size that stopped them. It wasn't the sword he held casually in his hand. If these men really wanted to make a fight out of it, there were enough swords, flingable armour pieces, and teetering shelves to turn this