



HUNGRY EYES

By

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Chapter One

The thick black hair all over Ruggero's body stood at attention as he stared fixedly at the full moon outside the arrow slit window of the castle's northwest turret, its light reflecting off the thick jewel-encrusted collar that hung loosely around his neck. An ominous sense of foreboding seeped into his every pore as he studied the blood red ring that encircled the moon. The Palatines, the educated ancients that had come before his time, had believed that the blood red ring was an ominous omen, a portent of evil, a sign of trouble to come.

He had not needed the omen, however. His own senses had warned him, the sense of foreboding growing more and more pronounced in the past weeks. Even without his gift, he had the acute, finely honed keenness of his senses—his ears to hear, his eyes to see, his mind to fit the puzzle pieces together as he gathered them to himself one by one. He had had no doubt that there was trouble on the horizon even before the portent appeared in the night sky. But then he had long known that Balthazar had not been defeated and that he would not stop. Eventually, Balthazar would regain his full strength and come bearing down upon the castle once more with the magical army that he had spent so many years creating.

His father had died in vain, he thought with a mixture of fury and pain, bought them only a little more time. If only his father had succeeded in killing Balthazar the kingdom would be at peace without the constant worry of the Evil One taking control, but fate had not seen fit to deal them that hand. Instead, he had sacrificed his life's energy to only come close to inflicting a mortal wound. He had died only to buy them time to wait for the next storm, time to wonder if they would weather it and prevail or if this time, when Balthazar struck, it would be the end of them all!

A chill swept over Ruggero at the prospect of what might happen to his princess at the hands of the Evil One. A sense of urgency followed on its heels. She needed him, needed his protection.

He needed to be near her, to stand between her and the storm he sensed approaching. He could not waste another minute staring at the moon and wondering how much faith he could place in the portent, could not stand idly by, dwelling on the possibility of trouble to come.

He needed to see her. He needed to hear her kind voice, to see her sweet, beautiful face and assure himself that she was safe. He never truly felt at ease unless he was with her, protecting her. Gathering himself, uttering a rumbling growl from deep in chest, he padded toward the stairs and bounded swiftly down the curving stone steps of the turret guard room. His feline eyes adjusted without difficulty to the faint moonlight filtering down the stairwell. Once he reached the lower floor, he moved faster still, covering the distance that separated him from his princess at a ground eating lope until at last he reached the thick, heavy oak door that protected the princess's chambers. Flexing, his claws on his right front paw, he scratched on his usual spot on the bottom edge of the

door a few times, now worn from years of his scratching demand for entry, uttering a low growl of impatience as he waited uneasily for the princess to acknowledge his presence and let him in.

“Just a minute Ruggero,” Bredamante called from within, her voice threaded with both amusement and irritation at his impatience.

Relief flooded him as she opened the door and moved to the side to allow him to enter. Rushing into the room, Ruggero surveyed it quickly for anything he deemed offensive, jumping on and off of her bed, peering beneath it, searching the dark corners for even the faintest scent of danger. Finally satisfied, he made his way over to where she still stood. Having closed the door, she leaned back against the oak panel, watching her companion’s behavior with a mixture of amused indulgence and uneasiness.

He stared up at her face for a long moment, regretting the uncertainty that flickered in her eyes. Uttering a rumbling purr to soothe her, he butted his head affectionately against her belly, reassuring himself with her scent and marking her with his own as he rubbed his face against her and then his body.

“Now what is all the fuss about Ruggero?” Bredamante asked playfully as she bent down on one knee to give him a warm welcoming hug around his neck. Burrowing her face against his thick fur, she breathed in the pleasant aroma that was only his as she held him for a moment, and then pressed her head against his hard shoulder, listening to the comforting beat of his heart. After a moment, she pulled away from him to survey his face, and he head-butted her affectionately.

“Ow! That hurt Ruggero.” She rubbed the spot where he had connected with her head. “If I did not know any better, I would think that you missed me,” she said, playfully tapping his nose with one finger. “And you should,” she added scoldingly. “I have been waiting nigh an hour for you.”

Ruggero rubbed his long body forcefully against her shoulder at her comment, his heavy weight almost pushing her off balance. She caught herself with one hand and stood up, brushing at the debris her plain red muslin dress had picked up off the stone floor. She ruffled the soft black fur on his head when she was done, smiling down at him affectionately.

Chuckling at his antics, Bredamante shook her head at herself for scolding him as if he could actually understand. Her panther was unusually intelligent as far as cats went, but it would be silly to think that he had actually missed her or could understand her scolding. She could not deny that she had missed him, though. Truth be told, she had been fighting the pull of slumber for hours, had been waiting for Ruggero to return from his nightly survey of the castle grounds before she let the full effects of sleep take her.

She did not sleep nearly as well as she used to. As far back as she could remember, Ruggero had shared her bed at night and snuggled against her, until just recently. He had just stopped one day, for no apparent reason at all. She missed the familiar comfort of his heavy weight behind her, his warm body, his soft fur, the pleasantly soothing sound of his purring as she drifted off into slumber. She really could not fathom why he had taken to sleeping on the floor. It was stone, cold. She could not think it was at all comfortable, and yet he had resisted all her efforts to coax him into bed with her.

She had already settled on the edge of the bed when a noise erupted outside in the courtyard interrupting her reverie. For a moment, she froze, listening intently, trying to

convince herself that the cries of alarm could not be what she thought it was. As Ruggero charged toward the window, however, she leapt from the bed to follow him and see what was happening outside. As she looked out the arrow slit, her face became ashen and gooseflesh erupted all over her body. By the light of the full moon, she could make out a horde of shapes in the darkness, some of them holding torches. Her heart clenched painfully in fear as her shocked mind finally accepted what it could not deny. The castle was under attack!

It was that bastard Balthazar!

Bredamante turned away from the horrifying images outside her window and ran as quickly as she could to the door of her bedroom chamber as an alarm sounded outside on the castle wall. Reaching up, she grabbed the wooden bolt and dropped it into place in front of the door and stepped away as she heard the sounds of life and death fighting erupt on the castle floor below her chambers. The intruders had caught them off guard and had already entered the castle! The sickeningly distinct sound of metal upon metal, multiplied by hundreds of blows, rang through the castle corridors, and men screamed in agony while others bellowed blood curdling war cries.

Bredamante knew that if the fighting had already advanced to the lower level, it would not be long before it reached the stairs and then her chambers. She quickly scanned her room for something to use as a weapon, but she already knew there was nothing, nothing she could lift off the floor. Since the first onslaught of Balthazar's attacks many years prior, in which her father had been slain by that bastard's hands, she had been forced to sell everything that would fetch a price to fortify the castle, make new weaponry, and hire new guards. But all her preparation had been for naught. Balthazar had easily broken through into the inner sanctum of the castle.

If only her father and the sacred panthers were still here to protect her! She felt desperation overwhelm her, and then her gaze focused on Ruggero. Her father had told her stories when she was a little girl about the panthers that had protected their family for generations. She had not really believed him then. She had thought that it was a sweet fanciful story he had told her to amuse her on cold winter nights when she was forced to stay inside the castle. Right now she prayed that it was not all just fancy. He was a particularly large panther, as far as the breed went, but she knew he would not be able to fend off the entire magical army of Balthazar's creation. Perhaps, if he could just distract them . . .

Before Bredamante had time to formulate a plan of action, she heard some of the intruders that had broken into the castle shouting something at each other as they began beating at her door. It sounded as if they were using a battering ram to get inside. It was not going to be long before the integrity of the door was compromised.

Squeezing her eyes tightly shut, Bredamante took several calming breaths, praying for the goddess to aid her in her time of need. And then an idea came to her through the chaos. She could hide behind the door, and, while Ruggero pounced on the attackers, she could slip out, hopefully unnoticed. It was grasping at straws, but she did not have any options. By the sounds of her door groaning, this was her only choice, she just hoped that Ruggero would not get hurt in the melee.

Running over to the door, Bredamante leaned against the stone wall by the hinges and waited for the door to give way, holding her hands in front of her in case, when they broke through, the door tried to slam against the wall she was leaning on.

She was not going to have to wait much longer. She looked over at Ruggero, only a few feet in front of the door. He was growling low in his throat, moving his large front paws back and forth on the stone floor, his green eyes sparkling with the lust of battle, all too ready to leap on the intruders once they broke through.

With the thundering sound of splintering wood, the door finally gave way, falling in pieces on the floor as three of Balthazar's men came flooding into the room. They stopped just short of entering all the way into the princess's chamber when they spotted with some alarm the huge black panther's dark, hungry green eyes glaring at them. They stood frozen in horror, each waiting for one of their cohorts to make the first move toward the dangerous animal, all having entirely forgotten their main goal in kidnapping the princess.

Ruggero seized the element of surprise and lunged swiftly at the portly man that unfortunately made up the front of the cowardly trio of trespassers. The portly man screamed in sheer terror and ducked to the floor with amazing speed for a man of his size, just before the Ruggero's claws could sink into the flesh of his upper torso, leaving the now enraged panther to land unceremoniously on the two stunned men that had been standing behind him.

Ruggero lashed out at the men in his outrage, ripping one man's fingers clean off of his hand with his large sharp teeth. Blood began to spurt furiously in every direction as the man stood gaping at the wound, holding what was left of his hand protectively against his chest. He realized belatedly that the panther was after more than just his hand and turned to make a run for it when he ran straight into the princess as she tried to quietly sneak around the door and exit the room without alerting the trespassers to her presence. He tumbled into her, and they both fell into a bloody heap on the floor, both of them screaming at the top of their lungs.

Ruggero growled ferociously behind them, furious that the cowardly knave had dared to touch his princess. He leapt into the air and snatched a hold of the skin on the back of the man's neck, wrenching the man completely off of the princess, eliciting a horrible, almost feminine, shriek and a healthy flow of urine from the man.

Bredamante took the opportunity to regain her footing. Before she could run, though, the portly man that had eluded the panther in the beginning of the struggle grabbed her by her thick, waist length blonde hair and pulled her to an abrupt stop, twisting her hair painfully in his chubby hand. Bredamante screamed out loud at first in shock and then in frustration as she realized that she had been caught.

Ruggero turned at the sound of her scream, having ripped out the throat of the small man beneath him that had stumbled over the princess in his haste to get away. He licked his lips with his thick, pink tongue and made ready to pounce on the man that held his princess captive when the last man of the trio, previously forgotten until now, threw a small glass vial in front of him. The strange glass vial broke into a thousand little pieces on the stone floor in front of Ruggero and a strange, hypnotic green vapor began to float sinuously into the air.

Ruggero snarled viciously at the nefarious odor that assaulted him immediately when the vial broke, trying to move away and turn his head, hold his breath, but it was too late. He had already inhaled some of the debilitating vapor. His vision became blurry as he desperately tried to look within himself and find the strength past the strong pull of the drug that was taking over his body and make a line for the portly man that held

the princess captive, a menacing grin deepening the folds in his filthy round face.

Uttering a snarl of rage, Ruggero leapt at the man, but the drug had affected his equilibrium, distorted his senses. He discovered even as he leapt to the princess' defense that he had miscalculated where they were standing. Unable to alter course or slow his momentum, he slammed into the stained glass of the large window that was behind them. The glass shattered into fragments. The world started to tilt. He felt himself falling and falling, for what seemed like forever. His mind became numb. The last sound he heard before his body finally landed and everything went black was Bredamante's desperate, sobbing cry. "Ruggero!"

* * * *

Ruggero awoke with a mind splitting ache in his head. His vision began to swim when he attempted to open his heavy eyelids. He closed his eyes at the dizzying images that flitted before him. Deciding to wait a few minutes before testing his eyes again, he searched his memory for what had happened and how he had come to be ... where ever he was. When he finally opened his eyes again and managed to survey his surroundings, he was not surprised at what he found. He had remembered inhaling the vapors from the vial, remembered crashing into the window when he had leapt at the man holding Bredamante. He even remembered the tinkling of shattering glass. More powerfully than anything else, he remembered hearing the princess' terrified scream.

He had plunged through one of the larger stained glass windows on the second story of the castle. It was no small wonder his whole body thrummed with pain. He had landed in a small shrub, which was probably why no one had seen him and disposed of his body, or taken him to Balthazar.

Ill with aftereffects of whatever it was he had inhaled, nearly blinded by the pain still wracking his body from the fall, a sickening rage rose to envelop him that wiped those personal considerations completely from his mind.

Balthazar had overtaken the castle with his sneak attack and his ruthless magical army.

Lifting his head, he closed his eyes, focusing his entire being on seeking the princess. Faintly, her scent lingered, but his senses told him the princess was gone. Where, he did not know. All he did know for certain was that if she had been prisoner somewhere on the castle grounds he could have picked up her scent and Balthazar would be arranging a quick wedding.

With an effort, Ruggero stood on four shaky legs and picked his way from the crushed branches of the shrub that had broken his fall. He would have to get off of the castle grounds and quickly, he realized, before someone came to look for his body. His body rebelled at the torments of moving, though, and he could only hobble slowly away from the castle as pain lanced through his body with every step.

Ignoring the blinding pain, he searched for the elusive scent of Bredamante that teased at him, drifting past his nostrils and then disappearing again, and eventually followed her scent to its source just beyond the castle walls. He stared dully at the faint footprints for a few moments and finally, dropping his head near the ground, limping, he followed it with dogged determination.

After what seemed like hours, Ruggero discovered he had lost the princess' scent. Too exhausted to care if anyone saw him or tried to do something to him in his weakened state, he collapsed at the base of a large tree at the edge of the wilderness that bordered

the castle's grounds.

Frustration and sorrow filled him. He sensed that Bredamante had escaped ... somehow. Other scents had mingled with hers in the beginning, but they had fallen by the way as he had followed, their paths diverging. It was good. It meant that that filthy knave Balthazar did not have her. And yet it also meant that she was alone, unprotected, vulnerable to those determined to harm her.

She needed him, more now than ever, but he realized he was useless to her as he was. He did not really know what he had been thinking. Common sense dictated that he would need to rest after his nearly fatal injuries, that he needed to give his body time to heal itself, but he knew deep down that his heart had been leading him, not his head.

He had picked up the princess' scent deep in the woods and subconsciously been making his way to her. It was foolish. He would have to stop. He would do her no good in his condition. Before exhaustion overtook him, it occurred to him as he tried to focus on a road that lay not far from his sanctuary under the tree, that if the princess had escaped, surely she would stick to the protective seclusion of the forests, stay away from the roads and the possibility of discovery, potentially from Balthazar's men.

He could not believe that he had lost her scent.

* * * *

"What have we here, Meg?" Peter said with a jolly bellow, his large belly shaking with his delight at his good fortune as he pulled the ox driven cart to a halt. "It looks like a panther! Balthazar will pay a mighty pretty coin for one such as this."

"Why I thought old Balthazar done away with all of them panthers," Peter's wife, Meg, said, eyeing the creature suspiciously beneath the sagging flesh of her eyelids. It looked dead, not that she cared if it was, but she surely did not want to get close enough to find out. "Peter, you best be to stay clear of that thing," she warned. "We don know nothing about that. Could be that thing is still alive, could be dead, could be we end up dead messin with it!"

Peter waved his hand in dismissal of Meg's comments, feeling certain he could handle whatever resistance the panther might put up considering the condition it was in. It looked half dead. He could see dark blood dried on its black coat, a good deal of it. Whatever it had been through, the great cat surely did not have the energy to put up a fight. Climbing down from the cart, he grabbed a small fishing net from the back and crept closer to the panther, taking care not to step on any branches or any of the underbrush that might make any noise that would alert the panther to his presence. His pudgy hands tightened on the net he clutched as he neared the sleeping beast—or unconscious, more like, he assured himself.

Ruggero had heard the cart with the man and woman stop on the road. He had heard the man as he talked with his wife, as he crept closer and closer to where he lay in the grass under the tree. He had known that something like this would happen. He knew he should have tried harder to find a place to rest that offered more seclusion. He had just been so distraught about the princess and beat all to the goddess and back that he had not really cared what would happen to him when he finally collapsed to take a much needed reprieve. All he had wanted to do was put some distance between himself and the castle . . . between himself and the bastard Balthazar.

He needed to find Bredamante, and that he could not do that if this man captured or killed him. He could not protect Bredamante if anything happened to him.

Slowly, Ruggero opened his eyes and emitted an ominous warning to the man who was still approaching him, the low growl coming from deep within his dry throat.

Peter stopped in his tracks when he saw the panther open his hungry green eyes just a slit. The blood in his veins all but curdled when he heard the deep throated growl that came from the panther. Sweat began to bead on his skin, and he turned tail and ran back to his cart and his wife, quicker than he had ever moved in his life. He grabbed up the reins and slapped tattered leather to his oxen's hind quarters.

Ruggero, who had not moved, watched as they disappeared down the dusty road. He was glad that they were gone, relieved actually. He really had not had the strength to contend with anything at the moment.

He realized, though, that he could not remain where he was any longer. Getting to his feet with an effort, moving with a little more speed and ease than he had had the day before, he made his way into the protective blanket of the forest. He did not go far before he found a large burrow deep in the side of a hill of dirt and trees. Whatever had lived in the burrow before was long gone now. He did not smell an animal or sense any presence within.

Slowly, and with great pain and much difficulty, he slid into the hole and plopped down. He needed to rest. He needed time to heal, but he could not afford to take too long. Even as he chaffed at his weakness and the delay in finding Bredamante, he thanked all that the Palatine's held holy that he would be totally healed in a few days, strong enough to defend his princess. If it was not for his superior panther strength and ability to rejuvenate quickly, he would be dead now and the princess would have no one to aid her in her time of need.

Balthazar had already succeeded in killing her father, the king, and his proud, lifelong companion, Darian, Ruggero's father, not even two seasons ago.

In his weakened state, that thought settled heavily upon him once more. Now he was alone, the last of his people. There would be no more panthers. There would be no one to pass on the knowledge that centuries of his kind had used and learned. The way of life his people had known would be gone forever when he died.

He had mourned the death of Bredmante's father almost more even than his own father. He had raged at his father's death, but he had felt pride that he had given his life willingly to try to save his king and shame that he had not succeeded. He had felt deeply the blow of failing Bredamante and her father, for his people had guarded the royal family for generations—died for them when necessary.

Now, though, he felt his aloneness as he had not felt it before, not allowed himself to feel it—perhaps would never have felt it at all if he had not lost his princess, if he was not so swamped with guilt and fear for her safety while he lay weak and useless. A lump of emotion formed in his throat, and he cursed Balthazar with his unrelenting greed for things he had no right to.

The realm rightfully belonged to Bredamante now and no other.

The kingdom had been in a great uproar when the news of the king's death had finally reached the four corners of the realm. But the contempt of the people had not stopped the Evil One. He had just drawn back into hiding, bided his time, and rebuilt his army. He had waited patiently like a spider in his web.

Bredamante had done everything she could in a time of great tragedy. She had rebuilt the castle's defenses, educated the commoners to the kingdom's plight. She had

worked so long and hard and had spent many sleepless nights going over plans with the castle guard. But all her efforts had been in vain.

Now the castle was under the evil magician's command, but at least he did not have the princess. Ruggero tried not to let his mind create the worst scenarios of what she could be going through at this very moment. She was intelligent, resourceful, and fast on her feet. She would be well until he found her. All he wanted to do was to get better and find her, hold her close, and keep her safe. He closed his eyes as he reminded himself that he would be no good to her as he was. With great reluctance, he waited.

Chapter Two

It took two full days of resting and healing before Ruggero regained his strength. In that time he had had the time to consider how best to go about finding the princess and had come to the conclusion that he must remove the royal collar from his throat. He was bound to happen upon more humans and when he did he realized they would instantly know that he belonged to the royal family if he was wearing the collar. Panthers in general were rare, he knew, but it was still safer without it. He would be less likely to run afoul of Balthazar before he could find the princess if he could not be so easily identified.

He had never tried to remove it before. The collar not only represented the crown, it represented his place of honor among royalty. More than that, it linked him to his princess. As loathe as he was to remove it, however, he would not allow so small a thing as his vanity to cause him to fail her, and he struggled with his paws until he had pulled it over his head.

It was not relief that filled him once he had succeeded, though. It was not even anguish at having to remove something so integral to who and what he was. Pain filled him, real pain, excruciating pain ... and fear, because the moment the collar fell from his neck something powerful seized him inside, felt as if it was tearing him apart, turning him inside out. Darkness enveloped his mind as he collapsed to the ground, his body convulsing. He could not think for the pain, could not see. Blindly, he searched for the collar he had removed and as he raked the ground around him, he felt his claws vanish, felt the thick pads beneath them grow thinner. When the pain finally left him, he could do nothing for many moments but gasp for breath. Finally, he pushed himself up ... and made a startling discover ... He was panther no more. He had become a man.

Stunned, he pushed himself onto his knees and stared down at his hands, his arms, his torso, examining his new man form, at first with a sense of disbelief. He had never imagined what he it would look or feel like if he were to become human. He had never dreamed that there would be a time when it would be necessary for him to do so, though he had always known that it was possible.

He had not known the way, though. His father had died before he had passed on to him the secret of how to change into a man ... if his father had even known.

One of the primary functions in the panther society had been the protection of the throne, and, long ago, a panther had given up the human part of itself in an amazing display of loyalty and love in order to protect the royals. Since that time, it had been their highly guarded secret that they possessed the power and knowledge to be human. It was forbidden to let humans know this truth of their nature, unless the most extreme or life-threatening of circumstances made it absolutely necessary. He did not believe that since the time when the panthers had first sworn to guard the secret of their human side many generations ago that any of them had actually become human at all.

He was dismayed. This was not good, he thought. This form did not have the strength of his animal side. He could *feel* that he was not as strong. His keen senses had all but abandoned him. He could not see, hear, or smell as well as he could before. The

body did not feel weak, precisely, but it was certainly not as powerful as he was accustomed to.

How would he protect the princess? Even supposing he could find her with this body?

It occurred to him after a few moments that there was a definite advantage to it, despite the disadvantages. With or without the collar, he could not move freely among humans in his panther form. And he would have to. He knew she was no longer in the woods, that she had not done as he had supposed she would and stayed in the forest to hide. Instead, she had fled to hide among her own kind. To go after her, he would be forced to hide in daylight and search only when the darkness made it impossible for humans to see him, and at that he could not enter any of their dwellings without raising an alarm.

The question was, could he actually pass as a human?

After studying over it for a time, Ruggero decided he could. He had lived with the humans since he was born. He knew their behaviors, their customs, and their language—he was not at all certain he could speak it since he never had before, but he could certainly understand it.

This form, he finally decided, was exactly what he needed ... for the time being anyway ... until he found the princess.

For that matter, it was obvious that Balthazar had placed a price on his head. The peasant who had stopped to try to capture him had expected to be paid for his capture. Now that he was the last of his kind, he knew it was more important than ever to hold on to his secret. And what better way to hide his identity and the secret of his people than by making the last panther disappear completely? Even now Balthazar's men were probably roaming the nearby countryside in search of him, for they had to know by now that they had failed to kill him.

It still made him uneasy, but he knew he could resume his panther form if it became necessary. The collar was the key, the talisman that would summon his beast forth. His beast was within him. He still had the strength, the healing power, the senses, and the heart of the panther, a heart that beat only for the princess, the only thing he had left in life to live for, and he did not even know where she was.

Dismissing his qualms, he set out to find her, but he quickly realized that men did not travel very fast on their own two legs. After one full rise and set of the sun, Ruggero finally reached the village of Krom. He did not immediately step foot into the village, though, because he had discovered he had one problem that he had not considered when he finally left the woods. He had absolutely no problem with being naked, the natural product of changing from a panther to a man, but he was sure that the other humans, especially the females of the breed, would definitely find fault with his lack of clothes. He knew this to be true because of how he had been raised.

As far back as he could recall, every one of the humans in the castle had been clothed. At times they abandoned their clothes to bathe or to find a different set of clothes, but then they quickly donned them again. Even in the solitude of their beds while they slept they wore them—his princess always had.

The idea did not appeal very much to him since the only thing that he had ever worn was the bejeweled collar, but he knew he would need some clothing in order to go unnoticed and to carry out his search for the princess. The problem was, how to get

them?

As Ruggero stealthily crept around the back of the first cottages at the edge of the village, he espied an assortment of clothes on a line unattended. He remembered the lady's maids at the castle using this technique to get clothes from wet to dry. Remaining plastered to the side of the house until he could hear that there was no one about to see him, he ran quickly over to the line, grabbed a handful of fabric, and ran back to the side of the house where he could get dressed without being seen.

It was only then that he discovered that getting dressed was going to be a little more complicated than he had expected. He held the things up, turning them round and round while he tried to decide which way they were to be worn and how he was supposed to get inside them. Why did humans have to wear these things? Why were they so hard to get into? Why could they not just go around naked?

That thought brought him to a mental halt as an image of the princess rose in his mind. The image instantly stirred his beast, to his surprise, or rather the thought of anyone else seeing her as he had stirred his beast. An angry sense of possessiveness washed through him.

He had seen Bredamante's naked form while she had bathed many nights at the castle. He had always secretly enjoyed those times, even when he had been a very young kit, but as he had matured he had enjoyed them in a way he had realized that he should not. And yet, when she lingered in the large metal tub that her maids brought for her, lavishing her body in delicious smelling caked soaps, and then rinsing her enticing form with the large urns of warm reserve water while she sang him a song he had not been able *not* to watch her with a hunger that he was afraid to put a name to.

It was treasonous, and dishonorable.

She did not know what he was, did not know that a human hid inside the beast she lavished with affection, or that she had innocently touched that part of him, arousing his man so that he began to think thoughts about her that he should never have allowed himself to think.

The princess was his to guard, to protect, not his in the way he had begun to want her so that his life had begun to be almost as much torment to him as it was a joy.

Ruggero's new man cock began to pulse as images of her rose in his mind and refused his efforts to banish them. It became very thick and hard at the vivid memories. His heart began to race, his lungs to labor to drag in air. His face became warm and flushed when he realized that his cock was becoming erect at just the thought of the princess naked.

Wonderful! he thought, glaring down at the thing that had sprung up to give his thoughts away. Something else he had to deal with!

Struggling to dismiss the problem, he held the clothing at arms length, examining them carefully. The holes, he knew, were needed for fitting over the various appendages of the human form, and, fortunately, he had recalled that men did not wear the things his lady wore. The problem was, he had not watched the men dress. He had watched the princess. He discovered, finally, though that there were two narrow tubes of fabric that jutted to either side of the thing with small holes at the ends—the hands, he decided, for his head would certainly not fit through them. And the smaller hole of the other two would have to be for his head.

It was still a battle to get the twice damned thing on. It seemed to take on a life of

its own as he struggled with it. He had broken a sweat and managed to rip it before he finally settled the thing over his upper body.

Sweat, he thought in disgust. He had forgotten humans sweated ... and stank. Bredamante would not like his smell, he felt certain, if he did much of this sweating!

After some loud tearing of fabric and much frustrated grunting, he finally managed to pull the pants on. It was with a heavy heart that he looked upon the shirt that he had absconded with. It appeared to be a lady's blouse, perhaps better suited for sleeping—which mayhap explained why it fit so poorly. He gritted his teeth in irritation and looked back at the line where he had procured the articles of clothing from. He was still trying to decide whether to try again when he heard a noise from deep inside the dwelling. Ducking down low to the ground beside the cottage, he went perfectly still, watching, waiting. Minutes later, he spied a small, dark woman approaching the clothes. *So much for going unnoticed. She was almost certain to notice things were missing.*

Realizing that he was stuck with what he had gotten, he made his way further out of sight down the side of the cottage and looked over the shirt once more. He was surely going to get some looks with this shirt, but it was better than being naked, or half naked, he finally decided. Maybe he could pass as a foreigner, a stranger to this land, he thought hopefully?

He rubbed his hand roughly over his face in frustration. His skin was not smooth as it had been at first. Short, black hairs had sprouted from his face sometime in the course of the day. They scratched at his palms and made a scraping noise as he ran his hand over his cheeks. Yet another thing that was starting to wear on his patience! The hair that had sprouted from his head was almost worse. It was not stiff and scratchy as the hair on his face was, but it was far too long. He could not decide what to do with it, but he could not seem to keep it from hanging down over his eyes. Each time he raked it back with his hand, it fell forward again.

His first day being a human was turning out to be one of the hardest, most miserable days of his life.

After quite a bit of adjusting, Ruggero gave up on the lady's shirt. It was a tight fit, having been meant for a woman, even though he had broken through more of the fabric than still covered him. It was almost like a second skin—everywhere except where he had made new holes. His man nipples were flattened against the taut fabric of the shirt and were plainly visible under the transparent material. The collar of the shirt, lined with frothy pink lace, formed a perfect v down the front of his chest from his neck to his navel, exposing a small patch of black curly chest hair. He did not know how acceptable that would be, but he would have to bear with it.

He frowned thoughtfully at the small patch of hair that was exposed. Why did humans have any hair at all? This small patch of hair could not keep his chest warm.

Dismissing the puzzle finally, Ruggero thrust his collar into the pocket of his pants, stepped away from the house, and walked as humanly as he could into the village, his bare feet seeming to pick up every small thing in his path and sending pain shooting through him.

He sighed miserably, struggling to ignore the pain and keep from wincing with every step. *I sure do miss my paws.*

Despite the boldness of his stride, Ruggero was uneasy as he entered the village. Once inside, he was amazed that he just seemed to melt in with the humans. They did not

appear to notice anything strange or different about him at all. He frowned after a moment, mentally revising that thought. The truth was, they seemed to look through him. Everyone was in such a hurry to go about their own business they bumped and jostled him and trod on his bare feet as they rushed about the village.

He discovered that his senses were not nearly as dulled as he had thought. He could smell the scents of the village far better than he wanted to. His heart beat quickened with relief and excitement, however, as he reached the center of the village and caught wind of the princess. She was near! He had told himself that she could not have gone far. She was on foot, as he was, and human feet did not cover much ground very quickly.

Heartened, cautioning himself not to behave in a way that might draw unwanted attention, he began to follow his nose as the trail of her scent became stronger. It led him eventually to a two-story building near the opposite end of the village. A rough balcony protruded from the upper floor of the building. The railing was lined with women who were all in various states of undress. They were leaning on the railing, or hanging over it and calling and waving at the men below.

He stopped abruptly, studying them curiously, trying to decide what sort of place it was and why the women were behaving in such a strange way. For that matter, he had to wonder why most of the people hurrying along the street seemed to be ignoring them when they were half naked. Slowly, it dawned on him what this place must be. It had to be a house for whores, he decided, remembering that the men-at-arms of the castle often spoke of this sort of place where they found women who were willing to mate with them for coin. Anger budded inside of him as the certainty grew in him that he had correctly identified the establishment. What, he wondered in growing rage, was his princess doing in this sort of place?

He would have dismissed it. He *wanted* to dismiss the possibility, but there was no mistaking her scent, corrupted though it was by the mingling scents of so many other humans. Before he could completely lose his temper and damn the consequences of charging inside to find her, he was trampled by a very large, very heavy man with hard boots. Pain shot through him, effectively diverting him. The instinctive urge to lash out at the man and bite him for stomping on his bare toes gripped him. He had already uttered a snarl and lifted his hand when it hit him that it *was* a hand, not his razor sharp claws ... and it still took all he could do to close his hand into a fist and return it to his side.

Grinding his teeth against the pain, Ruggero hobbled to a bench under the railing full of women and sat down, pulling up his injured feet one at a time to examine the extent of the damage done, certain his toes had been broken under the man's hard boots. They felt crushed. They did not look nearly as damaged as he felt they should under the circumstances, however, and, thankfully, the pain began to subside. He flexed his new toes back and forth a few times, still trying to get used to the new body he found himself in.

"What do you call yourself doing?" an older woman demanded from the door of the establishment.

Ruggero looked up from his foot that he had been examining very intently to see a very robust woman approaching him, her garishly red glossed lips in sharp contrast to the vibrant green and purple satins of her dress.

Madame Carley's face was pinched with irritation as she looked down upon the stranger taking up her bench, a thin brown cigar perched tightly in the corner of her thin lips. She withdrew her cigar hastily with one hand and blew out a quick puff of gray smoke. "What are you doing?" she asked, beginning to wonder if the man was deaf or dumb.

Ruggero stared at the woman uneasily, realizing that he had not thought about what he would say if he encountered a human. He needed to find the princess, who he knew could not be far because her scent was fresh and strong, but he could certainly not simply ask for her when he knew Baltazar's men were probably scouring the realm for her—had very likely offered a reward for her capture. Unfortunately, he had not only not devised any sort of story to explain his presence or his business, he discovered he had no idea of how to go about concocting one. As he sat trying to think up a convincing tale, however, the woman came up with one for him.

"Ah. Well, Madame Carley sure is sorry, shug. I did not realize that you were simple. What a shame! And you're such a pretty thing!" She smiled pleasantly at him then, her large breasts nearly bouncing right out of her gown as she bent forward to examine him more closely.

Insulted and wondering how the devil she had arrived at the conclusion that he was simple minded, Ruggero bared his teeth at her in return without making any real attempt to smile. Fortunately, he was distracted from his irritation just then as his gaze was caught by the bobbing, pendulous breasts she displayed as she bent toward him.

He came out of his trance abruptly when she touched him. A jolt went through him as her hand closed around his upper arm, squeezing. He tensed all over. It took all he could do to hold perfectly still while she patted his chest, examined his hands, and then his clothing, not because he felt threatened but because no one had ever touched him except the princess, and he was fairly certain he did not like it. He was *sure* he did not like it when she ran her hand along his thigh.

Next, he thought indignantly, she would be examining his man thing and expecting him to allow her to check his teeth. Disguise or not, he was *not* going to submit himself to *that* indignity he decided beligerently!

Finally, apparently satisfied, she patted him on top of the head. "Poor thing, you must surely be starving. Why don you come in? I will get you something to eat, or rather, I will have cook prepare you somethin."

A little surprised that he had been invited in when he had been certain he would have to wait until dark and figure out a way to sneak inside to search for the princess, he stood readily and followed her into the building. The offer of food was more than welcome if it came to that. He had not fed since the day before, and it took no more than the suggestion to have his stomach rumbling in anticipation.

"Oooh, you are a fine, strapping lad," Madame Carley cooed as they went inside, lifting a hand to pat his shoulder and then running it along his back. "You are welcome to stay here if you like. I need someone to help me around the house. The goddess knows I sure can't get them girls to do nothin but lay on their backs." She leaned into him at that, a lopsided grin on her face.

He looked down at her in confusion, and she laughed, sure that the comment had gone right over his head.

Ruggero kept quiet as he was led to a room at the rear of the building, the kitchen,

where he met another stout lady, Cook. “Well, Madame, what is it you have here, now?”

Carley beamed at Cook, proud of the pretty new man she had just found on her doorstep to help around the house. “I will have you to know, Cook, that I found this poor thing sitting outside. I reckon he is simple. I think we can use him, though. You feed him and, when he is done, get him to fixin’ this place up, startin with the sweepin. Doan wear him out too much, though, I might have a use for him later tonight, if you know what I mean.” Madame Carley winked at Cook and then laughed uproariously, slapping Ruggero soundly on the buttocks before she left the room.

With a mixture of indignation and surprise, Ruggero turned to watch the woman as she left, certain he had not seen that behavior before ... not from a woman, at any rate. He had seen the men of the castle slap the buttocks of the women, but he had *not* seen the women do such a thing to any of the men.

He was still trying to decide what to make of the woman’s odd behavior, wondering if the woman thought he was a female because of the female’s clothing he was wearing, when he turned to look at the woman she had called Cook.

Cook motioned for him to sit down on a long bench at a table inside the kitchen not far from the cooking chimney and food preparation area. She set down a heaping plate of meats and vegetables in a brown gravy, and then she sat down on the bench not far from him to watch him enjoy the fruits of her labor. He did not need any more encouragement and sat and wolfed down his food, finishing the meal in a matter of minutes, and licking his lips as he looked around a little hopefully to see if there was any more to be had.

“Lordy! I never have seen nobody put away food like that.” She smiled pleasantly at the compliment to her cooking, a dimple forming in one rounded cheek. “Well, I sure am glad you liked it. There will be plenty more on the morrow. Let’s get you to workin for that food.” She hefted her large body off of the bench with an effort and led him out of the kitchen. She took up a small straw broom from its place in the hall and handed it to him.

Ruggero looked at the broom blankly, wondering what the woman wanted him to do with it.

Cook tisked and took the broom from him. “I sure am sorry. I forgot you doan know no better.” She demonstrated how she wanted the floor swept with the broom and then handed it back to him.

Ruggero took it but merely stared at her, trying to tamp his indignation that she apparently expected him to perform the labor of a serving wench. He was a panther! A royal guard! A warrior!

Finally, with the reflection that he had set out to mimic the behavior of humans to fit in so that he could rescue his princess, he swept the floor just as she had done, collecting the dirt around him into a neat little pile.

“That’s it!” Cook exclaimed. “Yes, yes. And then you sweep it out the door.” She dusted her hands off, a broad smile on her face, and went back to the kitchen.

Ruggero’s eyes narrowed on the door the woman had disappeared through. After a few moments, though, he went back to swirling the dirt around on the floor, wondering what possible use there was in such a thing. It was dirt! It certainly could not be more unpleasant to walk upon than the rough wooden floor! In fact, he knew it was not for he had already driven more than one splinter into the tender soles of his human feet!

It was dismaying to realize that he did not understand humans as well as he had thought he did. Then again, he had never planned to assume his human form, had never had any interest in doing so, and he had not spent a great deal of time wondering why they did the strange things they did, mostly because he had simply considered their actions with contempt. As he performed the mindless, and to his thinking, useless, task, he contemplated his situation.

His instincts urged him to rush at once to the princess and assure himself that she was all right and to assure her that her faithful guard was here for her. He had been fighting that urge from the moment he had become convinced that she was within these walls, more because it had dawned upon him immediately that she was not likely to recognize him in this form than from wariness of the consequences. He did not want to frighten her, as she would surely be if she beheld him as he was.

Then again, he realized that he was also uneasy about her reaction. He knew, as a panther, that he was magnificent. His princess adored him. She was very lavish with both her affection and her admiration, often stroking his beautiful fur for hours, complimenting him on how handsome he was. He had no idea how she might perceive his man form, but he felt ... less. He was growing accustomed to it, but he did not want Bredamante to grow *used* to seeing him in this way and accept. He did not want to be diminished in her eyes, and he could not help but fear that she would think him ugly now, perhaps be repulsed by him.

Frowning at that thought, he moved the broom a little faster. He had never allowed his pride, or his ego, to interfere with his duty to the princess before, and he could not help but wonder if, in this form, there had been even more unwelcome changes in him than he had first considered. Pausing, he glanced upward in the direction that he sensed the princess lay, wishing that he had the power to see through the barriers that blocked his view of her.

His lips tightened. With an effort, he shook off the longing to go to her, to be near her. He had far more important things to consider than whether or not she would find him pleasing to look upon. Her situation was dire. Baltazar had seized her throne, and he would not rest until he had seized her, as well. *He* was no general. His duty to Bredamante had never been more than to protect her person. He realized now, though, that he must look beyond that to protect her. He must do more than simply guard her. He must think of a way to eliminate the threat and restore her to her rightful place.

The human form, as little as he liked it, was a still a step in the right direction. He would certainly be of no use to the princess if he was captured and slain. Hiding was not a solution to the problem, although it would give him time to *think* of a solution.

And he still did not like the idea of the princess hiding in such a place as this. The women here must be loyal to her, else they would not risk Balthazar's wrath by hiding her. Unfortunately, no matter how hard he thought on it, he could not think of a place that would be better. Balthazar had seized the kingdom. He would control *all* of her holdings now, even the smallest of keeps. There were none, at any rate, that he dared consider taking her to.

To try to do such a thing, even if he had no difficulty convincing Bredamante that he was indeed her faithful servant even though he no longer looked like the Ruggero she knew, was to risk capture. That was unthinkable, for Balthazar's plans for her were no secret. He meant to wed her ... the human ritual of mating.

It took no great leap for his mind to conjure an image of his beautiful princess writhing beneath the obscene, naked form of Balthazar, and the moment he did, rage boiled inside of him. A sharp crack jolted him from his abstraction. Disconcerted, he stared down at the broken shaft of the broom in his hands, which was now in two pieces rather than one.

Madame Carley would not be happy that he had broken her broom, he mused. She might well decide that he was of no use to her and chase him from the dwelling with it, and then he would be forced to guard Bredamante from the outside or slink into the place when everyone was asleep. Sighing irritably, he surveyed the work he had done and finally used the shortened handle to quickly whisk the pile of dirt he had collected out the rear door and very carefully returned the broom to the corner where Cook had gotten it, balancing the broken piece on top.

Not knowing what they wanted or expected him to do next, he walked over to the stairs. He sat down on a step next to the bottom of the stairs to think while he waited for someone to tell him, reflecting that they at least would not be able to demand that he sweep again until the broom had been repaired.

As insulting as it was that they thought he was simple, it occurred to him that it could well be as much of an advantage as his human guise was. They did not *expect* him to know things so they would not think it odd that he was not familiar with human tasks and begin to wonder about him. This would give him some time to assess the situation. He could eat and sleep here and then figure out a plan of action.

He was sitting pondering the latest turn of events when Madame Carley came down the stairs. She looked around at his work and then patted him on the head. Aside from the fact that he did not care to be touched by anyone *not* his princess, he did not give the gesture much thought since he was so used to it in his panther form. It occurred to him after a moment, though, that a human might take offense to it. They did not habitually pet one another, he remembered abruptly. The only times that he had seen humans exchanging touches were when they were fighting, or when they were copulating.

There was nothing aggressive in her manner. Therefore, he could only conclude that she was laboring under the impression that he might consider mating with her. The comments she had made before and her other touches seemed to bear that up.

The thought revolted him.

He had not allowed himself to consider mating, though he had long ago reached the maturity that made him yearn to do so and then burn for it until it was almost a constant torment. There *were* no more of his kind, however. There was no mate for him. He had known that from his earliest memories, long before it had mattered to him. Panthers of any kind were rare now, but even if that was not the case, *he* was not merely a panther. He could no more contemplate the idea of taking a mere panther as his mate than he could consider taking a human.

His mind and body instantly gave that the lie. He had refused to *acknowledge* his urges, but the truth was his love for the princess had, at some point, undergone a drastic and dangerous change. It seemed that one day he was perfectly content to merely curl against her as she slept and enjoy a companionable closeness and the next he was battling an internal war that he lived in terror that he would lose.

He knew Bredamante was hurt and confused that he had begun to place a careful

distance between them, refusing to curl up next to her in the bed as he had most of his life, but he could scarcely explain it to her even if he had had the gift of speech in his panther form. It was treason for him even to think about it, however briefly he allowed the images to invade his mind before determinedly ousting them.

And even if that was not the case, he feared she would find the idea distasteful and send him away, and he had no life without her. It would be far better if she had him beheaded for his treasonous thoughts than if she banished him.

It would be far better never to know if it revolted every sense to consider him as a mate than to have all doubt removed and *know* that she was disgusted.

"You did good work shug. Go help Cook with kitchen cleanup and then you can find a place to rest. The customers will be comin' in shortly an' you'll be underfoot here. You can sleep on the floor in the kitchen next to the fireplace when you are done, or you can sleep in the hallway upstairs as long as you doan get in the customers' way. It is a little warmer up there."

Customers, Ruggero repeated in his mind as the woman sashayed away, her voluptuous body jiggling all over with every step. If he had still had doubts, and he had not, that certainly confirmed that this was just the sort of place that he had thought it was. His human side and his panther side were instantly at war. His beast was intrigued but also mildly revolted. One did not copulate indiscriminately. One chose a mate worthy of bearing one's offspring.

His human side was more than mildly intrigued, and he had to struggle with the temptation to indulge his man root's indiscriminate desire to root in any warm, dark hole that he could find to shove it into.

More specifically, 'fucking' and Bredamante collided in his mind instantly and drove any possibility of rational thought from his mind for many dangerous moments. He had to fight the urge to follow her scent upwards and stake his claim upon her, to mark her as his own and ferociously defend his territory.

His hand was shaking with the effort to regain control as he lifted it to rake the hair from his eyes and scrub his hand over his face. Waves of hot and cold swept over him as mindless desire and cold reason did battle, drawing beads of moisture from his skin. He stood frozen in indecision even when he had finally managed to regain his equilibrium, torn by the need to guard the princess' door against any male that might get dangerous ideas and the fear that *he* would be that man if he came any closer to her at the moment.

Finally, he moved stiffly toward the kitchen with the reflection that Bredamante would not allow any of the men likely to frequent this place near her. If they tried, she would scream the house down and he would tear the man apart, with or without his claws and teeth. In the meanwhile, she was far safer with him in the kitchen than with him anywhere near her, he realized. When he had better control over his human side, he would find a place near her and watch over her.

Ruggero discovered that he cared even less for the tasks required of him in the kitchen than he had for sweeping. Cook handed him buckets with bails and sent him to draw water. He hated water, but he discovered with a mild sense of surprise that even when he splashed it on himself it did not feel as repulsive on his human skin as it did to his panther hide. There was no fur on his skin to prickle as the water trickled over it and drive him mad with the itching. The sparse hairs that did sprout from his skin did not

even react to the water.

It was cold, though, and he did not care for that. He also did not care for the fact that the old woman heated it over the fire until it was scalding and *then* expected him to dip his hands in it to scrub her pots. Sulking, doing his best to ignore the burn to his skin, he scraped and scrubbed pot after pot until the old woman was satisfied. By the time he had finished he discovered his annoying human cock had lain down, apparently as weary as the rest of him. That was true only so long as he was in the kitchen, however. The moment he began to climb the stairs to find a place to sleep, the damned thing lifted its head again as if it, too, were sniffing for Bredamante's scent.

He very much feared that it was because as soon as it leapt to attention, his mind filled again with the forbidden thoughts that had driven him into the kitchen and away from her to start with.

The swelling required adjustment since the breeches did not appear to allow growing room for the thing—not enough at any rate. If he had not found it so embarrassing that he did not seem to have any control over it, he would have been tempted to simply free it from restraint so that it would stop throbbing like a sore tooth.

It got worse when he stopped before the princess' door. Grinding his teeth, resisting the urge to scratch at the door and demand entrance, he settled in the doorway, regardless of what the woman had said about staying out of the way of customers. They could think what they liked and be damned! No one was coming near her door!

To his relief, the thing lay down again in disappointment after a while—a very long, miserable while because the parade of men and women along the hall and the sounds coming from the rooms kept it stirred up and hopeful until he had begun to contemplate beating it into abeyance. It was nearing dawn by then. Exhausted, Ruggero finally sought rest.

He had just begun to doze when he heard the footsteps he identified as Madame Carley's. She came to an abrupt halt as she neared him, and he opened his eyes to see what had caused the sudden tension he sensed in her. She was staring at him, he discovered. Even as he looked at her, she glanced toward the door behind him. Finally, she seemed to shake herself and moved on. She paused again when she reached the room at the far end of the hall, studying him, he knew, and finally went into the room and closed the door.

She was concerned about the princess' safety, he realized. He did not know whether to be insulted or not that she seemed to dismiss him as a threat, but finally he decided her opinion was of no consequence. It was enough that she was concerned about the princess, evidence that she was well aware of who Bredamante was and how dangerous it was for her to hide the princess.

He had thought her a silly, useless female, but she was neither. She was a brave woman, a woman of far more honor and courage than he would have guessed. Someday, he would have to thank Madame Carley fully for her generosity, for keeping his beloved princess safe from Balthazar when she had been in need.

Shifting to try to find a more comfortable position, he allowed his mind to drift toward sleep again, comforted by Bredmante's nearness and the faint sounds that filtered to him as she shifted in her sleep on the strange bed. He would have felt better if he was sleeping with her within his view as he generally did, when he had to do no more than lift his head and open his eyes to see that she was safe.

He would see her on the morrow, though, when she woke and rose from her slumber, and, since his man body and instincts were proving to be a severe trial, he thought it for the best.

The thought sent a ripple of warmth through his body that he was becoming all too familiar with. If it had not been contrary to what he felt was right for the princess at the moment, he would have been tempted to abandon the man body. And even so, he worried that his difficulty controlling it would counter its usefulness to her ... to either of them.

Wryly, he realized that he had not fully appreciated the control he had over his desires before. He had only *thought* that it was torment to watch her sleep, to bask in her nearness, her touch, and fight the growing need to cross the barrier that lay between them.

He did not remember when he had realized that his love for his princess had changed from love for his liege to love of the woman. He only knew that it had. He only knew that her touch had ceased to be a simple pleasure because it bespoke her affection for him and begun to be a trial of endurance because she aroused every nerve ending in his body to the point of madness with her soft touch, her supple body, her woman's scent.

Swallowing with an effort against the dryness in his mouth, he tried to focus his thoughts elsewhere.

It dawned on him abruptly that there was one advantage to his human form that he had not even considered. Now that he was a man, one of her kind, he would finally be able to communicate with her. Of course, she had no idea who he was, and he would not be able to tell her, but he could not stop the excitement that coursed through his body at the thought of talking to his princess. He had never spoken even one word to her.

What would she say to him when she saw him? What would he say to her? He had not thought that far ahead. He would have to gain her trust without revealing himself, he realized. It would be a difficult task. She had never really had any friends, apart from him. It just had not been safe. Somewhere deep inside he almost wished she would somehow recognize him, even though he looked nothing like his true self, recognize him with her heart for what he truly was, her panther, her lifelong companion bound to her from birth.

Bredamante interrupted his troubled thoughts as she mumbled something in her sleep. His ears pricked, straining to capture the words.

"Ruggero," she said in a soft anguished moan, tossing a little in bed.

A hard knot of emotion formed in his throat at the deep sorrow he heard in her voice, constricting his breath. She thought he was dead, he realized abruptly.

Chapter Three

Bredamante stretched lazily in her cot. Still wrapped in the warmth of the dream that she had had, she did not really want to completely yield to wakefulness and get up just yet. Even as she groped for the image her mind had conjured, however, it slipped further from her reach, fading until she could no longer remember what the handsome stranger who had invaded her dreams had looked like, could no longer even recall what he had done that had given her so much pleasure. The sense lingered that he had been handsome enough to make her heart turn over, done things to her that had made her feel hot and faint and wicked and delighted all at the same time, but it had grown vague and indistinct. Sighing with disappointment, she opened her eyes.

Dismay instantly descended over her as she stared at the strange ceiling above her head, confused for a handful of moments until reality set in and memories of the past week crashed around her. She was not home anymore. She could never go back.

And her beloved panther, Ruggero was dead!

Her throat closed at the thought. He had given his life to protect her, and yet she almost wished it had been her instead, or that he had taken her with him when he had crashed through the window and fallen to his death.

She knew people would think her mad for such thoughts. To everyone else he was only an animal, little more than a pet, though he was the most noble of beasts, one of the royal line of panthers that had guarded her family for generations.

To her, though, he had been everything—family, beloved companion.

She had no one else anymore, and now she had lost Ruggero, as well.

The urge to cry descended upon her again. She had struggled with the need to pour out her grief endlessly, trying to convince herself that she owed it to him to live when he had given his life to preserve hers.

But she found that she was not ready to face the prospect of life without him, found she could not imagine ever finding happiness again even if she managed to elude Balthazar—especially if she did not. A shudder went through her at the thought of that slimy filth pawing her, claiming her as his bride. She would far prefer to slit her own throat than to allow him to touch her!

Pushing the thoughts from her mind, she realized that the dream had somehow woven her fears of Balthazar and his plans for her, and her grief for the loss of Ruggero into something that had given her pleasure. The man in her dreams had been her lover ... and she had called him Ruggero.

Disturbed by that realization, Bredamante tossed off her coverlet and sat up abruptly. She *was* mad! Her grief for Ruggero had turned her mind if she could imagine him, even in her dreams, as a man!

The growling demand of her stomach was a welcome distraction. She had not broken her fast since the day before. Even if not for Madame Carley's warning that it would be safest for her to stay out of sight of the other women as much as possible, not just the customers, Bredamante had not felt safe enough to venture from her room for

more than a few moments. The realization that she would need to quickly make her way to the kitchen before the house began to stir with life if she wanted anything to eat galvanized her. Rising from her cot, she quickly performed her morning ritual and dressed.

The gown looked wretched, though it had been laundered and mended since she had fled the castle. She was fortunate even to have the gown she stood in for if she had already made ready for bed before the attack she would have nothing but her night gown. She had certainly had no time to grab anything.

She would not have escaped at all if not for Ruggero. Even in death, he had protected her, for it was the fear that he still lived and the frantic search for his body by the men who had taken her that had distracted them enough to allow her to escape. Her throat closed at that thought, and she had to fight the rise of hope that there was any possibility that he had survived the fall.

Her distraction cost her. Instead of pausing to listen at the door as she usually did, she simply opened the door and went out. She did not walk out. She fell over something lying in her doorway and sprawled in the corridor.

After regaining some of her composure, Bredamante turned from where she had fallen in the hallway to see what she had tripped over. A man was sleeping soundly on the floor in front of her room ... or had been. The collision had wakened him.

As if he was as paralyzed by surprise as she was, he merely stared back her, his strange green eyes flickering over her curiously as she gaped at him, her mind frantically considering possible scenarios.

Was he a customer, she wondered, that had imbibed too much drink and passed out? That seemed unlikely. Even if he had been drunk, if he had managed to get up the stairs, surely he would have attacked anything warm and breathing, or at least tried. She did not recall anyone fumbling at her door and she did not think for a moment that she would have slept through that.

To her relief, the man closed his eyes again after a moment. With painstaking care to be as quiet as she possibly could, Bredamante began to lift herself off of the floor, since it seemed she had somehow managed not to completely rouse the man when she had toppled over him. She did not want to do that. It would not be good for her to be forced into a confrontational situation where she was cornered by a customer, especially one that could possibly still be drunk or have a hangover and a temper. Then she might have to try to defend herself. She had vowed many years ago, when one of Balthazar's fiends had tried to rape her, that she was not going to lose her virginity against her will. He had found that out rather quickly when she had kicked him in the genitals and Ruggero had taken his life.

Her train of thoughts brought back the memory of Ruggero. She still found it hard to accept that he was gone. He had been so much a part of her life since she could remember that she felt like now she was only half a person. She had been functioning on a purely instinctive basis, her heart having died with Ruggero. She had always known that she loved him deeply. After all, he had been everything to her, especially when her father had been killed. She had just not realized how deeply until he was gone.

Now was not the time to dwell on that, though. She did not have time to grieve, she thought, ousting her sorrow with anger. She had to focus on the present. She had to live, had to take her revenge on that bastard Balthazar—for her father and for Ruggero.

Somehow she would make him pay. But she could not take her revenge if she was discovered before she had time to plot his downfall.

Easing up to a crouch, Bredamante was about to stand when a flash of light caught her eye. Her heart skipped a beat when she saw what it was that had caught her eye. Hanging slightly out of the man's pocket was the end of Ruggero's collar. It must have come out when she had fallen over him.

Anger surged through her, flushing her cheeks. *Bastard! How did he come to possess Ruggero's collar?* He was either one of Balthazar's men or a man who had cashed in on the mayhem at the castle, pilfering valuables from the dead. Fury spiked inside her as she stared at it, making it hard to see. Her rage and hurt overwhelmed everything, including common sense.

Too consumed with hurt and outrage to care about the possible repercussions of her actions, Bredamante reached to snatch the collar. What happened next happened too fast for her mind to fully grasp it. One moment she was reaching for Ruggero's collar, the next she found herself pinned between the wall and the hard, muscular body of the man she had thought lay in a drunken slumber. Her breath seized in her throat, her eyes widening as she stared up into his dark, angry face and found herself pinned as surely by his beautiful, piercing green gaze as if she had been staked to the wall.

She had only seen eyes like that on one other—Ruggero.

Hurt and yearning surged through her, dispelling both her anger and her fear. She sucked in a shaky breath, inhaling an intoxicating lungful of his scent. Instantly, it coiled inside of her, stirring heat and other sensations she was too witless even to put a name to.

Something flickered in his eyes. For a moment the fierceness of his gaze gentled, and then an almost feral hunger filled them and she felt his manhood swell against her belly, felt it almost as a firebrand through her gown.

As she stared at him in mute dismay, unable to tear her gaze from his, she thought she sensed him waging some internal battle, felt something inside of her responding to the hunger in his gaze. The gentle quaking of fear inside her became something else entirely as she watched his face grow taut. After what seemed an endless time, he dragged in a ragged breath, swallowed convulsively. Doubt flickered across his features and then ... a look almost of shame or self-loathing.

He stepped away from her, releasing his grip on her wrists. She had not even realized until he did so and she felt the sting of returning sensation that he was holding them pinned against the wall in a vice-like grip.

"Mine," he said almost mildly, though his voice sounded rough, as if with disuse.

It took Bredamante several moments to recover her wits. She blinked at him a few times, trying to dispel the magic his intoxicating scent had thrown over her, and then she realized he was talking about Ruggero's collar.

She felt her face flush at her near fatal mistake. Coldness followed it. She had been so upset when she had seen the collar that she had completely forgotten herself. It would be dangerous, she realized, to reveal her knowledge of the collar. With an effort, she swallowed the urge to argue with him on the matter. It occurred to her, though, that he would probably take it that she was trying to steal the valuable piece from him if she did not say anything. He had caught her in the act, after all.

She found she could not gather her wits together enough even to try to dispel his suspicions. She looked down in embarrassment and realized abruptly why her wits were

still so addled. He had ceased to press against her, but he had put no great distance between them. He had not moved away more than a hair's breadth. She still felt his heat. With each labored breath either of them took, their bodies brushed, creating fresh currents of tingling warmth that eddied and flowed through her, making her heart stumble over itself one moment and race the next.

She should be angry, she realized, struggling to summon the elusive defense. She should feel complete outrage that this man had dared to touch her in such a manner, but even if she had managed to summon the emotion, she realized, she could no more act upon it than she could demand that he return her property. She was not Princess Bredamante now, could not afford to strike a royal pose.

She had taken sanctuary in a house of prostitution. She was *posing* as a prostitute. It would be far more appropriate for her to offer herself to him than to display outrage at his familiarity.

Indeed, she found she could not summon any outrage. Despite the simmering resentment she still felt at his possession of Ruggero's collar, she found herself toying with the insane urge to play her part to the hilt, to discover if he would stir the same, forbidden sensations in her if he touched her again, pressed his body tightly against hers.

Her breasts and woman's place throbbed in response to the thought, began to ache with some nameless need.

Not entirely nameless, she realized, feeling embarrassment color her cheeks. She was not ignorant of the baser needs of men. She was not even completely ignorant of the mechanics of coupling ... and she knew abruptly, instinctively, that that was what her body was demanding even if she had never felt it before.

Relief flooded her when he stepped away allowing her to flee.

* * * *

Ruggero watched Bredamante flee through narrowed, intent eyes, struggling with the urge that instantly overwhelmed him to give chase, fighting to dispel the image that leapt into his mind of springing upon her, pinning her to the floor, and driving his painfully throbbing flesh into her body until he found surcease from his torment, claiming her as his own. Dragging in a ragged breath when he had mastered the urge, he ran a shaky hand through his hair and then rubbed the scratchy growth on his face.

As reason finally returned, a chilling wash of dismay coursed through him.

What had possessed him, he wondered a little wildly?

He could not lie, even to himself, that he had not known all along that it was Bredmante. He would know her scent anywhere, anytime. If he was half dead he would know her. Moreover, he had looked straight at her and there was certainly nothing wrong with his sight.

A part of his behavior, he knew, had been gut instinct—self-preservation, not just possessiveness. The collar was his, but more than that, it was his life-line to his true self. Without the talisman, he feared he could not call his beast, that he would be trapped forever in this strange body that gave him such misery. He was not certain of that, in fact he knew that there had been a time when his people had changed at will, without the need of any sort of magic, but the uncertainty was enough to create mindless panic at the thought of losing the collar.

What he had done had gone well beyond self-protection, however. The loss of control had cost him *all* of his self-control. The very instant his body had collided with

hers the needs he had mastered over and over had mastered him. He had struggled with it, had tried to remind himself that she was Bredamante, his princess, but it was *that* reminder that he had not needed. He knew already that it was his princess he felt and smelled, Bredmante's flesh that beckoned him to embrace madness and assuage the need that was burning him up.

Panic assailed him. He could not *do* this! He knew in his bones that he was going to do something unforgivable, irreversible, if he continued as he was. He had tasted the feel of her flesh, pressed his man root so close to her femininity that even now want burned the back of his throat like acidic bile. He had already crossed the line, he realized, and now, instead of only imagining what it might feel like, he would have certainty to chip away at his control until he had none.

Gulping in deep breaths of air like a drowning man, he paced the corridor. Finally, unable to fight the urge any longer, he turned away from the stairs and strode to the window at the rear of the house. He saw no one, but he scarcely glanced around before he leapt from the window, landing in the soft turf of the Madame's rear yard in a half crouch as he instinctively allowed his legs to give to absorb the shock. Pain shot through his legs anyway, reminding him that the body he lived in now was not as agile as his feline form.

He welcomed the shock of pain, though. It drove his disturbing thoughts further into his mind, usurped them, if only for a few moments, allowing him the respite to gather his wits about him.

He prowled the yard while he thought, seeking cool headed logic to weigh the pros and cons of his situation. Eventually, though, he accepted what he had known all along. He really had no choice. His honor demanded that he protect his princess, even from himself.

* * * *

Bredamante ate her meal as quickly as she could. She did not really want to eat after what had just happened. Her stomach was still clenching spasmodically, balking at the idea of eating even though it had been clamoring for food before.

It took no effort at all to figure out why.

The man had had a strange effect on her. Even now just thinking about it was enough to send forbidden shivers through her, to summon even more forbidden images to her mind.

Or maybe it was just seeing Ruggero's collar that had upset her so?

She knew that for a lie. That had made her angry, summoned a surge of grief. It *still* angered her that he had it, but that did nothing to change her reaction to him.

She had never, ever, reacted to a man like that before, and it was not as if she had not found herself in a similar position. She had, at least the once when Balthazar's man had assaulted her. Before that, though, before her father's death, she had allowed more than one man to steal a kiss when suitors would come to court her. How was it possible for a man merely to press against her and have that devastating effect upon her when she had felt nothing even close when she had been kissed?

Unbidden, the dream from the night before materialized in her mind. He had been dark, even dangerous looking, she remembered—much like the stranger.

Was that it then? Was it because that had so recently been on her mind?

She would have liked to think so, but she could not convince herself of it.

Finally, she decided that she needed to put the incident from her mind. She would have to take care to avoid that man, needed to hurry back upstairs before the rest of the house woke up or a new customer arrived for an early morning treat.

Having eaten a little, she got up from the kitchen table, grabbed a piece of bread and cheese in case her stomach decided to complain later for the lack of food, and peeked around the kitchen door to see if it was safe to run back up to her room. Relieved when she saw no one lurking about, Bredamante ran up the stairs, back to the safety of her room, shutting the door and barring it behind her. Slumping against the panel, she covered her frantically pounding heart with one hand, trying to convince herself it was the fear of being caught.

When the weakness finally subsided, Bredamante moved away from the door. She found that she was too restless, though, to simply sit on her bed and stare at the wall as she had been doing for days that had begun to feel like weeks. Instead, she moved to the window to stare down at Madame Carley's back garden.

A jolt went through her when she saw the stranger pacing the rear yard. Ducking back behind the curtain, she peered down at him, wondering how he had gotten into the yard when she had not heard him pass the kitchen. The rear door was right beside the kitchen. Surely she would have heard him pass?

But then she had had her mind on the 'incident'. She had been distracted enough, she supposed, that she might not have noticed ... a dangerous thing, indeed, for a hunted woman.

What, she wondered, was the man doing here anyway? She had thought he must be a drunk who had passed out and spent the night. He behaved, though, as if he belonged here, for surely he would have gone home instead of going into the rear yard to pace if he had not?

He should have looked like a figure of fun in the ridiculous garb he wore, particularly that frilly thing he wore for a shirt that looked far more like a woman's night gown than a shirt.

Oddly enough, he didn't. It might have been because of their meeting earlier, but she thought that was only part of it. She had been too shocked to really notice anything much beyond his effect on her, but she saw now that she had not merely imagined his size and strength. He was tall, noticeably taller than the average man, and far more muscularly built if it came to that. His shoulders were broad and straight, his chest massive. The skin tight breeches he wore made it patently clear that he was muscular all over, not just his upper body and arms.

He was too far away for her to have a clear view of his face, but she could see that he had a strong jaw and chin and features that were regular and pleasing. Her mind's eye promptly gave the lie to her earlier observation that she had been too stunned to register anything about his face. It was more than pleasing. He had a very handsome face, devastatingly so, regardless of the black stubble that covered his lower face, with a mouth that had made her burn to feel its touch.

And his eyes.

His long black hair caught a ray of sunlight as he raked it back from his face in a gesture of irritation. Deep blue and silvery highlights danced across the midnight black, and instantly an image of Ruggero rose in her mind.

Swallowing a little convulsively, mentally berating herself for hiding behind the

curtains to moon over him, Bredamante resolutely left the window and refused to return to it, though the day stretched out before her as a long, boring endurance of captivity.

Some time later that evening, Madame Carley knocked softly on her door. "It's me shug."

Bredamante went over to the door and unlocked it, opening it just a sliver so she could speak to Madame Carley without being seen.

"I just wanted you to know that we have a new addition. I did not want you to be startled if you happened upon him. I found a man outside and brought him in to do a little work around here. He's a mighty pretty thing."

"I think I already met him," Bredamante said wryly. "He was sleeping in my doorway. I tripped over him this morning on my way to get something to eat."

Madame Carley giggled a little. "Well, shug, I don't think there's much to worry about that one. He's simple. He's quiet and seems to keep to himself. I've had him working all day. I just wanted to let you know so he didn't scare you."

"Thank you," Bredamante said, a small blush creeping up her cheeks as she remembered their brief encounter that morning.

"Good night," Madame Carley said jovially.

"Good night," Bredamante whispered back, not trusting her voice. She shut the door and locked it, leaning back on it for support. Simple? A vision rose in her mind's eye of the man's piercing, green eyes. Whatever Madame Carley seemed to think, the man was *not* simple!

Uneasiness moved through her as it occurred to her to wonder if the man had some nefarious reason to pose as simple-minded. It could not have anything to do with her, though, she decided. There would be no reason for any sort of subterfuge if he was one of Balthazar's men. He would simply seize her himself or report to Baltazar who would send men to seize her.

She still did not feel completely easy in her mind, but she thought that was just the man himself. He had had plenty of time to betray her if that had been his purpose in Madame Carley's house.

Moving to the small cot in the corner of her room, the bed being the room's only furnishing, she lay down, trying not to think about green eyes, those hungry eyes that seemed so hauntingly familiar.

* * * *

In an attempt to avoid another potentially disastrous encounter with Bredamante, Ruggero rose every morning thereafter and made his way down to the kitchen before she discovered him sleeping in her doorway again. In part, his caution stemmed from his uneasiness about his grip on his self-control, but it was also because he knew very well that he had frightened her that morning, first by sleeping outside her door and then by very nearly forcing himself upon her. He had not meant to frighten her, and it sickened him that he had, that he had had no control over his desire. For days he had not even been able to bring himself to look at her for fear of what he might see in her eyes.

It had certainly not helped his feelings at all that the first morning afterwards, when Bredamante had discovered him in the kitchen, she had very nearly taken flight. He thought it was her pride that had kept her from yielding to the impulse, for he had noticed she ate little and that her hands were not steady. He was grateful for whatever it was that prompted her to stay, though her uneasiness around him had flayed him as surely

as if she had take leather to his hide and torn it from him inch by painful inch. She was less wary of him the day afterward, and he began to have some hope that she might forgive him for his lapse ... if he could only refrain from having a similar lapse.

And it was by no means a certainty that he would not.

He had tried to convince himself that he had learned his lesson and that he had himself well in hand but knew his hold was tenuous at best. The pain of need had become an almost constant ache. It dulled, but it needed only a glimpse of her, a whiff of her scent, and his body was just as painfully hard as before.

Worse, the constant, screaming demands of his body addled wits. He had wracked his brains for some solution to his dilemma, some way that he could restore Bredamante to her right place and thus put her beyond his reach once more, but it was a constant battle to redirect his mind to the problem and no small wonder that nothing had come to him when his mind was divided at all times between the problem and his focus on his throbbing cock and the warm place he wanted to put it.

His preoccupation was nearly his undoing before the week was out. He was hunched over his platter of food that morning, trying to concentrate on swallowing around the knot in his throat rather than the swell of breasts he could see in his peripheral vision with every breath Bredamante took.

“Boy! Boy!”

He had no idea Cook was even talking to him until she dropped a hand on his shoulder. He tensed when she did, shifting his focus to trying to restrain himself, for his feline instincts always threatened to get the best of him when he was startled, and he had to fight the instinctive urge to lash out. “You’ve a name, boy?”

“Rugger” Ruggero broke off his unthinking response, flicking an uneasy glance at Bredamante.

Her eyes were wide as she stared at him, and he felt heat fill his face.

“Roojeer?” Cook asked. “That’s a bit odd.”

Ruggero swallowed the bite of food in his mouth with an effort, but cudgel his brain though he might he could not produce a name that was similar.

“Soon as yer done, Roojeer, ya need ta fetch me some pails of water.”

Ruggero nodded, almost hoping that Bredamante would say something, demand to know why his name was so similar to her panther’s. He was almost as fearful that she would now recognize him, that she would know that he had betrayed her trust. When he finally nerved himself to meet her gaze, however, she merely stared back at him unblinkingly for several moments and then rose abruptly and left, and he could tell nothing of her thoughts from her expression.

Had he seen accusation in her beautiful eyes? Hurt? Revulsion?

It tortured him that he did not know, and at the same time, he knew ... *knew*, that if he let down his guard for one moment, came too close to her for any reason, he would behave just as he had before ... perhaps not even be able to prevent himself from taking things much further than he had already.

The moment of truth hit him less than two weeks after he had arrived at Madame Carley’s.

* * * *

Cook greeted him with a warm smile and a hearty welcome as he walked into the kitchen. She made him a heaping plate of food as he sat down in his usual spot on the

bench. It was only a matter of minutes before Bredamante walked quietly in. She sat as far down the table from him as she could, not even once glancing in his direction, but still watching him in her peripheral vision. He could sense her unrest. He did not look at her, as desperately as he wanted to, as hungry as he was to fill his gaze with the golden tresses of her hair, the soft, pale tones of her skin, the lushness of her delicate pink lips.

She did not trust him any more now than she had from the moment she had first met the man that he was now. She did not shy away from him. She did not avoid the room if he was there, but she would only flick sidelong glances at him when she thought he was unaware, and he knew he would have to tread carefully where she was concerned. He could ill afford to scare her away. As unsatisfactory as he found the situation, as uneasy as he was about her safety here, it was at least something, and he had nothing better to offer her.

Ruggero lingered over his food, not wanting to rush and miss the little time he was allowed with his princess. She might be trying her best to ignore him, but just being in the same room with her gave him bittersweet pleasure.

Bredamante finished after a while, complimented Cook on the meal, and made her way to the door of the kitchen, trying not to be too obvious about checking the hallway before she left. Seeing no one, she hurried out of the kitchen, rushing toward the stairs. Just as she neared them, the door to the establishment opened. Startled, she froze instead of running, so dismayed she could not seem to command her feet to move.

"Hello there!" the man greeted her jovially as he shut the door behind himself. "I've not seen you afore. You must be new! Mmmm," he said with pleasure, grinning lasciviously at her breasts beneath the thin material of her gown as she turned around, grinding his genitals briefly with a large dirty hand.

Drawn instinctively by the movement of his hand, Bredamante gaped at the man in revulsion, unable to drag her gaze from the bulge in his pants.

"I think I would like to sample your lovely wares today, miss," he said, grinning through a handful of yellow-caked teeth.

Feeling faintly ill, struggling to gather her wits, Bredamante finally managed a weak smile. "Thank you for your generous compliment, sir, but I am afraid I am already spoken for ... uh ... for the day ...and tonight, as well."

The good humor vanished from the man's face. He tensed. Sensing that he meant to forcibly detain her, Bredamante grabbed her skirts and whirled toward the stairs. She saw even as she lifted a foot to the first step, however, that Roojeer had stepped from the kitchen at the sound of the man's voice. His face was taut and dark with fury as he strode briskly toward them. Her heart, already beating unpleasantly fast, tripped over itself as a hand settled around her arm and tightened. Even as the customer jerked her around to face him, Roojeer reached them. His hand closed over the customer's wrist. Uttering a squall like scalded cat, the vile man released her abruptly, falling to his knees. Without a word, Roojeer gave him a shove that sent him sprawling backwards on the floor, grabbed her around the waist, and hauled her over one broad shoulder. She grunted as her belly impacted with the hard ridge of muscle and bone, the breath forced from her lungs. Hardly missing a beat, Roojeer started briskly up the stairs with her.

"Here now," the customer at the door hollered in outrage, "I had a mind to bed that whore!"

Ruggero stopped in his tracks and swiveled to pin the man with a hard look, steadying Bredamante on his shoulder by placing one of his large hands firmly on her backside.

"She is mine," he said in a low, rumbling growl that sounded almost inhuman. "You touched her. That was your first mistake. Be glad you still have your hand."

The fine hairs along Bredamante's spine tingled with uneasiness. She could not see Roojeer's face, but she saw as Roojeer turned and proceeded up the stairs that the customer's face had turned chalky white.

Too stunned to either object or attempt to struggle to regain her freedom, Bredamante merely stared wide eyed at the man, looking a little wildly around for some hope of salvation as Roojeer stalked up the stairs with her and made his way to the door to her room. Opening it, he stepped inside, slammed and barred the door, and then strode purposefully across the room to her bed.

She let out a startled yelp as he dropped her onto the mattress. Landing with a bounce that nearly made her bite her tongue, she stared up at him wide eyed, feeling a mixture of trepidation and, insanely, excitement as she met his tumultuous green gaze. One look at his face, though, and the little wit she had deserted her. Heat burgeoned inside of her. Her breasts seemed to tighten and swell, began to ache with need. The muscles low in her belly clenched, and moist warmth flooded her sex.

She licked her lips, her mouth as abruptly dry as if she had not had water in days, trying to convince herself he meant nothing by what he had done, nothing but to rescue her when she had needed rescuing, but the tension in him told her otherwise, communicated itself to her in heated waves of desire.

"Listen, I cannot. . .," Bredamante began, holding a hand up in the air, as if she could stave him off with the gesture. It was a ridiculous notion. He had just shown her how amazingly strong he was by carrying her as if she weighed no more than a feather. "I do not want you to be confused. . . ."

He interrupted her, his voice hoarse with the desire she could see he held barely in check, his eyes like green fire.

"Do not fear me, my princess. I swore many moons ago to protect you, and I will protect you until my last dying breath."

His words caused the breath to catch in her throat. Her head felt like it was spinning. Who was this man? How did he know who she was? Bredamante scrambled back on the cot as far as she could until her back met the headboard, effectively halting her retreat. "Who are you?" she demanded in a hoarse whisper.

Irritation flickered across his features. He dropped onto the bed abruptly, grasping her upper arms before she could evade him. "You know who I am," he growled. "I see it your eyes when you look at me. You sense it even if you refuse to acknowledge it."

Bredamante swallowed with an effort, shook her head. "I do not!"

His lips tightened, but he seemed to dismiss it after a moment. He wanted to shake her, make her see reason, but how could he expect her to when he was not thinking reasonably himself?

"You have been seen. Now is the time that they should hear your pleasure, else we are done for here." He sucked in a ragged breath, his heart beating loudly in his ears. "Moan." It was a command.

Bredamante stared at him blankly, feeling her face redden with embarrassment, with anger that he dare suggest such a thing. "You expect ... you want me to ... I do not think I can pretend to"

He swallowed thickly. "Then do not," he said roughly, dragging her fully against him.

Bredmante's lips parted slightly in surprise as he descended upon her like a savage beast upon its prey. The first touch of his lips against hers sent a jagged bolt of fire coursing through her, snapping every inch of her body to life. It hit her with such force that it snatched the very breath from her lungs. His mouth was a conflagration as it covered hers, melting her down to her very core, sending her mind reeling into chaos.

Uttering only the faintest sound of protest in her throat, she yielded to his will with no attempt to defend herself when she felt the brush of his tongue along her lips, felt him thrust it into her mouth. His taste and scent was as intoxicating as strong mead as it swept through her.

She clutched at his shirt dizzily as he shifted the two of them on the bed, settled his weight firmly on top of her. She felt as if she was drowning in pleasure, swept away by the fire that grew higher and higher with each possessive rake of his tongue along hers. She moaned a protest when he lifted his lips from hers, moaned again when he anointed her face with his kisses, exploring her cheeks and then the line of her jaw from her chin to her ear, and then back again.

Briefly, his lips clung to hers, his tongue explored her mouth, and then he moved to explore her face again, the hollow of her throat. She gasped for breath, panted with the effort to fill her lungs when she could not seem to drag air into them, moaned with the heated pleasure coursing through her as she felt his hands move over her, the touch of his lips, listened to his ragged breaths.

She could not decide whether she wanted more of his agonizingly pleasurable onslaught or desperately needed for him to stop. She found she could not simply lie still and feel what he was doing to her, though. She moved feverishly beneath his hungry assault, lifting to meet him his brazen caresses, clutching at him for fear that he would stop, fear that he would make her explode from all the sensations that were building within her.

He shifted lower, pressing at the bottom of her breasts as he lightly caressed the rounded tops protruding above her neckline with his lips. Quivers of sensation rushed through her, made her tremble inside. She lost her breath as he covered the heated area above her distended nipples, as she felt the wickedly moist heat of his mouth through her gown. Her fingers tangled in his hair as she dug them unknowingly through the dark hair of his head. "Roojeer," she gasped shakily when she caught her breath, uncertain of whether it was a curse or a benediction.

He lifted his head, stared at her a long moment and shifted upward to cover her mouth with his again. "Ruggero," he growled, absorbing her startled gasp into his mouth as he planted his lips solidly, hungrily over hers and deprived her any ability to think at all.

She heaved against him, desperate for something more, her body becoming more and more frantic with some unfulfilled need. When he shifted between her thighs and pressed his swollen member against her woman's mound, she literally came off of the bed with the current of fire that shot straight through her, uttering small, desperate sounds

into his mouth.

He was shaking all over she discovered when he lifted his head to look down at her, not just her. He uttered a hoarse groan as he pressed against her sex again, ground his teeth as if he was in pain. She released a high pitched cry in counter, lifting to meet his thrust, aching with need, confused when each thrust of his hips only made her feel more hollow, more needful, gave her as much pain as pleasure.

She felt his hand along her thigh, groping blindly, closing over her thigh and thrusting her leg wider. Feeling almost ill with the short, panting breaths she took that seemed to do no more than dry her mouth, gave her no air to sustain her, she moved her leg to accommodate him. His next thrust plowed deeply along her cleft, sent lightning sizzling through her, scorching every nerve ending in her body.

He lifted slightly away from her. Resting on his hip, he ran one hand along her exposed thigh and then cupped her now thoroughly damp cleft between her legs with his hand. It felt good, so good, but it was definitely not enough, she thought almost tearfully.

"I need ... I need ...," she gasped, begging him to give her what she needed when she had no idea what that was.

He stroked her slowly with his warm hand, rubbing the tiny, swollen nub at the apex of her thighs. It vibrated at his touch, made her belly clench painfully.

"Ruggero," she gasped plaintively, demanding.

He removed his hand abruptly, pushed her thigh wide and pressed his swollen member against her cleft. Shifting to catch her buttocks in both his hands, he began to move rhythmically against her. It was not right, she thought, blind with panic. It was not what she wanted, what she needed, but the friction of his thrusts drove those thoughts from her mind as he rubbed against the lips of her sex. Abruptly the tightness that had been growing exponentially inside of her convulsed and ecstasy erupted, flooding every fiber of her being. She groaned, uttered a hoarse cry as it rocked her, bringing shards of light to her eyes. A shudder when through him and then another. He bit down on her shoulder as waves of pleasure rocked him, as well.

She dragged in a long, shaky breath of relief as the tension eased from her in mellowing waves of warmth taking her strength with it. For many moments, she could not think beyond the sense of utter relief. As he sagged heavily against her, however, foreboding began to filter through to her chaotic mind, doubts, anxiety. Slowly, she began to be aware of her body again, of his. Her legs were splayed wide, wantonly. His hips rested between hers, his member no longer swollen.

Complete awareness landed on her like a bucket of icy water. "You bastard!" she snarled.

He stiffened, lifted his head to stare at her in bemusement, but she saw the guilt and wariness in his eyes. "I did nothing," he growled, defensive anger threading his voice.

Bredamante's eyes widened. "Nothing?" she demanded, suddenly outraged. She could feel the dampness between her thighs that gave that the lie!

He rolled off of her abruptly and sat up on the edge of her cot, running a shaking hand through his hair.

"You were seen. No one would believe your pose if I had not brought you here. There is yet a chance that he will cause us grief. We may have to leave this place and find sanctuary elsewhere until we can defeat Balthazar."

Bredamante stared at the back of his dark head and then glanced down at herself. Her skirts were hiked nearly to her waist, her thighs still splayed obscenely. It did not make her feel one whit better that he was still wearing his breeches and she could feel that she still wore her pantelettes. In fact, it made her feel a great deal worse. She felt like crying abruptly.

She did not know what he had done to her, but it was clear it was not what she had thought he had done. And she felt ... cheated, ashamed the moment she recalled the way she had begged him to pleasure her, embarrassed that he had, and he had not even taken her maiden head! She must have sounded convincing as a prostitute!

"Go away!" she said, angry that her voice quavered, feeling her chin begin wobble precariously. "You saved me! You should ... you should feel very noble, damn you!"

He lifted his head, turned to look at her. "Do you think I do not know I betrayed your trust?" he ground out. "I could not stop myself. But I did not take what I had no right to."

Bredamante clamped her lips together to keep them from trembling. She did not want him to see just how much he had affected her. "Who are you?" she managed to ask, though the question ended on a half sob despite her best efforts to keep her voice strong.

A pained look crossed his features, furrowing his dark brow. "Ruggero ... your faithful servant."

Bredamante sucked in a shocked, painful breath. "You are mad! Mad I say! Whoever told you about Ruggero lied to you! Ruggero is not ... was not. He is dead!" she finished, biting her lip to keep the tears that were building behind her eyes from spilling forth.

"Left for dead," he corrected.

Glaring at him, she grabbed the only pillow from the bed and clobbered him soundly in the head with it. "Get out! Get ... Out! You made your point, damn you!"

He retreated from her pillow assault, but he paused at the door. "You are angry," he observed unnecessarily.

Bredamante growled at him and threw the only thing she could, the pillow.

He caught it, glared at her over it for a long moment, and finally tossed it toward the foot of the bed, turned and stalked from the room.

The moment the door closed behind him, Bredmante sprang from the bed and rushed to bolt it. "Knave!" she snarled accusingly at the door panel, knowing he was probably still outside. She hoped he heard her.

Tears welled again in her eyes as she climbed back into the bed again. What had just happened? She had been so upset at the possibility of being found out or forced into having sex with a customer that she had been thoroughly relieved when ... whoever he was had grabbed her and whisked her away. She did not have to defend herself, make excuses. He had come to her rescue, and she should have been able to trust that it was only that!

Bastard! She did not know who he was, but she was not going anywhere with him. He had had his way with her as if she was a common prostitute, knowing full well who she was! And he had Ruggero's collar. She wanted more than anything to get it back from him, but she knew that would be virtually impossible. He was strong, stronger than any man she had ever met. She did not stand a chance against him.

Bredamante stewed over the latest turn of events. She would have to slip out on

the morrow, she decided. She would leave a note for Madame Carley so that she did not suspect the worst. The man who claimed to be Ruggero had been right about one thing. It was no longer safe for her here, and he was part of the problem. She felt sure that she could sneak out in the morning while everyone slept. She did not usually see him until breakfast. She would rise early and slip out before the sun rose. She was not sure where she would go, but anywhere was better than here with a man she could not trust who knew her identity.

Chapter Four

Bredamante lay awake all night, too nervous and worked up about what she had to do to relax enough to find sleep. She lay in her bed quietly for hours, watching the sky grow lighter and lighter beyond the small window of her room. Before the sun completely rose over the horizon, she unlocked her door and carefully, quietly opened it a

crack to see if the man who called himself Roojeer-or Ruggero-was sleeping at her door again. He had not been there since the first morning she had met him, or stumbled over him, but she did not want to take a chance on waking him up if he had decided to camp out there again because of what had taken place. She breathed a sigh of relief when she saw that he was not there, not realizing that she had been holding her breath, and quickly exited her room. Just as she shut her door completely, a large hand wrapped around her mouth, effectively cutting off any means of sounding an alarm, and she was pulled back against someone.

"It is I, princess," Ruggero whispered on a harsh breath of sound, not wanting to alert anyone in the building to their plans. "I heard you stirring. I know that what happened yesterday must have frightened you and angered you, but we do not have time to discuss it. You will come with me now, for your own safety."

Ruggero kept his hand clamped tightly over her mouth, not wanting to take a chance at her screaming if he were to let go, as he lifted her off the floor and pressed her firmly against his body, carrying her a little awkwardly down the stairs and out of the building. He did not take his hand from her mouth until they were just outside of the village. He was thankful that they did not run into any humans, it would have only complicated matters.

Bredamante knew better than to scream or to struggle with the man as he took her captive. It would not do her any good and could do a great deal of harm if any of Balthazar's men were about searching for her. Resisting him would only waste valuable energy and alert people to their whereabouts, and, whatever she thought about him, she did not feel that he meant her any harm. She did not want to go with him, but she also did not want to be discovered. As frightened as she was, therefore, she had realized by the time he eased his hold upon her that she would have to bide her time and try to escape later when he let down his guard.

She glared at him as he stood watching and waiting to see what her reaction would be when he finally uncovered her mouth. When he saw that she was not going to scream or fight him, he shrugged and hefted her over a shoulder as he had done before, holding her in place with a hand firmly on her tight bottom.

Ruggero felt she had obviously thought through what she should do and reasoned that it would be dangerous to object to him. He was glad that she was not putting up a fight. He knew that he would have to keep a sharp eye out until she trusted him, however, for he knew his princess very well. Likely, the entire time she was behaving in such a subdued manner, she plotting her revenge and escape.

He carried her for miles and miles, making sure to stay well away from any signs of civilization. With no particular destination in mind beyond taking the princess as far from danger as possible, he headed in the opposite direction of the castle. He might be uncertain about many things, but he was sure of one, and that was that he did not want to be anywhere near the castle right now. Bredamante's distrust of him, however much she might feel it was warranted, was the greatest threat at the moment. Somehow, he must find a way to get through to her to make her understand that he was only doing this for her own good. He tried to see her situation from her point of view, but he still could not help feeling hurt that after all this time she did not seem to trust him even a little. He had furtively hoped that if he was patient, he would gain her trust, and perhaps she might come to realize who he really was.

After a day and a half, they reached a clearing and he found a small cave. Listening intently outside first to see if there was anything stirring within, he tested the air carefully for scents, and finally, assured that it was safe, he carried Bredamante inside and put her down gently.

She had been on his shoulder for so long with so few breaks that she could not stand on her own two feet. Her legs buckled as soon as he set her down. He caught her before she could fall, holding her close to his body as he looked into her face.

"Are you ill, princess?"

Bredamante's throat was raw from disuse and little water or food. "Why would you care?" she asked sullenly, trying to look away as he brought her face closer to his to examine it for signs of ailment.

The comment wounded him to the quick. He tried not to let it show in her face. He understood that she was angry and probably very scared, but he had done nothing to make her believe he meant to harm her. Even when he had touched her, he had meant it only to protect her. True, he had lost control, done far more than he had meant to, but he had retained enough sense to protect her even when he was half crazed with his desire for her. He had not made her his even though he had wanted to so badly that it had been sheer torture to restrain himself. Everything he had ever done was for her. For her to suggest that he did not care cut him to the core.

Swallowing against the hurt, he helped her to sit down in the front of the cave and stepped away from her, his form rigid. He did not trust himself to respond to her remark. She obviously needed a little more time before she felt she could trust him. He would get her some water and food and a fire. When she had broken her fast and warmed herself, she would feel better. Perhaps then they would talk.

"I will gather some wood and find water and food. Stay here."

It was not a request. She heard it clearly in his voice, saw the threat in his eyes. She knew better than to try to run away from him right now anyway. She was too weak, too stiff and sore, both from the little walking she had done and being carried by him when she was too weary to put one foot in front of the other. Averting her gaze from his pointedly, she lay down on the dirt at the mouth of the cave and closed her weary eyes, falling fast asleep within minutes.

Despite the warning threat in his voice when he had left, Ruggero held little faith that Bredamante would allow his anger to sway her if she was still as angry with him as it seemed she was. That being the case, he gathered some wood for a fire and returned quickly, immensely relieved when he returned to find his princess had not feigned sleep only to slip away from him.

She was still sleeping. He studied her, being to worry for a few moments, but finally decided that it was simply that she needed the rest. The trip to the cave had been very hard on her. They had only stopped when it was absolutely necessary. He had wanted to put as much distance between them and the town as possible after the incident with Madame Carley's customer, deciding that, despite their ruse, he could not take the chance that the man would not talk. In his experience with the human men, they were apt to talk freely with other men when they were angered.

For the moment, though, they were safe. He studied her yearningly as he made a small fire with the wood he had collected. They would have time to talk when she awoke. He just prayed that she would listen.

"I said I want more ale!" Broden yelled irritably, his words slurring, spittle flying from his lips.

It had not been a good day. He had thought when he woke up that he would start the morning off right with a visit to Madame Carley's house of ill repute. As soon as he entered, he had seen the most delicious woman he had ever laid eyes on. But then some man had come barging through as if he owned the place and claimed her before he could.

He was sure that she had been untouched. He had never seen a woman at Carley's that was so clean, who looked so pure and innocent. He had stood on the bottom floor, listening to her enthusiastic moans of pleasure for a while, thinking that he would wait his turn. One of the other girls had invited him to her room when she saw him, but sleeping with her only served to infuriate him more. His money was just as good as that man's money. He had seen her first.

Broden sloshed his ale on the wooden counter of the tavern when the owner handed him another tankard. "She was the most beautiful woman I have ever seen, with hair like strands of spun gold." He stopped his tirade to take a chug of ale, some of it pouring down the sides of his mouth to catch on his worn wool tunic. "She had lips like pose retals."

"I think what you mean is rose petals."

The voice directly behind him startled Broden, causing him to jerk and spill his ale on his lap. He turned on his seat and, trying to steady his wobbly head, tried to focus his eyes so he could look a little angrily at the man that had interrupted him and caused him to spill his precious drink. He wiped at his damp pants.

"You don't know what I mean. You didn't see her," Broden said, leaning in his seat until his dirty face was mere inches from the stranger, his body threatening to leave his seat and land on the man or the floor, the pungent odor of the ale on his breath stifling the fresh air.

The stranger stepped back a little and then pulled Broden off of the stool he had been sitting on to land in a wet heap on the floor, his tankard crashing to the floor beside him.

"I think I know very well of whom you speak. Now, I want you to take me to her," the stranger said, motioning for his cohorts sitting at a table on the other side of the tavern to gather the drunken man off of the floor and carry him out of the tavern.

The group of Balthazar's men carried Broden to the house of ill repute that he had told them about. They unceremoniously threw him in the dirt outside as they made their way into the building.

Madame Carley was standing on the stairs when they burst in without so much as knocking. She fanned herself a white feather fan frantically when they entered.

"Well, hello! And what can I do for you fine, strong soldiers? Do you need a few women to take care of some of the burdens of war?" She batted her long, thick black eyelashes at them coquettishly.

The lead soldier did not waste any time in getting down to business. "Where is Princess Bredamante?" he demanded in a commanding voice, pulling his broad sword from its scabbard at his waist and pointing it threateningly at Madame Carley.

"Why I don't know! I have never had the honor of meeting her," Madame Carley exclaimed, twisting the feather fan in her hand innocently. She hoped that her words and

face looked sincere. Sweat began to bead on her skin.

"The man outside described a woman just like the princess. He met her here in this building earlier this morn. She has fled Balthazar, and we mean to take her back to him. Do not stand in our way or you will certainly pay the price." He motioned with his free hand for his men to search the house from top to bottom. The search did not take long. The princess was nowhere in sight. The soldiers stormed out of the building just as quickly as they had entered it.

"I have a mind to slit all their throats and burn this shit hole to the ground. She was here! We will need the hounds," the leader said angrily to his men. "You men there go and gather them. I will wait here in case she returns."

Bredamante awoke to the sound of a crackling fire. Her stomach protested as she sat up and looked around. She smelled something delicious and saw that the man that had taken her had made a spit over the fire and was cooking something that smelled wonderful. Her mouth began to water. She was so hungry she thought she could eat grass at the moment.

Ruggero studied Bredamante surreptitiously over the fire as he continued to turn the fish he had caught on the spit. The sun had gone down and now only the fire illuminated her pale skin. In its gleaming light, she looked like an angel.

Unbidden, images of the two of them together in her room flooded his mind, of her face beneath him as she sighed and moaned with pleasure. He swallowed hard as the memory of her thrusting against his engorged cock came back to him, making his member swell tightly against his breeches. He began to sweat, and he knew that it was not from the intensity of the fire. It was the intensity of the passion he felt for her.

He cleared his throat uncomfortably, hoping she could not see the desire that consumed him in his eyes.

"We will stay here for a few days. There are no humans for many miles. It is safe, for now," he said, keeping his gaze resolutely on the task at hand.

When he spoke, Bredamante looked up in surprise from the sizzling food she had been lusting over. No humans? What a very strange thing to say!

She looked away again when he met her gaze, staring down at the fire, though she was keenly aware of him now when she had not been before. When she sensed that he had returned his gaze to his task, she slid a careful glance him, studying him as she had not really had the opportunity before, except once and that was at a great distance.

His black hair caught gleams of firelight and reflected it back, reminding her of Ruggero's gleaming midnight coat as he lay before the fire on her hearth in her chambers. The thought gave her pause. His green eyes had been a constant reminder to her as well of Ruggero's, but it was nonsense of course, regardless of what he had claimed ... and she had not forgotten that, or forgiven him for it!

He knew she was the princess. It stood to reason that he could know things about her when the same was not true in her case.

He had said nothing about any sort of spell that had been cast upon him to effect the change he claimed ... not that she would have believed that anyway. Ruggero was a magnificent panther, but he had no magic. The only person that she could think of that could wield such a spell was Balthazar, and there was certainly no reason why he would do such a thing. If he got close enough to a panther, especially her Ruggero, the only

spell he would cast would be death.

Bredamante rationalized that she was only mourning her beloved Ruggero, desperately seeking things that reminded her of him. And *he* was taking advantage of her grief!

He was not fit to speak Ruggero's name! He was certainly not fit to wear it!

Ruggero, she knew, had loved her every bit as much as she had loved him. He had given his life trying to protect her. Even if it had been possible, even if, somehow, a spell had been cast upon him and changed him into human form, he would *never* have behaved toward her as this man had!

It made her angry all over again each time she thought about it, and she had scarcely *stopped* thinking about it!

What she could not understand, at all, is how the man had so ... *enthralled* her! Grudgingly, she admitted that he *was* strikingly handsome, hardly surprising when there was nothing on the man that was not exceptional. Even his nose was not ugly as was so often the case, no matter how perfect a person seemed otherwise.

She studied the part in question critically, but she found that she could not dispute that it was a very nice nose, rather bold, perhaps a bit hooked on the end, but not distressingly so, his nostrils as finely chiseled as the noble bridge. She was almost sorry he did not have one of those blobby, meaty looking things stuck in the middle of his face. *Then* perhaps she would not have been so susceptible to the scoundrel!

But, no, he was quiet distressingly beautiful and yet so boldly, irrefutably male that she could not even fault him for being so easy on the eyes.

She considered it for a time, but she was finally forced to conclude that whatever it was about him that made her have such wicked thoughts, that had encouraged her to behave so shamefully, it was not actually his looks. She *had* to admit that, to herself at least, because the truth was that first time she had not even had the chance to study him and appreciate all that loveliness of his. He had taken her completely off guard and she had gone up in flames only because he pressed himself against her.

Even now, as completely hurt and shamed and angry as she was that he had *made* her behave so badly, so wantonly, she had only to look at him to remember vividly all the things he had made her feel and she ashamedly wanted him to make her feel those things again. She wanted him to touch her and kiss her, but more than that, she wanted him to possess her, completely. She wanted him to make her his ... fool though she was.

And fool that he was, for that matter! Did he think she would behave like that for just anyone? *How* could he not tell how much she had wanted him, needed him? How could he not know that she was more angry because he had *not* claimed her than because of anything else?

What did she possibly have to look forward to now? Everyone she had loved was gone, and that bastard Balthazar was relentlessly hounding the kingdom for her... would continue to do so until he had finally caught her. She would far rather give herself willingly to a stranger who made her feel impossibly wonderful than save her maiden head for that ... evil, disgusting, putrid being that dared call himself a man! How could he fail to realize that?

Damn him! Maybe he *was* simple minded! He certainly did not seem to know the first thing about a woman.

Except how to make her burn for him, she mentally amended.

Mentally, Bredamante shook herself as the memories flooded her mind again and she felt her woman's place grow damp at the turn of her thoughts. She shifted uncomfortably in front of the fire, hoping belatedly that he had not noticed her staring at him.

He took the small fish off of the spit and handed it to Bredamante. She nodded her head slightly in his direction in thanks for the food, grabbing it by the cool end of the stick, holding it until the meat had cooled enough to eat.

"Do not worry, princess. I am your friend," Ruggero said softly, his mouth felt suddenly dry as he waited none-too-easily for her response.

Bredamante looked up at him quickly at that comment. She eyed him warily, wondering at his motives in trying to soothe her. If he had been one of Balthazar's men, he would have simply taken her to the Evil One. But just because he had not taken her to her enemy did not mean she could trust him. He was taking care of her, but it just might be a means to lull her into letting down her guard. He wanted something from her, she just did not know what. And she could not easily forget that he still possessed Ruggero's collar. Since he already knew her identity and held her captive, she felt she had nothing to lose by asking him about it.

"Where did you get that bejeweled collar?" she asked abruptly, looking him squarely in the eye, waiting with baited breath for his answer as it occurred to her abruptly that he had told her Ruggero was not dead. She knew it was too much to hope that he was not, that she could not really believe anything the man told her, but she still could not help but hope that he had not taken it off of Ruggero's dead body. She had thought that she had shed her tears for her fallen friend, but as the words left her mouth, she felt tears begin to well behind her eyes.

Ruggero only took a moment to find his answer, "I took it off of your panther," he said tiredly. It was not a lie, and it was what she seemed to believe, in any case. He had taken it off of himself. He had tried to tell her before that he was Ruggero, had almost convinced himself that his love for her must be so evident that she could not help but know him, even when he was so changed. He supposed he could always prove it to her by transforming, but for some reason he wanted her to just believe him, to trust him as a man, just for his actions. He had saved her from the man in town, had proven that he meant to take care of her by making her as comfortable as he could, what more did she want from him?

The man's words destroyed the last of Bredamante's hope and with it her resolve to hold back her emotions. She let the tears flow as she bent her head, no longer able to see the fish in her lap for the tears that blurred her vision. She sniffed quietly as she let the emotions roll over her, the loss of her father, the loss of her dear Ruggero. She had scarcely had a moment to grieve since Balthazar had attacked her home. The grief overwhelmed her in its intensity. She stood up, finally having worked herself into a fury and tossed the food aside.

"You Bastard! How dare you steal from the dead!" she screamed at him as she dove over the fire and into his chest. She caught him off guard and knocked him over, and he rolled with her on the ground until he was on top of her. He grabbed her hands as she tried to beat him, scratch at his eyes, do as much damage as she could. He took her small wrists and held them with one hand over her head. "I loved him!" she shouted furiously in his face as she struggled to free her wrists.

With his free hand, Ruggero covered her mouth before she could say anything else. "And I love you.... I always have. I always will."

Bredamante stopped struggling abruptly at that, studying his face, searching his eyes for the truth. Slowly, it sank into her mind that she saw nothing in his eyes but honesty.

He removed his hand from her mouth.

"What are you saying? Are you trying to say that *you* are Ruggero? You sick bastard!" Bredamante said angrily, beginning to struggle against his hold again.

Ruggero put his hand back over her mouth, tamping his frustration with an effort. It occurred to him after a moment, however, that he knew his princess as no one else. "I *am* Ruggero. I have been your faithful companion since I was no more than a young kit, played with you, adored you, protected you. I slept with you every night ... until I came to realize that my feelings for you went beyond ... what was acceptable ... Because I watched you bathe each night, and I began to want what I could not have, should not have wanted.

"Each night, I lay on your bed so that I could watch you bathe every inch of your delectable body as you sang to me, night after night. It was sweet torment, Bredamante, but I realized it *was* torment when I grew to full maturity. I fantasized about licking every inch of your delectable body, but mostly I fantasized about licking the little, diamond shaped strawberry birthmark"

Holding her gaze, he released her mouth and ran his hand roughly down her neck, down the side of her full breast, down her hip, to the skirt of her gown. Catching her skirts, he gathered the fabric in his hand until he could slide his hand beneath the material and stroked upward along her thigh. His thumb grazed the inside of her thigh as he skated his hand upward, and gooseflesh erupted all over her body.

"Here," he said as he circled the place with the tip of one finger just above the crease of her thigh, no more than a finger's breadth from her mound. "I have craved that more than anything else. I wanted to lick that sweet spot until you moaned with ecstasy."

Bredamante gasped in a sharp breath at the prickle of awakening sensation that erupted all over her as his words moved over and through her like a caress, struggling to remain perfectly still beneath the torment of his finger. Chaos filled her mind, not just because of his touch, or the seductive timber of his voice and the words he had spoken, because she *knew* no one could possibly have known about that birthmark but her parents ... and Ruggero.

She closed her eyes, uncertain what to believe any more, not certain at the moment if she cared whether he lied or not so long as he continued to touch her.

The scent of her desire filled Ruggero's senses, crumbled his tentative hold on his own burgeoning desires. He allowed his hand to drift from the birthmark to the curls at the apex of her thighs and then slipped it downward to cup her sex in his palm, his body hardening painfully as he felt her heat, the dampness of her desire. She tensed as he found the slit in her pantalettes, parted her nether lips gently, and traced her damp cleft with his finger, but a moan of pleasure escaped her, as well.

It was his undoing, shredding the last of his fragile control. Dipping his head, he captured her lips beneath his hungrily, possessively, delving between her lips to thrust his tongue into her mouth as he stroked the fragile petals of her sex and found the swollen bud that gave her so much pleasure. Her thighs opened for him with a will of their own

as he teased the bud, sucking him deeper into the quagmire of madness. Shuddering with the fire that consumed him, he made love to her mouth with his tongue. Penetrating the warm, wet cavern with possessive thrusts as he wanted to penetrate her nether mouth with his cock, he sought her woman's place with one thick finger and delved inside of her channel.

Her flesh clung to his finger, closed around it tightly.

It was madness, he knew, insanity, but his mind was fevered with the need to possess her, to claim her as his own. He stroked her with his finger instead, telling himself he would do no more than give her pleasure, bring her body to rapture. She rose against him as he continued to stroke her, lifting to meet his hand each time he delved deeply.

He was light headed with the feel of her, with the burning in his lungs as he broke the kiss at last and nipped at her face, her throat, working his way downward until he could cover the peak of one breast with his mouth. She uttered a choked cry, arching her back and thrusting her breast more tightly against his mouth as he sucked at the tender bud through her bodice, ran his tongue around the puckered aureole surrounding it.

Releasing his grip on her wrists, he delved beneath her bodice, lifting her breast from its restraint and suckling the tight bud at the tip. Her fingers dug into his hair, tugging, and then cupping his head to her as he alternately teased a nipple with the light flick of his tongue and sucked it deeply into his mouth.

He slipped another finger inside of her as the moisture of her desire coated his finger, pressing as deeply inside of her as he could.

The tentative touch of her hand on his cock blindsided him. The moment he felt her hand close over him, he lost what little mind he had left. Jerking his fingers from her channel, he began to tear at the breeches confining him, ripping the fabric in his desperate haste to open them. Her fingers closed around his shaft the moment he had freed it, the pleasure so painfully exquisite it dragged a choked groan from him. He felt as if he was dying as she stroked him, pulled at him until he yielded with blind need to her guidance and moved between her thighs.

She arched to meet him as he found her channel with the head of his cock, pressed into her. Her movement engulfed his flesh in fire. Gasping, shuddering at the feel of her flesh slowly yielding to his, clutching tightly at him as he delved a little deeper with each thrust, he burrowed his face against her neck and pumped again, frantic to feel her flesh completely surrounding his to drive deeply inside of her to spill his seed at her womb.

She gasped sharply as he filled her at last, her fingers clutching so tightly at his arms he could feel her nails biting into him. Shivers skated over him, goose bumps erupting all over his arms and back.

"Bredamante," he groaned against the hollow of her neck, feeling his body gathering to explode as he began to thrust into her in a mindless need to reach his glory. "Mine!" he ground out fiercely. "You are mine!"

She arched to meet him as he pounded into her in deep, hard thrusts, countering his moves, opening herself to take him deeper until, abruptly, she stiffened, cried out, shuddering and shaking as she climaxed. Her body clenched around his cock, squeezing it, milking it until his seed erupted, his body convulsing in hard quakes as he came inside of her. He groaned, shuddering as the waves of ecstasy wracked his body until he had nothing more to give her.

Panting for breath, still shuddering with the after quakes, he leaned heavily against her, trying to gather the strength to lift his weight from her before he crushed her. Finally, every muscle in his body screaming in protest, he wrapped his arms tightly around her and rolled onto his side, gathering her tightly against his body.

The smell of burning fish roused him when he was drifting toward oblivion. He wrinkled his nose at the smell but finally cracked an eyelid to look at the fish he had left on the spit.

“You burned our dinner,” Bredamante mumbled lazily.

He had expected a blast of temper, recriminations, complaints about his roughness at the very least, and he had struggled to find the energy to try to defend the indefensible. Her comment surprised a chuckle out of him, mostly because he was infinitely relieved that she was not threatening to castrate him for his trespass. “I burned *my* dinner,” he corrected her. “You threw yours on the fire.”

Chapter Five

With great reluctance, Ruggero gently released Bredamante and sat up. Grabbing the spit, he removed it from the fire and tossed fish and all through the mouth of the cave. He glanced at Bredamante, then, knowing he needed to leave her to find food for them both, but far more interested in assuaging his hunger for her at the moment.

The heat of passion was no longer driving him as it had, however, and he had already begun to regret his loss of control and worry about the consequences. His uneasiness deepened when he found her staring back at him, her expression unreadable. Should he apologize, he wondered? Beg forgiveness for taking liberties with his princess that were treasonous given his position in the royal household?

Would she demand his life? Exile him for his audacity?

He could not bring himself to feel regret, regardless ... unless by taking what he wanted he discovered he had given up the right to protect her. This was nothing like the time before, though, when he had known that, even as he indulged his need to love her, he was protecting her identity. This time he had done it only for himself, and he had not stopped until he had claimed her fully as his own.

But then, she was no common maiden, nor one of his own people, for that matter. She could not simply be claimed, whether he marked her as his own or not.

Dimly, he recalled that she had urged him to possess her, but then she had been caught up in the throes of passion, as well. Clearer thought might have brought doubts, made her regret the impulse to yield to him. She might merely have decided to exercise her royal right to take a lover of her choosing for that matter.

He thought he would rather she drove a knife in his heart than if she told him she regretted it.

"I should find food," he said gruffly, realizing that, as much as he wanted to make love to her all over again, he could not quite summon the courage to risk rejection. If she had welcomed him, shown even the slightest indication that she would not turn him away, he would have gladly ignored the needs of his stomach in favor of the needs of his heart and soul, but she merely studied him, neither offering a welcome nor displaying anger or hurt.

He got up when she still said nothing and left, wondering uneasily what was going through her mind. Discarding his clothing on the bank of the stream as he had before, Ruggero shifted into his panther form. It had become easier each time he did so, though he had feared the first time he willed the change that he might be unable to summon his human form again, and by that time he had not wanted to give up that side of himself.

He did not have to search deeply to know why. In all the weeks that he had walked among humans, behaved as a human, he had never truly grown comfortable with it, and yet it allowed him the possibility of coming closer to Bredamante than he could ever have hoped to in his panther form. For her, he would have willingly sacrificed his beast forever, but then he was of far more use to her as a panther than he would ever be as a human, stronger, more capable of protecting her ... and that was his true role in her life, protector, not lover ... and certainly not mate. Though what he had done had mated him to her, sealing his fate forever, he had no cause to regret it even if she could not or would not acknowledge it.

He was the last of his kind, but even if he was not, there could be no other for him but Bredamante. He had committed his heart and soul into her care long since and he did not regret it, would not even if he must see her wed another of her kind. And he knew, eventually, that he would.

The faint scent of blood wafted to his nostrils as he padded down the bank, and he tensed, paused to sniff the air cautiously. His heart sank as he traced the scent and discovered the source was him, or rather his genitals. It was Bredamante's blood, and the moment he realized that, cold fear closed over him. Feeling abruptly weak kneed, he dropped to the dirt and stared at his cock as if he had suddenly discovered it was a sword blade.

He had hurt her. His passion had turned him into a mindless beast, allowed his beast to take over his human body, and he had hurt his princess.

No wonder she had only stared at him! Lifting his head, he turned to stare back over the terrain that separated him from her, as if he could pierce the earth itself and see her. Why had she not berated him for his brutal assault? Had she been that wounded? Too shocked by his savagery even to realize how badly he had hurt her?

Horror did not begin to describe how he felt as his shocked dismay gave way to a full understanding of what he had done. He thought wildly for many moments of throwing himself from a cliff, falling upon a blade ... there was no cliff to leap from and no blade save the one he had used to brutalize his beloved. The stream was too shallow to drown himself in.

She should cut his heart out herself. She might as well.

Unable to resist the urge, he got to his feet a little unsteadily and made his way back to the cave, peering cautiously inside, terrified that he would find her laying pale and lifeless within, or worse, her mind shattered by his brutal rape of his delicate flower.

She was sitting by the fire, idly snapping twigs and feeding them to the fire. Her eyes had a faraway look to them that unnerved him, but even as he watched a faint, satisfied smile curled her lips ... and then she began to hum, ever so faintly.

Frowning, Ruggero left the cave, trying to decide what to make of her behavior. It was harder to catch the fish than the first time because he was distracted. He could not very well return empty handed, though. When he caught enough he thought would feed them both, he snapped the heads from the fish and gutted them before he shifted into his human form again and dressed once more.

She looked up as he entered the cave, and he froze for a handful of seconds. A smile curved her lips. "Good! I am starving," she said when she saw the fish.

Confused and thoroughly rattled, Ruggero joined her at the fire and settled the spitted fish over it to cook. He would as soon have his own raw, but he had become so accustomed to posing as a human for Bredamante he was far more interested in behaving as she expected than satisfying anything as insignificant as his own preferences.

They managed to eat the fish this time. Ruggero felt as if he might choke on his own food, but he ate it anyway, reflecting that he needed his strength to protect her, even if it was only to impale himself on the first pike trained upon him. She was right. He was a knave, a bastard ... not literally, of course. His parents had been a mated pair, but certainly in the sense of having not an ounce of honor. He had disgraced himself, his family, and far worse, sullied his beloved princess and brutalized her into the bargain.

He could not understand why she was being so forbearing, unless she was simply too traumatized to fully comprehend the depths of the disaster as of yet.

Coward that he was, he could not bring himself to ask her, and he refused to yield to the urge to flee her sight in shame. Instead, once they had eaten, he asked the princess politely if she would care to go to the stream to bathe. She brightened immediately and rose expectantly.

"The water is cool," he told her apologetically.

Amusement twinkled in her eyes when she looked at him. "What? No heated water for a royal princess? Nature could not be so crass!"

Disconcerted, he studied her for a long moment before he realized she was teasing. He settled on the bank to guard her as she discarded her clothing to bathe, but for once it was not the pleasure of filling his gaze with her beauty that prompted him to examine her thoroughly once she had disrobed. He thought he might throw up his dinner

when he saw the dried blood on her thighs.

Focusing on *not* further disgracing himself and likely disgusting her in the process, he stared off into the distance, as if he was fascinated by the scenery.

“You are not going to join me?”

He did not look at her. “I bathed when I caught our dinner.”

“Fishing is not bathing,” she pointed out.

“It is when it requires wallowing in a stream long enough to prune the skin,” he retorted.

She chuckled. “I would have enjoyed seeing that.”

Her easy laugh lightened the dark cloud that sat so heavily on his shoulders, but he was not convinced by her easy manner anymore than the lack of reproach. She could *not* be all right, he knew, he had seen the evidence.

She made no attempt to dress herself when she had finished. Instead, she gathered her clothing in her arms and looked at him expectantly. “You are not going to dress?” he demanded uncomfortably. “You will be chilled.”

“I am wet,” she responded reasonably, if somewhat tartly, “And in no hurry to don my dirty clothes when I feel clean for the first time in days. Besides,” she added as he turned to lead her back to the cave, “I will have the fire ... and you to warm me.”

He stiffened at that remark, wondering if she had devised the delightful prospect as a means of torturing him to avenge herself. It *would* be torture. He knew damned well, no matter how sick he was with himself, that he could not curl up to Bredmante, naked, without wanting to touch her. Reflecting that he deserved whatever she wanted to dish out, he did not object. He balked, however, when she had lain her clothes on the floor of the cave and lay down on them, asking him innocently if he meant to keep his own clothes on.

He did. As much as he hated them, as unnerving as it was to think that she would be naked in his arms, removing the barrier his own clothes represented would only make it that much harder to bear.

She tilted her head curiously. “You are not shy?”

He felt his face reddening. Lie to spare himself, he wondered? “No,” he finally admitted gruffly.

She rose up on one elbow. “I want to see you,” she said in a low, husky voice that made his cock instantly spring to life.

The reluctance he had felt before was nothing compared to the reluctance he felt at that moment. Trying to ignore the thing, willing it to lie down again and behave with proper contrition, Ruggero shucked his shirt and breeches. Gritting his teeth, he allowed her to look her fill before he settled uneasily beside her, wondering worriedly yet again if she was disappointed with his human form where she had been so fond of his panther. She had always lavished praise on him as a panther. He had never realized how much he had taken it for granted now that it was gone.

He tensed all over when she placed a palm on his chest. His throat closed as if he had a fish bone stuck in it. He swallowed convulsively several times, but it did nothing to release the sense of choking as she examined him with curious fingers.

Despite the warm feeling of excitement threading her veins and accelerating her heart as she explored Ruggero with her hands, Bredamante could not help but notice that he was as stiff as a corpse. She stopped after a moment and met his gaze ... or tried to.

His jaw set, he was staring at the ceiling of the cave as if mesmerized. "What is wrong?"

Ruggero released a pent up breath. "Tell me."

Bredamante removed her hand, studying him with a mixture of hurt and anger.

"There is nothing wrong with me. You do not want me now?"

Ruggero closed his eyes at the hurt anger in her voice. "How could there be nothing wrong with you when I saw your blood?"

Bredamante stared at him blankly for several moments, torn between indignation and amusement. "My virgin's blood?" she demanded. "Did you not expect it? Do you think I have made a habit of giving myself to men just because I sought refuge in that ... place?"

Ruggero whipped his head around to stare at her. "Virgin's blood?" he echoed.

Bredamante pursed her lips angrily. "Yes, damn you! Do you think I should not have felt any passion only because I had not been with a man before? How could you *claim* to be Ruggero and not know that I had never given myself to any man before you!"

He caught her as she sat up jerkily to move away from him, dragging her naked body down so that she fell across his chest. "I *did* know you had not been with another man!" he growled, his face close to hers. "Why else do you think I would say that I had claimed you for my own?"

"Mayhap because you *claim* to love me?" she snapped angrily, wriggling to get off of him and succeeding in causing him a good deal pain as she thrashed against his painfully swollen cock.

Gritting his teeth, he rolled to capture her beneath his weight. "I did not only claim it," he growled, "I said it because it is true. Explain to me this virgin's blood! You were not hurt?"

She sniffed indignantly. "I did not say it did not hurt. It did not hurt *much*! How could you not know about a virgin's blood?"

He gritted his teeth. "Because, I *am* Ruggero!" He averted his gaze uncomfortably. "And because I have never been with a woman," he muttered irritably.

Bredamante stared at him in stunned surprise. "You mean besides your own kind?" she asked slowly.

His lips flattened. "Any female," he clarified stiffly. "You of all people must know there *are* no others of my kind."

Bredamante studied him for a long moment. "Is that why you wanted me?" she asked in a small voice, tracing a finger almost idly along his collar bone.

Ruggero uttered an impatient sigh. "I wanted you because I love you. It would not matter if there were a hundred of my own kind. It is you I love."

Reassured, Bredamante lifted her head and brushed her lips along his stubble roughened cheek, nibbling her way to his ear.

He stilled, allowing her to explore as she pleased, sucking in a harsh breath and holding it as she reached his ear and traced the intricate swirls with the tip of her tongue. He shuddered, expelling his pent up breath in a harsh rush, then turning his face against hers to explore her in turn.

"Bredamante?" he murmured when he had made his way down her throat to explore her collar bone and the upper slopes of her breasts.

"Mmm?" she responded dizzily, already intoxicated by the feel of his lips and tongue.

“Was that both of our virgin’s blood?”

The question caught her off guard. She struggled against the surge of amusement that filled her, bit her lip to try to contain the laugh that threatened to choke her. “Yes,” she lied a little unsteadily, “which, as I understand it, makes you mine since I took your virginity even as you took mine.”

“There was never any question of that,” he responded. Lifting his head to look at her, he noted the amusement still dancing in her eyes with suspicion. “What?”

Her amusement died. Lifting her hands, she captured his face between her palms, studying his face, his deep green eyes, the shock of midnight black hair that tumbled over his eyes. She realized in that moment that Ruggero had been right. She had known all along who he was, not consciously, but she had responded with passion to his slightest touch because she had felt the love he had for her, because her heart had known him. And even if she had not, she could no longer doubt him. Poor darling! He did not understand the way of humans nearly as well as he thought he did. “It does not matter, Ruggero. Love me tonight and let us not think of anything beyond the moment, the past, the present, or the morrow.”

A deep sorrow filled him at her words, but he knew, he had always known, that she was not destined to be his.

Ruggero pulled Bredamante against the hard heated flesh of his body, consuming her lips in a searing kiss. He wanted to give every part of his self to her. He wanted to fill her with all the love that he had repressed for so many years. He wanted her to love and feel loved.

Bredamante cooed as his lips left hers, thrusting her breasts to fill his hungry mouth. He suckled her waiting breasts greedily, holding one in each hand and alternating between nipping and licking each nipple. Every inch of his body seemed to grow taut with need, became as hard as stone, his blood pounding furiously, almost painfully in his temples and through his swollen cock until it began to seem that he would burst and spill his seed before he had the chance to fill her.

Bredamante reached between their bodies and closed her hands around his throbbing cock that had been teasing the naked flesh of her woman’s place and slowly stroked it from the bottom to top, mirroring the feel of her body when he thrust inside of her, wanting desperately to fill him with as much pleasure as he was giving her.

Gooseflesh began to ripple all over her skin and brought her already sensitive nipples to hardened peaks as she continued to stroke his thick hot flesh with both hands as he laved her body with nibbles and kisses. She soon discovered, though, that pleasuring him with her hands was not nearly enough. Feeling entirely wicked and wanton for her desires, not feeling self-conscious but more apprehensive, since she was still in the dark to so much of the things that went on between a man and a woman, she decided she wanted to feel him in her mouth, to taste his flesh the way he was sampling hers.

She stopped his passionate assault on her senses and pushed him up until he sat back and then sat up in front of him. Grasping his large hands, she guided them back toward her waiting breasts and then grabbed his muscular arms to hold herself steady as she leaned closer to him and began to use her teeth on his neck the way he had done.

Ruggero let out a groan of pleasure as her lips brushed the sensitive flesh beneath his ear. Another wave of wet warmth seeped from her woman’s place at the sound,

exciting her in a way that she had never thought possible and it gave her the encouragement she needed to continue, feeling like a brazen hussy but not really caring.

While he continued to torment her full breasts, she began to make a new path of love bites from beneath his firm, square jaw to his ear, nipping and licking intermediately, using her sharp teeth as he had done to gently stimulate the long muscles of his neck and shoulder. She gasped out loud when he growled into her ear and bit the bottom of his ear delicately, just barely touching his skin. She felt an empowering sense of control sweep over her as he trembled slightly beneath her ministrations, only serving further to pump blood and sensations harder to her woman's place.

Using the emboldened feelings now coursing through her, Bredamante let her small hands move roughly over the hot taut skin of his chest and thrust her tongue from the back of his ear around to the front, briefly experimenting with exploring the inside of his ear. Ruggero released another animalistic sound of pleasure, a sort of guttural groan that sent a lightning bolt straight to her wet passages of her womb, causing it to clench spasmodically as if he was already thrusting inside of her. Pulling back, she dared a glance at his face. Somewhere in the midst of their passion crazed fury, he had closed his eyes and his face had contorted in an endearing mixture of pain and pleasure.

Bredamante's face lit up with a sense of accomplishment at Ruggero's state of being, the sexual power over him eliciting a small ripple of an orgasm deep down in her core, her woman's place getting wet with desire, with need to find a harder, more sustaining orgasm. Taking advantage of his eyes being clamped tightly shut, she left a feather light kiss on his lips, shocking his mouth open, and then thrust her tongue inside of his hot mouth, loving the aggressive feeling that was taking over her.

Ruggero made a surprisingly quick recovery, kissing her back ardently. He had longed for this moment with all of his heart for what had seemed like an eternity. He did not imagine that if he were given a lifetime with this amazing woman that he would ever have his fill of her, of her delicious scent.

Bredamante wove her arms about his neck and began to just barely rub her woman's mound on the tip of his cock, as he had done in the house of ill repute, eliciting another growl from him into her mouth as he continued to kiss her passionately as the sensations she was creating with the friction of their bodies made his cock pulsate almost painfully with pleasure. His engorged cock was slick with the juices weeping from her woman's lips, and it aided her to lightly move up and down over just the sensitive head of his cock.

He continued to suckle the now reddened flesh of her neck as she mercilessly continued to rub her mound on his cock, admitting a little bit more of him inside. Her nether lips clung to him possessively, and he felt his entire body begin to quake with the need that had been building.

"I love the way you feel inside of me," Bredamante whispered in his ear, her voice husky with desire, tentatively licking as she spoke, thrusting her hips up until his engorged cock was just a little deeper and then coming completely off again. He moaned out loud, trying hard not to spill his seed before she could get her find her own surcease.

"I have never felt so much pleasure as I have in your arms, my love," he said softly. .

His words dissolved the last vestige of her control, "Take me now! I need you!" she shouted at him, unknowingly her nails into the flesh of his back as he thrust

himself completely into her passage. He set a rapid pace with long, deep strokes, and she struggled to match his rhythm. Wanting desperately to feel him imbedded deeper within her, she wrapped her legs about him, tilting her hips with each of his powerful thrusts so that he drove even deeper inside of her. She grabbed his buttocks and pulled him, begging him to drive harder into her, their hot bodies slamming hard into each other with the frenzy to completion. She screamed, the sound echoing in the cave, as her climax finally flooded her body, her muscles clenching his large girth even tighter until he too reached his climax. He lay down half on top of her, nuzzling his face in the hollow of her neck, his breath hot on her skin.

He caressed her for hours, wanting to learn every inch of her body, memorize it, and cherish it while he still had the chance

* * * *

After a full night and a full morning of lovemaking, Bredamante's body should have been sore. Or, at least she thought it should have been sore. Instead, her body felt awakened, alive as it never had been before. She felt renewed. She smiled at Ruggero's sleeping face as he lay snuggled beside her, resisting the urge to touch him, to familiarize herself with the feel of his flesh beneath her fingertips once more. As much as she wanted to wake him to make love to her again, it pleased her just to study him.

It was odd that he seemed so familiar to her and yet, at the same time, so strange, so *unfamiliar*, or perhaps not. Ruggero the man was as different from Ruggero her beloved panther as night from day. She could not reconcile the two, even though she had little doubt any longer that he was just who he claimed to be.

As she stared at him, his eyes opened abruptly. Thinking at first that it was her staring that had awakened him, she reached to caress his cheek just as he tensed and sat up.

A prickle of uneasiness washed over as her as he abruptly shot to his feet.

"Get dressed," he said quickly, a twinge of something else edging his voice.

Bredamante blinked at him in surprise, but the tension communicated itself to her. Without a word, she rolled off her clothes and began to pull them on in a frantic haste. She had managed to don no more than her pantelettes and chemise when she heard what she realized Ruggero had heard many minutes before she had.

The baying of hounds.

Terror instantly assailed her. Her hands shook so that she had to fight her clothing to get it on.

"How many?" she asked fearfully. "How close are they?"

Ruggero had moved to the mouth of the cave. He turned after a moment, and she saw by his grim expression that there was no hope for them.

"Too many, too close," he said sullenly. His expression was closed, but she could tell from the distant look in his eyes that he was rapidly reviewing their options.

He strode toward her abruptly, catching her to him. "I can not get you safely away from here, and I can not guarantee that I can kill them all. Run. I will hold them off as long as I can."

Bredamante's throat closed with emotion, but she absolutely refused to loose him now that she had found him again. "No," she said calmly.

He pushed her away from him abruptly and shook her. "Do as I say, woman!"

Bredamante set her jaw. "NO!"

He looked furious for a moment. "I will give my life gladly in your service, but at least grant me the hope that it will avail you!"

"You will not give your life at all! I will not have it! Think of something else, damn you!" Bredamante screamed at him in desperation.

He released her abruptly, pacing uneasily toward the mouth of the cave again. She watched him with her heart in her throat, terrified that any moment Balthazar's men would descend upon them.

"There is one possibility, but I do not like it, and I can not give you any guarantee that it will work."

"What?" she demanded breathlessly, a shimmer of hope bleeding into her heart.

His lips compressed grimly. "We allow ourselves to be captured."

Bredamante gaped at him. "That is no solution! They will only torture you before they give you death, and then that vile monster who has destroyed the kingdom will make me marry him! Is that what want?"

He shook his head. "You know what I want! I want you to run to safety and allow me to do what I was born to do! Protect you!"

Bredamante fought the urge to burst into tears. "What of the other plan?"

"There *is* no plan," he said through gritted teeth. "There is only a slim possibility that, by allowing ourselves to be captured, I will have the chance to strike Balthazar down."

"You think so?" she asked hopefully, sniffing.

"I think there is no other way that I even *might* get an opportunity to get close enough to kill him."

She did not like the way he said that, but she realized fairly quickly that they had run out of time as they argued. The sound of the dogs was loud, and she could hear the men with them. She rushed to Ruggero and flung her arms around him.

"Then, so be it ... and, if you do not succeed, then I will kill him myself when he takes me to his bed!"

She had scarcely voiced her determination when men and dogs crowded at the mouth of the cave. Ruggero shoved her behind him protectively. She fought free of him and leapt in front of him, tussling with him when he again tried to shove her behind him so that he could shield her with his body. The soldiers ended the battle between them. Grabbing both of them, they wrenched them apart.

"Kill him. Bind her!"

"Balthazar will be furious if you deprive him of the opportunity to torture my lover!" Bredamante cried out desperately, ignoring the stricken look Ruggero sent her.

The men halted abruptly at her announcement, however, turning to look at their leader questioningly.

"You have a great tenderness for the man, I see, to prefer to see him die by inches rather than given a quick death," the leader growled coldly. "The goddess preserve me from the gentleness of women! Bind him. She is right. Balthazar will be fit to be tied when he discovers she has given herself to the man!"

A mixture of horror and relief filled Bredamante as she was bound and led away. She could not look at Ruggero, terrified that she had indeed deprived him of the mercy of a quick death. She could not have borne to watch him die, though. She just hoped her weakness would not come back to haunt her.

They arrived at the castle by nightfall the following day. Dragged through the rooms and corridors of what had once been their home, the soldiers took them to the dungeon and tossed them into the dank cells there that had not held any prisoner for many years. Bredamante had expected no different, but her teeth chattered with terror when she watched them shove Ruggero against the wall of his cell and manacle his wrists and ankles.

How, she wondered, was he going to be able to do anything all chained to the walls of his cell?

The answer was clear. He could not. She had killed him with her stupid tongue, doomed him to a horrible death when her love for him should have protected him. If she had not been so selfish, if she had kept her tongue between her teeth, he might at least have had a quick, merciful death! "Forgive me, Ruggero," she whispered brokenly.

She was not left long to dwell on her stupidity.

Giddy with the news of their capture and enraged when he discovered Bredamante had thwarted him by giving herself to another man before he could claim her himself, Balthazar arrived at her cell to vent his spleen on both of them within an hour of their arrival.

* * * *

Ruggero could not see Bredamante. They had placed him much farther in the bowels of the dungeon than her, where it was dark and damp. He could not allow himself to dwell on that, however. He would free her ... soon. He would have his revenge on Balthazar and restore Bredamante to her rightful place.

He was almost unnerved by how well everything had fallen into place, but then again, none knew his secret save Bredamante. The soldiers had no reason to concern themselves that they knew of, no reason to doubt that the cell and manacles would hold him.

They had cudgeled him when he had fought them. Blood ran down his forehead and into his eyes, and he could only blink it away once they had manacled his wrists. His ribs were bruised ... his entire body battered and cut. He regretted the fear he had seen on Bredamante's face, regretted that she had been forced to watch when it had distressed her, but he knew the guards would have been suspicious if he had not tried to break free. If he had gone docilely, they would have thought it odd.

They punched and kicked him a while longer for good measure once they had chained him to the wall, but at last they were satisfied—or worn out from expending themselves—and they left him, locking the door behind them for good measure.

Lifting his head, he listened intently until he knew they had left the dungeon.

A smile curled his lips as he summoned his beast to break the chains that bound him.

* * * *

Balthazar entered the dungeon, wrinkling his nose at the unpleasant aroma that assaulted his nostrils. He only had to walk a little way, however, before he saw Bredamante. She sat in the corner of her cell, shivering, her arms wrapped tightly around her body.

"I hope you have not found your stay so far to be unpleasant, my dear," Balthazar cooed, smiling at her as she looked up at him, anger burning brightly in her blue eyes.

"Oh my! You are not angry with me, my bride?" he remarked snidely.

Bredamante glared at him. "I would rather die than marry you, you vile, disgusting excuse for a man!"

He shrugged. "That can be arranged," he said coldly, "... after a suitable period of time has passed *after* we wed. First, however, you will marry me, and you will take great care to convince my loyal subjects that you are a happy bride. And, once you have done your duty and produced an heir for me, then I will send you to your just reward."

"What makes you think I would even consider such a disgusting thing?" she demanded.

Again, he shrugged. "Have you no affection at all for your lover then? Tell me you did not fuck him only to annoy me? Because if you did, it would be a great pity and a waste."

Bredamante swallowed a little sickly. "If I do you as you say, you will allow him to live?"

He chuckled. "Certainly not, my sweet! He fucked you, took what was rightfully mine. He will have to die. But you have the option of bartering a quick death for him as opposed to the one I have in mind."

"Then I will consider it," she responded shakily, fearful that if she leapt at his offer he would only take it back. She could not trust him anyway, she realized sickly. He could offer her anything and take it away. He was in total control.

"A wise decision. You will marry me in the morning. Everything is arranged. We have only been awaiting the arrival of the happy bride."

Looking pleased with himself, he stepped back from the door. "In the meanwhile, my men are bored and so am I. We will have to teach your lover the error of his ways."

"Wait!" Bredamante screamed, rushing to the door of her cell, grabbing the iron bars tightly, pulling against them as if she could somehow free herself. "You said you would not torture him if I agreed!"

He paused to look at her in surprise. "After his punishment for soiling my bride, of course. A hundred lashes."

Horror washed over her, her face becoming ashen. "He will not live through that!"

"You think?"

Bredamante gripped the bars in the window of her cell, struggling to think of something to say that could turn him from his intent as she watched him and his two guards head toward Ruggero's cell. A low, rumbling growl cut across her chaotic thoughts, however.

Straining upward on her toes to peer out, Bredamante saw two gleaming green eyes appear in the darkness at the other end of the corridor. The men had seen, as well, or the threatening growl alone had halted them in their tracks. One of the guards with Balthazar very carefully took a slow step back, and then another. Seeing his effort to retreat, Balthazar grabbed the man and shoved him toward the beast even as the great, black panther sprang out of the darkness.

Bredamante clamped a hand over her mouth to stifle a scream as, teeth and claws bared, Ruggero uttered a deep chested roar of fury and flew at the men with blinding speed, snarling and biting as he ripped them to shreds with his great paws. Balthazar screamed like a banshee and turned to flee, groping at his talisman and muttering an incomprehensible mixture of profanity and incantations.

One of the guard's bloody heads slammed into his back, sending him flying forward. It landed with a moist, meaty thud on the stone floor and rolled. Balthazar screamed again when he saw what had struck him, but he was too panicked to remember the words to any of his spells, and, in any case, Ruggero flew at him before he could get a spell out, tearing his throat out and then slashing him to ribbons with his flying claws.

He stood over the man for several moments when he was done, studying him for any sign life. Finally satisfied, he leapt from the still twitching body and returned to examine the guards.

When he appeared once more, he lifted his head to stare at her for a long moment and then ... stretched. Bredmante stared at him in confusion, but as she watched, she saw his body begin to contort, to change. Within a matter of moments, instead of a midnight black panther, a man stood before her ... Ruggero, bloodied from battle, still bruised and battered from the beating he had had before.

Swiping at the blood on his face with the back of one arm, he only succeeded in wiping more of the mess on him from his hands. After studying them doubtfully for a moment, he walked over to Balthazar and grabbed a piece of the man's torn clothing, using it to clean most of the blood from himself.

Bredamante was still too frozen to move. She hardly even blinked when Ruggero appeared at her cell door a few moments later and used the keys he had taken from one of the guards to free her.

Before Bredamante could rush into his arms, he knelt, bowing his head. "Your majesty, I have vanquished your enemy!"

Tears filled her eyes, tears of relief. When she had blinked them away, she saw that the man she had come to love was once more the beloved panther she had always loved.

Chapter Six

Bredamante frowned thoughtfully as she dropped her robe and stepped into her bath. She had no reason to be unhappy. Ruggero had restored her to her throne as he had vowed he would, avenged them both for the death of their fathers, for all that Balthazar had done.

She *was* unhappy, though. Ruggero had banished his man and become once more her faithful companion, and, beloved as her panther was, she missed the man he had been dreadfully.

Taking up the soap and bathing cloth, she dampened the cloth and absently rubbed the soap into it, wondering, not for the first time why Ruggero had returned to his panther form. She knew that that was his 'true' form. She did not doubt that he was far more comfortable as his beast than as a man, for he had not had to tell her that *that* was a trial for him. He had not really understood the things that were natural to her, because they were not natural to him.

She had not asked him. She had not been comfortable asking. She felt almost as if he were holding her at arm's length, though, not just that he preferred to be a panther or was not comfortable as a man.

He had said that he loved her, had always loved her, she thought, feeling her throat close. Why then, would he choose only to be her panther when he could have been her lover?

She slid a surreptitious glance at him at the thought.

He was sprawled on her bed, his gaze intent as he watched her.

Frowning thoughtfully, she focused on her bath again. He desired her with his human side, she knew, but from what he had told her he had desired her as a mate long before that. He had said that it tortured him to watch her bathe.

And yet, it was almost as if he could not help but watch.

She released an irritated breath. She loved him. She wanted him by her side as a *human* companion. If she had believed for one moment that it was better for him to remain as he was, she would not trouble him. If she had believed that he did not truly love her as a mate, she would let him go.

She did *not* believe that, though. She just was not certain if she had convinced herself of that because it was what *she* wanted or because it truly was best for him. She decided, however, that he had had long enough to consider the matter ... two long months of absolute misery for her.

She was not going to *order* him to shift, though. She was not going to *demand* that he change so that he could be her lover. What would that prove to her beyond that he was a faithful servant, which she already knew? She wanted him to realize that he was her equal, in every way.

With great deliberation, she took her washcloth and began to slowly lather her body, beginning with her arms. When she moved to her breasts, she lingered to massage the aching fullness there, brushed the cloth lightly over her tender nipples. They stood

erect at her touch, became almost painfully distended. Moving the cloth lower, she washed her sex with even more care. Her nub tingled as she brushed it. She swallowed, wishing Perhaps it was never to be again, though?

She was not certain why she touched herself there or where the impulse came from that to pleasure herself except from a deep need to feel those things Ruggero had taught her body to feel, or rather, since they had both been virgins, they had taught each other to feel, because she knew he had felt them as powerfully as she had. She was vaguely uncomfortable about it, but when she noticed Ruggero's unblinking stare, she found she could not resist the urge to tease him by pleasing herself.

If he would not do it, she thought with a touch of anger, why should she not?

It felt good, and yet she could *feel* the intensity of his gaze, and it distracted her, made it impossible to build the pleasure until she found release. Stubbornly, she stroked herself anyway, pretending far more pleasure than she felt. Allowing her head to drop back on the edge of the tub, she closed her eyes, massaged her breasts until she felt her sex grow warm and damp, imagining that it was Ruggero touching her, and then she stroked her nub again, feeling much more than she had before.

She made no attempt to stifle the sighs that rushed from her lips, to hide the way her breath caught in her throat each time a hard jolt of sensation went through her. She imagined his thick pulsating cock hovering over her sex, waiting for entrance. When she finally reached the point, however, that she felt her body closing on release, the sudden, heavy thump of Ruggero's feet hitting the floor broke her concentration and sent her release flying from her hands.

Resisting the urge to glare at him with an effort, recalling the way she had gasped and groaned and cried out when Ruggero had loved her, she imitated those sounds, determined to make him think she had satisfied her needs even if she had not. She rested her head limply on the edge of the tub for several moments more when she had finished 'climaxing' and finally lifted her head.

Without glancing in his direction, she rinsed the soap off of herself and finally stood up.

Ruggero favored her with a sullen glare as she stepped from the tub. Biting her lip to keep from smiling, she averted her gaze and pretended to focus on drying herself. She was still damp when she tossed the cloth carelessly aside and strolled brazenly across the room without even the towel to cover herself. She paused when she reached Ruggero, who was sitting stiffly upright at the foot of her bed. She stroked the top of his head. He glared at her and flattened his ears back, his thick tail flicking in obvious irritation behind him.

Smiling, she bent over just far enough to 'innocently' dangle her breasts in front of his feline face and caressed his face with both hands. His gaze, she saw, was riveted to the sway of her breasts with her movements. Working her way back along his neck, she seized his loose collar in both hands and snatched it over his head before he could do more than utter a warning growl deep in his chest.

He began to shift the moment she snatched it from him. She stepped lightly out of his reach when he made a grab for the collar. She did not know what it was about the collar--some sort of magic she was sure—but it trapped his human inside of his beast effortlessly.

He could shift with or without the collar, of course, and he might merely shift

back the moment he regained control, but taking his collar ripped his control from him, even if only briefly, and she thought it worth a try.

Sprawling on the bed on her side, she waited the few moments it took him to transform from beast to man. As he rose up to his full height, she lifted the collar, dangling it tauntingly from one finger.

Uttering a snarl, he leapt at her as if he were still a panther. He had amazing strength and agility, however, even in human form. He cleared the foot of the bed and landed almost on top of her. Grasping her shoulders, he shoved her onto her back against the bed.

He was almost too quick for her.

She had hoped, however, when she had seen the look of intent upon his face that she had finally gotten through to him, and that perhaps his control had finally slipped. The moment he shoved her onto her back, she looped one arm around his neck and lifted the arm holding the collar, flinging it as far across her chambers as she could send it.

A look of stunned surprise flickered across his face before it darkened with anger.

"Why?" he demanded in a growling voice, his mouth a breath away from her own.

Bredamante lifted her brows questioningly, batting her eyelashes to add credence to her innocent demeanor.

He dragged in a harsh breath. "Why do you torture me?"

"Do I?" she asked with interest, trying hard to repress a smile of pure glee at his admission.

He uttered a frustrated growl. "You know you do," he said harshly, his look one of almost hurt. "To punish me?"

"Why would I want to punish you?"

He stared at her for a long moment. Abruptly the anger and tension abandoned him. He swallowed thickly. "If you bear me any affection at all after what I did, give me peace. It is punishment enough that I know I can not have you."

Bredmante studied him in irritation. "*Why* can you not have me?"

He looked at her as if he suspected she was taunting him. "Because you are my princess," he said tightly. "Because ... I am not a man, not of your kind, and even if I was, I was born to serve. Because you rule this realm and you must choose a man who can give you an heir to the throne."

Bredmante tightened her arms around his neck. When he refused to allow her to tug him down, she lifted her head to brush her lips lightly across his before he could move away from her. "I already chose a man ... and he has given me my heir," she whispered against his lips.

He jerked away from her as if she had burned him, staring at her in shock for several moments before his gaze flickered over her face, her abdomen. "You are ... with child?" he asked finally in a strangled voice.

She smiled, nodding her head, finding his reaction to the news of fatherhood endearing.

He turned as white as a sheet. "My child?"

"Our child," she corrected.

He frowned. "But I am the father?"

Irritation touched her, but she could not forbear chuckling at the look on his face.

She knew he had meant no insult, even though she had felt it as one.

"You are the father of the child even now nestled in my womb," she assured him firmly.

He stared at her in disbelief, but his face reddened. *"I got you with child?"*

Bredmante laughed. *"Yes, Ruggero. You. I assure you no one else put it there."*

He frowned. *"I beg your pardon,"* he said a little stiffly. *"I meant no insult. It is just We are not the same, you and I. You are certain? I mean, that you are with child?"* he added hurriedly when she frowned at him, praying she was not somehow mistaken.

Releasing her hold on his neck, she caught one of his hands and guided it to her belly, settling it there. *"There is no doubt in my mind,"* she said softly.

His gaze had followed his hand. He stared down it, splayed across her belly.

"The question is, do you love me as I love you?"

His head snapped around, his gaze colliding with hers.

"Are you willing to acknowledge to the world that the child I carry is yours? To rule beside me as my consort?"

"I love you more than I love my own life. Have I not proven that to you?"

Bedamante felt tears well in her eyes. *"Many times over, my love."*

The End