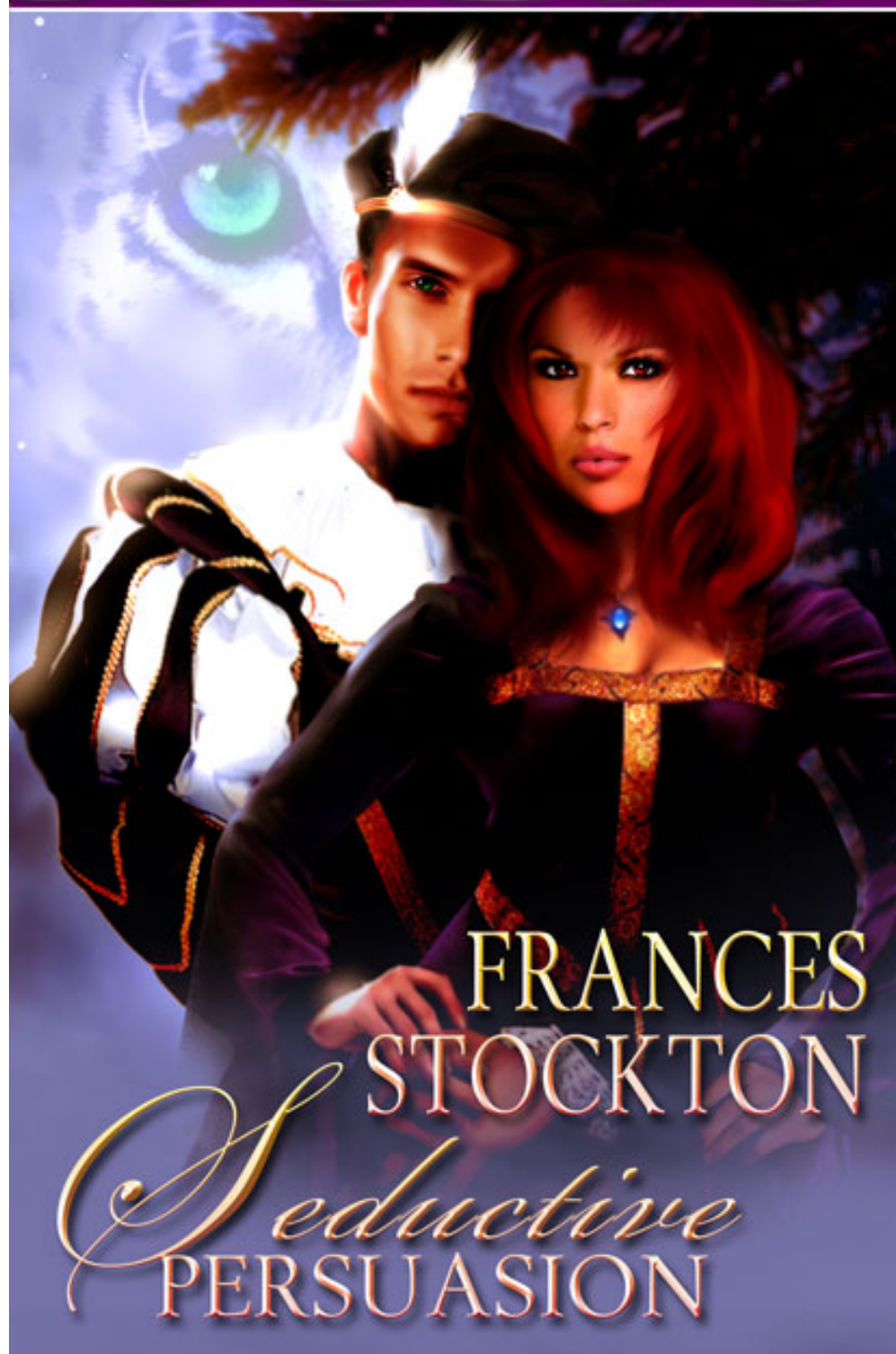


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FRANCES
STOCKTON

Seductive
PERSUASION

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Seductive Persuasion

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SEDUCTIVE PERSUASION

Frances Stockton

Chapter One

2nd August 1453 – Danford Manor – England

Garrick Forrester, Earl of Danford, stood at the window of his solar and inhaled, instinctively burying the roar sawing at his throat.

His fingers itched to curl into claws, forcing him to press his knuckles against the hard stone ledge. A gray sky hid the sun that was beginning to set on the western horizon. The scent of rain lingered over the manor, but he could still feel and smell...her.

Sensing that the woman could be his mate, he wanted to roar, to hunt. Instead, he waited, deliberating whether it would be right to pursue another English woman. He'd married two in his four hundred and fifty years of age and hadn't been able to trust his secrets to either of them. If he followed his instinct and claimed another wife, he prayed she was truly meant to be mated to him.

"What troubles you, my friend?" a familiar voice called out, startling him.

Shaking off the lure of nightfall and a hunt, Garrick turned. His visitor stood just inside the door, the wood and hinges cringing with age as it closed.

"How long have you been there?"

"Not long, I assure you," Lucien Hunter said. "Is something amiss, Garrick? You should have sensed my presence long before I spoke." Lucien leaned back against the door, waiting for an explanation. Older than Garrick by a hundred years, Lucien was a panthera Abcynian in his prime, though he looked to be about thirty and five years.

"My instincts were elsewhere." Unsettled, Garrick pushed away from the window. "Have you brought Valiant?"

"Aye, my son needs to learn the ways of a knight. Who better to instruct him than the second eldest of our kind?"

"To be granted the right to instruct Valiant is an honor, Lucien. I am grateful for the trust you've shown." Garrick accepted the task, inclining his head in deference to Lucien.

Both men switched their gazes to the door when the shuffle of wool and leather mules indicated a serving woman neared. "I trust Catarina is well?" Garrick asked on the chance that the servant would overhear.

"After giving me another son and twin daughters, she claims she is through with childbirth. But my family has grown by one more, a boy named Dante, whom I have taken in as my own due to the unfortunate deaths of his parents. He is a year younger than Valiant."

"The time passes more readily since last we spoke," Garrick said. His duties as a warrior and a lord weighed heavily upon his shoulders, forcing him to forget how long it had been.

The servant knocked and waited for permission to enter.

"Enter anon," Garrick snarled.

As bid, the woman peeked warily around the opening. "Sorry to bother you, m'lord," she begged, casting her eyes to the floor when she saw Garrick. "I've come to ask if your guest would like something to eat. His son has already scoured the livery cupboard for his meal."

"Nay, I have eaten," Lucien replied. "Make certain my son finds his way to his quarters."

"Aye...m'lord, I shall," the servant said and left the room without looking at Garrick.

"She fears you," Lucien said.

"They all do."

"If you did not snarl, they would not tremble at the rasp of your voice."

"Mayhap, but I cannot allow myself to speak to them at length."

"Might I inquire as to why? By all accounts, you are a fair lord to this manor and to those who work your lands. You refuse to allow harsh punishments by your bailiff and have allowed many to pay their fee for freedom if they wish it."

"You know I must guard my secrets from the servants and avoid lengthy contact with the tenants." Remaining where he stood, Garrick crossed his arms before his chest.

"Garrick, why do we speak as mere acquaintances when we have known one another far too long?"

At first, Garrick did not wish to answer. Pending nightfall drew him to the window. He breathed in. Her scent had grown stronger. His erection lengthened, making him all the more aware of how long it had been since he'd last bedded a woman.

"I confess, Lucien, pacing the manor house and tutoring your son are not what I have in mind. I need to hunt this night."

"There's no need to begin his instruction tonight." Lucien joined Garrick at the window. "I feel it too, Garrick. The change is easiest when the moon is full. If you are in need of food, you know better than to resist."

"I have no intention of resisting, but I am not in need of food."

"Ah, I see. You hunger for a woman."

"Aye."

"The village is close. Choose a wench for the night and return to the manor ready to tutor Valiant."

"Nay, my friend, it is not a mere wench I shall be prowling for. I believe my mate is living in the village."

"If you are right, it would be wise to claim her."

"I know. The need grows stronger as we speak."

"Then by all means go and find your woman. We've lost too many of our kind to war and the Saturians over the centuries, Garrick. You are an Abcynian Elder, the second eldest amongst us. It is your duty to continue our legacy in England."

"Think you I have not tried? I have married twice for political alliances and I never trusted my wives enough to tell them of the Abcynians. I tried to be a good husband to them, but they were difficult to understand. Much like my wives, the woman I believe to be my mate is English. I'm not sure I want to align myself to a woman I cannot trust. It has been my experience that Abcynian women are much easier to deal with."

"Nay, Abcynian women can be most complicated, as all are, I find."

Garrick rolled his shoulders against the pull of the moon coming up on the horizon. He could not see it easily from where he stood, but the lure of the moon was there nonetheless.

Night was falling across his land. Whispers were spoken as loud as shouts to his ears. The village smelled of the small game and porridge the villagers had prepared earlier that day.

Beyond the village, something else lured him, and it was not just his potential heart's mate. Strangers approached his demesne.

"Trouble stirs within the village, Lucien," Garrick said. "I must see to it and then I shall find my mate."

"Do what you must. I will remain here unless you need me." Garrick inclined his head, aware of the amber eyes that studied him as he left the solar.

* * * * *

"Come one, come all! Merchant and peasant, come one, come all!"

Over and over, Aisley heard a stranger beckoning. She followed the sound of his voice because something felt terribly wrong.

"For a coin, no more than a farthing or two, lend your ears to my traveling minstrel. Five pence will earn you merriment with a jester trained amongst the best within the royal court. Peruse the candles, spices and incense found in the most exotic lands. Come one, come all!"

Finding it odd that a stranger had entered the village after a rainstorm, Aisley grew more concerned. The gray sky was getting darker. Perhaps the stranger was detained by the storm or he wanted shelter before nightfall, but she didn't trust her reasoning.

She'd marched a few feet before hesitating to look back at the woods separating her cottage from Danford Manor. The Earl of Danford had recently returned after spending years at war with France and it was his duty to protect the people living and serving on his land. She did not know him other than by name. Few of the villagers did, though

she knew they liked to gossip about the lord only few had ever seen. But she was certain he would send his guards if the stranger meant anyone harm.

Long ago, her father had been the Earl of Danford's physician. When she was a child, she used to beg her father to take her to the manor house. She'd wanted to meet the Earl, to see the nobleman so many spoke of in whispers. But Papa denied her request, saying the Earl was too busy for a child or that another battle called him away from Danford. Yet her father always assured the villagers that their lord was an honorable man.

She often thought that Papa was protecting something about the Earl and longed to know Lord Danford's secrets. Her father had warned her to listen to her elders and to mind her lessons. As he claimed to have no other living relatives, he had wanted her to be learned on the chance that someday he might not be there to provide for her or her mother. He'd made certain she would not depend upon other villagers for her meals or needs.

Aisley realized she was spending too much time thinking about Lord Danford when the stranger beckoned anew. "Come one, come all! For I have yet to reveal the best of all. A glimpse will cost each of you a penny. Full reveal will take a shilling."

Before reaching the village common, she spotted the villagers circling the caller a bit warily. Several horse-drawn wagons rested in a straight line. The sky remained gray, but Aisley spied unlit torches attached to the wagons. Did the stranger plan to stay when it was dark?

Two older villagers, Howard Jones and his wife, inspected the wares and concoctions displayed on a market stand. A handful of coins were tossed to the ground and a small lad scuttled to pick them up.

In a thrice, a jester danced about the villagers. His antics induced a trickle of laughter. At the same time, an eerie grumble coming from the forest lifted the tiny hairs on the back of Aisley's neck. Frightened, she rushed for the safety of the crowd and it wasn't long before she stood amongst them.

"Pay your tribute to Ruck, dear friends," the stranger touted, swinging his right arm about as the jester continued to dance. Coins sprinkled the dirt almost as fast as the boy swiped them into a purse. "The finale is near. You have my word, one and all; Sedgewick Haywood will not fail your call."

Aisley hesitated to admit she was intrigued by what was to be revealed. Pennies were spread on the ground at Haywood's feet. How odd that the villagers would give up their coin.

"Wait, sir," Aisley said. Breathing harshly, she stepped forward. "What brings you to our village on such a night as this?"

"I mean no harm, fair lady," Haywood promised. His smile was little more than a gap-toothed leer. The balding man made her the tiny hairs on the back of her neck rise, causing her to ignore her worry over the sawing rumble in the distance. "I wish to

entertain the village. I have traveled far through the day's rain in the hope of warding away your troubles for at least a night. Might I inquire as to whom quells my efforts?"

"Aisley, a healer, and I speak not for myself, but for the villagers. This village has not gone unscathed by plague. We have lost many. I would not wish for the sickness to return."

"Nor would I," Haywood responded. Feigning elegance, he bowed at the hips. The expense of his green and tan robe and the silk of his gypon made him appear a man of means. At the hem of his robe, Aisley caught a glimpse of a sword. "I am free of plague. You may inspect me for lesions if it would set your mind at ease."

The rumbling she'd heard grew more prominent, sounding like an animal. It felt as if the beast was warning her against inspecting the man. Oddly, no one else seemed to hear it.

"I think it best if you leave before the villagers lose more coin." Inspecting this man would require three areas, the armpit, neck and the inner thighs. Touching him was not something she relished, regardless of her vow to attend those in need.

"Aisley, do not rush him off. He promises to reveal the creature behind that curtain, and I, for one, have paid to see it," Howard Jones said.

It was difficult to avoid staring at the curtained stage resting behind the stranger. The jester had tumbled his way to one side of the wheeled contraption and hung from a ladder. The minstrel strolled toward the opposite.

"Throwing away money like this can only lead to trouble," Aisley said.

"How is it that a woman speaks so bold?" Sedgewick Haywood demanded.

"It is common for Aisley to do so," Andrew White answered. "Her father was a physician for the Earl of Danford. She is valued amongst us."

"Then why have you given what this man has asked?" Aisley wondered aloud.

"Curiosity."

"We want to see what he has to offer."

"Worry not, Aisley. All will be well."

The villagers relayed their wishes and Aisley stepped back. She could not deny them a few moments pleasure. Even her curiosity was piqued.

More pennies hit the ground as Sedgewick demanded. Apparently pleased with the villagers, the visitor bowed once again in acceptance.

"Ah, at last my performers will grant your due," Haywood pronounced. Proudly, he moved to the side. "Beware, dear friends, sometimes myths can be proven."

Both the minstrel and the jester beckoned to the crowd and the curtain before them. Whispers filled the air, but they could not mask the eerie sawing drawing ever closer to the village.

Did no one else hear the beast? It sounded as if he roared from a mountaintop.

"What is that I hear?" she asked. "Is someone cutting branches in the forest?"

"I hear nothing of the sort, Aisley," Howard said.

Ease your worry, little one, only you can hear me, someone said, someone male with a deep, gruff voice. *I am close. Do not provoke the visitor.*

"Who spoke to me?" Aisley demanded, glancing about. The villagers stared back as though she'd gone mad.

"Your attention, healer," Haywood insisted. "To one and all, I give you living proof of werewolves in England!"

"Werewolves...are you mad, Haywood?" Andrew asked.

"Nay, I tell you true, feast your eyes on a werewolf's babe." Sedgewick swept his right hand toward the jester, who sliced a rope and the curtain shushed to the ground.

"Oh!"

"Evil."

"Witchery."

"What do you mean by this?"

"Deplorable..."

"Barbaric..."

Aisley gasped in horror as the villagers voiced her feelings. A child with large, rounded blue eyes stared at them and wept, pleading for love. It was barbaric to see such a beautiful girl subjected to such cruelty.

"Dastard," Aisley accused. "How dare you cage a child?"

"It is for her safety and yours, dear lady."

"Nay, this is an atrocity the likes of which none of us have seen."

"All should know by now there are no werewolves or men that can change into animals," Howard said. "You show us an unfortunate child."

"Can you not see her deformity?" the visitor insisted. "This occurs in children of a werewolf."

"You speak of what is evil, Haywood!" Andrew White shouted.

"Nay, cease! I beg you," Aisley warned. Talk of evil could spread quickly amongst the crowd. "There is no evil here. This child is an angel from God, not some creature."

"Mayhap the healer feels herself capable of speaking for God," Sedgewick hedged, rounding on Aisley and marching toward her. "Be careful in your speech, healer. It would be unwise to speak of His will in such a way."

"There is nothing wrong in speaking of God."

"Yet you are certain you can dispel the existence of evil."

"Evil is a man who can cage a child!" Aisley accused.

"Step away from me, woman! How dare you speak to me with such disrespect? I see standing before me a woman of flame red hair, freckles upon her face and a dark patch of skin right beneath her chin, a woman who shouldn't be so outspoken."

Sedgewick looked at the villagers. "Your healer bears the marks of a witch. She should be sent to a priest to confess her sins."

Unbidden, tiny bumps pricked Aisley's skin as Sedgewick spoke of witchcraft. Because of her father's teachings, the villagers of Danford did not believe a birthmark was the mark of evil. Such talk could sway minds, causing hysteria and fear.

"My mother bore freckles and my father the same red hair. He also had a mark on his shoulder similar to that which you see beneath my chin. You'll not find a villager amongst us who would think they were anything less than good, decent Christians, nor I," she said.

"She speaks the truth," Andrew added in her defense.

The jester and the minstrel pulled long, sharp daggers from their scabbards. Andrew and others stepped forward to protect the women of the village. Aisley turned away and rushed to the cage.

Realizing she shouldn't have spoken so harshly to Sedgewick, Aisley tried reason. "Please sir, please free this child and let me take care of her," she urged and reached for the door.

"Step away anon! That child is not what you think. She is eight with the mind of a babe. There is nothing that you can do to change that. She has been in my charge for nigh unto three years. She is clothed and fed. Another man would have left her to die."

"It matters not what you say. I beg you to allow me to attend her. I am a healer. I can take care of her."

Aisley faced the child, attempting to smile, to soothe as best she could from the slight distance. She would love to trace the girl's wispy brown hair back behind her ears and wash away the dirt streaked across her plump, round face.

"You will be all right, sweet angel. Fear no more." She paid no mind to the rush of voices warning her to stop.

"Healer, touch what belongs to me and I will make you pay dearly for it," Sedgewick threatened in a voice so frightening it sent tremors down her spine. "Take your hand from that door or I will cut it off." The sound of a sword being removed from its scabbard sang close to her ear. From the corner of her eye she saw the stranger raise his arm. She was certain he was about to let the blade slice through her wrist if she didn't let go of the cage, but she was too frightened to move.

"Threaten what is mine, knave, and you will face a wrath unlike anything you could comprehend!" A man's unexpected voice rumbled behind them. The unusual sawing she'd heard from the woods reached her then and she trembled, yet she couldn't understand why no one else reacted to it.

Aisley turned slowly and looked about, discovering that the dastard's sword rested on the ground. A man pressed Sedgewick Haywood to the cage, his big hand wrapped about Haywood's throat. Belatedly, she noticed how big her savior was and for a moment she couldn't move or look away.

Larger and broader than any man she'd seen before, her rescuer towered above Sedgewick. His straight, dark brown hair fell between his shoulders and elbows, looking as soft as fur. There was enough gray light left in the day to reveal his green eyes. Though she knew it was wrong to look right at him, Aisley couldn't avert her gaze.

His face was free of beard growth, allowing her to see the sharp arch of his cheekbones, prominent nose, squared chin and wide mouth. Finding herself staring at his full lips, she felt an odd flutter in her belly. There was no doubt that the man was strong, powerful, his bearing so proud she thought he must have been trained as a knight.

Dressed in the finery of a nobleman, his shoulders were broad, his waist trim. His long, muscular legs were encased in black braies and thigh-high boots. The expanse of his chest was apparent in a silver and blue cote-hardie. Though he'd not given in to gluttony, it amazed her to think such a big man could come upon the villagers without being heard.

As she stared, soldiers on horseback closed in on the common, joining their lord, who must have arrived on foot.

Suddenly, Aisley knew who'd come to her rescue. The Earl of Danford maintained a lethal hold upon Sedgewick's throat, and the rumbling continued, freezing her to the spot.

Chapter Two

The Earl tightened his fingers and the blueness creeping into Haywood's face broke Aisley's trance. "Nay, milord, I beg of you... do not take his life."

She thought Lord Danford had not heard until the set of his jaw eased. "You have been spared." Without delay, Sedgewick was released and he doubled over, clutching his throat. "What would you have me do to him, my lady?"

"Milord?" she gasped, startled that he spoke to her.

"You ask a woman for my punishment?" Haywood rasped.

"Bow your head and fall to your knees before the Earl of Danford," her rescuer commanded. Sedgewick Haywood knelt at once, his head bowed.

All the while she heard a beast's harsh bawling, creating a fearful respect for whatever animal could emit such a sound. She prayed there wasn't a wolf in the forest. It could attack a villager or come looking for food if it was hungry.

"From this point on, you will speak only when addressed," the Earl warned Haywood.

Judging the set of the Earl's massive shoulders and fisted hands, Aisley worried that a simple aye or nay from Sedgewick's lips would induce the very rage Lord Danford displayed when he'd pressed his foe into the cage. She had no wish to witness a man's death, so she waited quietly, suddenly aware that the mysterious sawing had ceased.

"My lady, what would you have me do to this man?" Again, Lord Danford's deep, gruff voice centered on her and she forgot about wolves. Something about the way he spoke tempted her to stand there and simply listen to him for awhile.

"I...umm...banish him, jail him, whatever you believe fair," she said after a moment. "Do not let him take the girl, milord."

Haywood looked up in alarm. The Earl glared, silencing Haywood. No one moved as Lord Danford's gaze came back to Aisley. He studied her for so long she thought he must be looking for bruises. For one breathless moment, she imagined what it would feel like if he caressed the same places with his bare hand. Would his hands be rough like a villager's, like hers?

Those same green eyes switched to the cage. The girl began to cry until Lord Danford's gaze softened and he smiled. His smile faded when he saw the pennies on the ground.

The villagers remained silent. Haywood trembled. His men had long since retreated to the safety of the crowd. Aisley heard that threatening raspy bawling again. Strangely, it seemed closer, almost beside her.

Silently, Aisley watched the Earl. The veins in his neck throbbed, yet it was undetectable by the crowd. His full mouth and strong jaw remained firm.

Ease your worry, I'll not harm anyone. What you hear is difficult to control when I am angry, Lord Danford whispered. It sounded as though he'd spoken inside her head. Green eyes locked with hers. *Soon, little one, you will understand why you can hear me and others cannot. You need not fear it or me.*

"Milord, did you speak to me?"

"Aisley, are you all right, dear?" Mrs. Jones asked. "The child needs—"

"Oh my," Aisley cried, facing the girl. "Forgive me, sweet angel. I want to call you Angelica. Is that all right?"

Angelica whimpered and the Earl snapped his fingers. "Valiant, ask the men who brought the child for a key to the cage."

"Aye, milord."

A tall squire, not quite grown into his broad shoulders and large feet, stalked between the villagers until he found the minstrel and jester. Without much protest, the jester gave the key to Valiant.

"Milord, may I stand?" Haywood asked. "I am Sedgewick Haywood and I wish to speak."

"My ears must have deceived me. I could not have heard your voice after having been told to remain silent." Sedgewick cowered away. "Henceforth you will remove yourself from Danford Village, the manor and the tenant farms spread about my land. Return or should I receive word that you and your troop attempted to defraud any other village or town in England, and I will have you jailed for the remainder of your life. Threaten my lady again and I will have your head. If you understand, nod."

Sedgewick nodded.

"Take him away before I change my mind." Lord Danford shifted his attention and walked toward Aisley and Valiant, who'd opened the cage.

Aisley approached Angelica slowly and prayed the girl would stop trembling.

"I'll not harm you, Angelica. My name is Aisley. I am a healer. I can help you." Aisley did not know if Angelica understood, but the child didn't move as she neared.

Calmly, she reached out, offering her hand. After a moment, Angelica's small hand wrapped around Aisley's forefinger. "That's right, you can trust me. The bad man is going away. I'll not allow him near you again."

Aisley lifted Angelica into her arms and discovered that she was heavier than appearances told. It was a relief to know the child had not gone hungry in Sedgewick's care.

The Earl's guardsmen had snuffed the torches of the traveling troop, distracting Aisley from Angelica. Curiously, she watched the guards remove Sedgewick and his men from the common. As Sedgewick and his troop left, he could be heard complaining over his loss of Angelica and warning that they hadn't seen the last of him.

Aisley didn't think it was wise of Sedgewick to make such a comment, but her eyes were drawn to the ground. She was pleased to discover that the soldiers had refused to allow Sedgewick to take the coins.

"You see, Angelica, Lord Danford sent the bad man away," Aisley said quietly, hoping the girl would come to fully trust her. "I would like to take care of you now."

Aisley didn't know if Angelica understood, but decided to return to her cottage anyway. Walking slowly, she was unaware of Lord Danford's approach and started when she found him blocking her way.

"Oh, I beg your pardon, milord. I'm sorry I didn't say so before, but I thank you for helping me and Angelica," she said, nodding to Angelica and the villagers scattered around the common.

"You have a kind heart, Aisley. It is good to know you like children." A rather pleasant sort of rumble emanated in his voice when he breathed out, reminding her of the sound a cat made when it was pleased.

"You are kind to say so, milord." Graciously, she bowed her head, yielding to his rank.

"You do not need the formal address. My name is Garrick. Use it at your will."

"I dare not."

"Why? I fully intend to use your name, Aisley."

"How do you know my name? Twice you have said it."

"You gave your name to Angelica."

"I suppose I did," she agreed. "Lord Danford, forgive me for not asking first. May I take Angelica to my cottage? I will send word to the manor house on the morrow to inform you how she fares."

"You cannot leave just yet, Aisley." Again his voice rumbled, softening the gruffness of his voice, and a curious pang swelled deep in her womb when the Earl leaned closer. The scent of spices clung to him, tickling her nose and making her mouth water with longing. It smelled warm and sweet and so very familiar, as she recalled her father adding spices to his wine when it tasted too sour. "Place the child in the care of my squire and he will see that my servants have her bathed, fed and clothed. I suspect she'll sleep long past sunrise."

"I suspect so." Wanting to care for Angelica, Aisley appealed to Lord Danford. "I am a healer. I can examine her for prior injuries or illness. Mayhap I can come with you and calm her if she is scared..." Garrick held up his hand, quieting her.

"She may be frightened, but she is not ill. Valiant, come and take little Angelica to the manor house," the Earl said.

"As you wish it," Valiant answered at once.

As the squire reached for Angelica, Aisley noticed that his face was almost too beautiful for a man.

Regardless of the squire's attractive face and long, tawny hair, Aisley found the hard, etched lines of Lord Danford's face more appealing. He made her aware of herself as a woman. Made her long to know him in a way a healer should never hope for with a lord.

Angelica fussed when Valiant touched her, bringing Aisley's attention back to the matter at hand. "She's afraid. She may not trust a man. Please, allow me to go with her, milord."

"It will be all right," Lord Danford insisted. "Valiant will earn her favor." Valiant offered Angelica a brilliant smile and whispered something that made her grin. "There now, it is as I promised. On my honor, you will see her soon."

Reluctant to let go, Aisley allowed Valiant to take Angelica. Without argument, the child hugged her arms about his shoulders, but looked back. "Go with the squire, angel. He'll protect you."

More at ease, Aisley raised her eyes to Lord Danford. Normally, she could stand shoulder to shoulder with the men of the village. With the Earl, the top of her head did not reach his shoulders. Discomforted, she shifted her feet, hoping for something she could not name.

She waited until Valiant strolled away before speaking. "Why won't you allow me come to the manor house, milord?"

"It is for your protection that I send you away. Do not ask me to change my mind in this."

"From whom am I in danger?"

Lord Danford's lips curled with a barely spoken, "Me."

"You would...harm me? You just said that I had nothing to fear...from you," she stammered, taking a trembling step backward. She prayed a pleasant face did not mask the face of a tyrant.

Silently, she noted his size, noble arrogance and fierce green eyes. Something in his eyes made her aware of herself as a woman, made her wonder what he saw when he looked at her. She could still smell spice, yet there was something more to his scent, something musky and male that tempted her to ignore his warning and bask in the rich, dark fragrance that emanated from him.

He smiled, his stance firm, unmovable. "I could no more harm you than I could cease the moon's glow."

"Why am I in danger if I visit the manor long enough to attend Angelica?"

Swiftly and silently, he moved closer. His huge, calloused finger pressed against her lips, tracing their shape until they parted ever so slightly. *Because I would bed you many times before dawn and you're not ready to accept the consequences that would follow.*

Once, twice, thrice Aisley blinked and drew back. Surely he hadn't spoken without moving his lips. "Did...did you just speak to me?"

"Aye, you know I did."

Deliberately, she cast her eyes about. Most of the villagers had dispersed and those that lingered were lighting torches. It was dark now and the villagers were far enough away that no one could hear their conversation. "You shouldn't talk of such things, milord."

"I will say whatever I please to you. You now belong to me."

Incensed, she started to strike out but he caught her wrist before she slapped his face. Helplessly, pleadingly, she bit her lip and lowered her eyes, bracing herself for his coming wrath.

She'd almost struck the Earl of Danford. He had the authority to smite her where she stood.

* * * * *

Garrick Forrester released Aisley's wrist and stared at her bowed head. "Anyone who has the courage to raise their hand to me should have the strength to face me."

"I cannot look upon you, milord. I have never tried to hit someone."

"I am certain you haven't." Garrick was well aware that he'd provoked Aisley's temper and wouldn't punish her. "Raise your eyes. I'll not have my woman cowering from me."

Aisley lifted her head and her soft brown eyes met his gaze. She was pretty and he liked the tiny freckles dotting her high cheekbones, nose, chin and forehead. Though she was uncommonly tall, she carried herself with grace and dignity. Her dress was functional, but the aged brown linen dulled her beauty. She wore a simple peasant woman's cap that covered most of her hair, yet strands of wavy fire-red hair fell over her forehead and across cheeks, making him want to sweep the ugly head-covering away just to discover how long it truly he was.

Here stood the woman Garrick wanted as his countess. Because she'd been able to hear him when he spoke in her mind, she was fated to become his mate. Although most of his kind could communicate with any animal, they could not speak mind-to-mind with anyone other than their mate. Aisley, however, was not ready to learn what he was, and revelations would have to take place gradually.

"Am I to be punished?" Aisley whispered.

"There will be none at this time. Still, I would advise against trying to strike me again. You could provoke something you're unprepared to accept.

"But...you are staring, milord." A pretty flush stole into her cheeks. The moon was rising, the last of the rain clouds scattering, giving enough light to show her freckles and fair skin.

"You are a lovely woman. I will remember the way the moonlight graced your face until next we meet."

"Are you are going away?"

"I am not leaving the manor, but I have matters to deal with before I can come to you again."

Aisley frowned. "I will not let you bed me, no matter who you are."

"Ah, little one, I wish that was all I wanted from you." Garrick leaned forward, drawing in her scent, making it his. He would forever associate almonds with her. "Because of what I'd said earlier, you fear me. You needn't worry. I'd never lift a hand against you."

"Nay," she objected.

"You think I'd strike you?"

"I believe you honorable, milord. Someone dear to me told me so on numerous occasions."

Jealousy reared when Garrick realized her thoughts were on another man. "You speak of a man."

"Aye, but he is gone now," she explained, her sadness sounding earnest.

"The loss of a loved one is difficult. Do you have family here, Aisley?"

"They are near," she whispered. She looked as though she would say more, but decided to keep silent. She was sad and trying to hide it from him.

Garrick breathed in. Her female scent reminded him of why he could not offer her the comfort she needed. The full moon represented further trouble. "I would like nothing more than to comfort, Aisley. If I draw you closer, I may not let you go as I should. Allow one of my men to escort you home."

"There is no need, Lord Danford."

"Garrick," he said, irritated.

"I am made aware of our differences on a daily basis, milord. Speaking your name aloud is not permitted."

"I'm granting you permission." Against his better judgment, Garrick reached out and touched her chin, tilting her head upward. Her lovely mouth softened, the fullness of her lower lip becoming a temptation difficult to resist. Aisley's lips were made for him to savor in ways he was certain she'd never known before. "Go, Aisley. Sir Brandon Mathews will escort you to your cottage," he urged, though he hoped she would stay. He wanted her, now, beneath the light of the full moon, regardless of the consequences. Already, the subtle scent of her feminine cycle drew him like a moth to flame, tempting his instinct to claim his mate as was his right by Abcynian law.

"What of Angelica?" she questioned, withdrawing and leaving him both aching and relieved. If he took Aisley too soon, he'd only frighten her. He'd not make her afraid of his panthera nature before she'd even learned of it. "May I come to the manor and visit her soon?"

"I will have Valiant bring her to you any time you wish."

Uncertain as to why, Garrick noticed Aisley's shoulders lower in defeat. She started to speak, but caught herself and turned away.

"Hold, say what you were about to," he insisted.

"I've wanted to visit the manor house since I was a child. Now I understand that a simple healer would not be welcome."

Garrick grasped her elbow and held her fast. "You misread me, little one."

"I am not little. You keep calling me that and it makes me nervous."

Aye, it made her nervous, he knew. It also thrilled her. He could detect her skittering pulse as easily as he felt his own heartbeat.

"You are little to me," he said. He liked knowing that her head reached his shoulders. Her legs were long, giving her height that equaled most Englishmen. "Aisley, you will come to the manor house. In a fortnight, I will speak to your father about our betrothal. Afterward, you will come and live with me."

Garrick watched her mouth slam closed with a sharp snap of teeth.

* * * * *

The Earl of Danford's edict rendered Aisley temporarily mute.

When she found her voice, she frowned, "Have you gone mad?"

"There is no madness in me," the Earl said. "You will be mine according to the dictates of the Church and English law."

Suddenly frightened, Aisley could not prevent herself from drawing away. "Do not jest, milord. I will not be yours."

"You will." He stalked closer with the precision of a hunter. "I claimed you the moment you acknowledged that you could hear me speak to you mind-to-mind."

"You say things best left unsaid." Unbidden, she recalled Sedgewick's warning about witches and shivered at the thought of what might happen to Lord Danford if anyone were to think he was capable of speaking in her mind.

"Aye, on that I agree. Ease your mind. Only you and I can talk in such a manner. It is the way of true mates. I believe you'll not betray me by telling others of the ability."

"Lord Danford, I have no idea how to handle you." In truth, she was curious and a little frightened, yet unable to walk away. She'd never accuse him of practicing witchcraft, but he had an ability that few could claim.

"You'll learn. Aisley, I have enemies who'd like nothing more than to harm the woman I intend to marry. It is for your safety that I arrange our betrothal as soon as possible."

"You know nothing about me. I am already betrothed. It would be impossible for us to—" A giant hand caught her chin.

"It is unwise to provoke me on a night when the moon is full and my instinct is to bed you until dawn. We would beget a babe if I took you this night. Are you ready to bear my child?"

"Surely I misheard you?"

"You did not, you are fertile."

Uncertain what to think, she tried to step back. "I am twenty and one. There is no reason I could not have a child."

"That's not what I meant. You are fertile now."

"Now?"

"Aye," he said, glancing up at the moon.

As he did, she remembered that her menses would begin in a sennight. She'd seen many women give birth. She knew a woman's cycle. If she were to lie with him on this night, they could create a child. Dear goodness, he was right.

"Cease! How could you know such a thing, much less speak of it? No one has ever spoken to me in such a way." Curiously, as much as she was offended she also found herself wondering what it would be like to carry the Earl of Danford's babe. For reasons she did not understand, her heart swelled and her womb tightened with a strangely pleasant yearning and she hoped he did not know what was happening within her body.

"Not even the man you mentioned?"

"Do not mock me. You know the truth."

"Aye, I do. Always remember that I have excellent senses. If you had a man, I'd have smelled him on you. You have the scent of almond oil, the herbs used in remedies to aid the villagers and the honey you added to your porridge earlier this eve."

Incredibly, he was right, again. Aisley was confounded and awed by his presence.

Who was this man who stood before her? His vivid eyes reflected a man of great passions and convictions. His stance was one of confidence and infinite patience. Lord Danford could wait all day for someone or something and not move a muscle. Why did she not fear him as she should?

"You were right, I must go," Aisley insisted, finding the strength to pull away as Garrick lowered his hand. "Send word when Angelica will be visiting. I pray it will be soon."

"You will see Angelica on the morrow and whenever you wish thereafter. Be ready for me, Aisley, I will come for you a fortnight from now."

Aisley sighed as she turned to leave. Something about his silent presence drew her to glance back one last time. She wanted to tell him where her father was, but decided to hold her tongue when she realized the Earl was watching her. He was an arrogant, but compelling, man and it was most difficult to walk away.

Refusing to give in to temptation, she resolved herself to avoid Lord Danford as much as possible. If he pressed the issue of betrothal, she would consider leaving Danford altogether.

A handsome man of average height and muscular stature approached and offered an escort to her cottage. As they walked, her musings were thwarted by the very familiar seeing she knew belonged to him.

There is nowhere you could go that I could not track you and bring you home, Aisley.

A glance at the guard warned that only she had heard Garrick's vow, the rumble in his voice warning her to flee while she could. It took every ounce of determination she possessed to walk on as though she'd heard nothing.

Chapter Three

Deep in the forest, Aisley hunted through the brush for herbs, plants and sticks instead of thinking about him. Three days had gone by and she'd not heard from Lord Danford, yet he was never far from her mind.

She thought it was strange that the Earl remained silent, but she was pleased that Angelica and his squire visited daily. Already she'd developed a deep, abiding love for the quiet, though energetic, child.

Valiant and Angelica were due to visit soon and Aisley decided to make her way home. Relatively pleased with the items she'd gathered, she stood tall and became aware of someone, or something, watching her.

Aisley looked around, but spotted nothing. Still, she could feel eyes upon her and swung about.

"Are you there, milord?" Mayhap Lord Danford had decided to visit after all. She could almost hear his distinctive rumble.

She waited for the Earl to show himself, but it soon became apparent that her imagination was playing tricks on her. She'd long since rebuked herself for believing that eerie sawing she'd heard three nights ago came from the Earl of Danford. While she'd heard it each night since, she'd decided it belonged to an animal, not a man.

Thinking she should go home, she turned away. Once more she felt as if something was watching her and looked back. Nothing moved, nothing made her feel in danger, but she suspected that something was hiding within the greenery of the forest.

"Is someone there? If you were part of Haywood's troop, it would be best if you left before Lord Danford catches you."

There, in the thick ivy covering the hollow in a dead, fallen tree, a pair of eyes caught a ray of sunlight, making them flash red. With her next breath, the same eyes became a brighter green than the leaves framing them. Both intrigued and frightened, Aisley stared back.

Instinctively, she remained still and quiet, praying the creature wasn't a wolf. She didn't think so. This seemed to be one animal. As far as she knew, wolves rarely hunted alone.

As she waited and watched, she saw that those eerily familiar green eyes belonged to a regal, feline face covered in fur so dark it looked black. Well, it wasn't a wolf. It was a cat. Given the size of its head, it was a very big cat. She'd heard that wildcats that fed off scraps from villagers could become quite large.

Cautiously, Aisley waited to see if the cat would become aggressive. When it didn't move or hiss, she relaxed. She didn't sense any danger, but she thought it would be best

to return to the cottage and tell Valiant about her discovery. The squire would likely know best how to deal with the beast.

Satisfied with her decision, she backed away and retreated to her cottage. Safe at home, she stored the herbs and plants she'd gathered.

A knock at the door had her rushing to greet her visitors. Angelica's plump face glowed with a smile as Valiant held her in his arms. Sunlight rained down from above them, haloing the child's head and emphasizing a pretty dress.

"Well now, Lady Angelica, don't you look the manor born in all your finery," Aisley praised. "Good day, Valiant," she said as she reached for Angelica.

"And to you, milady," Valiant addressed, ever the polite lad. She wished he would stop speaking to her as if she was a lady.

"Come in, come in." Aisley turned away from Valiant and strolled toward the center of her modest one room dwelling, where she'd spread a blanket and a few gewgaws she'd borrowed from some of the villagers so Angelica could play. "My, this is a lovely gown."

After placing Angelica on the floor, she lowered to her knees and inspected her dress. Simple in its childish design, the silver and blue fabric enhanced Angelica's soft brown hair and blue eyes. Her face was flushed with a healthy, rosy hue.

"Lord Danford had the gown made for Angelica. It should please you to know that he has seen to all her needs, milady. He's turned a guest chamber and solar into a place for Angelica and sent missives to hire suitable maids."

"That pleases me very much," she said, wondering if she might be asked to work in Lord Danford's household. She'd not forget the villagers, but she would like to spend more time with Angelica.

"Milady –"

"Aisley," she said.

"Aisley, do you not realize why she wears these colors?"

"Blue and silver?" she uttered. "Oh aye, the Earl of Danford favors them."

"They are his heraldic colors. Angelica's gown is Lord Danford's way of proclaiming to others that he views her as his own."

"I see." Stunned by what she learned, Aisley couldn't thwart a pang of jealousy. She hadn't the means of providing such pretty things for Angelica.

"Have I upset you?" the squire asked, seeming to detect her disappointment.

"Nay, I thought that I would have a more active part in her life."

"What makes you think you would not?" Valiant settled on the floor and Angelica smiled up at him.

"You said Lord Danford sent messengers to find maids for Angelica. No one has come to ask if I might wish to be one of her maids."

"You are to become the Countess of Danford. Your influence in Angelica's life will be far more important than a maid's."

"Nay!" Alarmed, Aisley drew back, frightening Angelica. "Oh angel, I did not mean to scare you. Our friend here, well, he likes to jest."

"I speak the truth," Valiant insisted, turning his attention to Angelica for a moment.

"Milady, you must realize that Lord Danford is preparing a place for you in his household," he said after the girl calmed.

"If that's true, why haven't I heard from him?"

"That is for him to say. His mind is set."

"Cease, Valiant. When you return to the manor, tell Lord Danford that I cannot marry him. I am a healer. This is my abode," she continued, sweeping her hands about. "I'll not leave it because he says so."

"If the Earl of Danford wishes to marry you, he will. I heard him tell my father that the two of you can speak without saying a word." Deliberately, he pointed to his temple. "In a way, Lord Danford and I are related, like cousins. Our ancestors believe this is the way to discover our destined mate."

"Nay, nay we cannot." Aisley didn't want to believe that she and Lord Danford could talk in their minds. "Strangely, I think I have heard something in the woods, at night when the villagers are abed. It began the night Sedgewick Haywood came."

Valiant scooped up Angelica and stood tall, but the girl pointed to a wooden horse and he set her on the blanket. "Have you heard this in your mind or aloud?"

"I don't know for certain."

The squire stood, remaining close to Angelica, but eyed Aisley. "Describe what you heard."

"It sounded like someone was sawing old branches. Only it was louder. It scared me."

"You say no one else has heard it, other than you?"

"Do not jest, Valiant. Have you heard it?"

"Not since I've been here. Don't be frightened, milady. It's a roar."

"Nay, lions roar. It couldn't have been a lion."

"Do you know what a lion's roar sounds like?" Valiant asked. She scowled, feeling her temper rise, but he held up his hand. "My apologies, I shouldn't have spoken to you like that. You're right, it wasn't a lion. You heard a leopard."

"That can't be. Mayhap it was the wildcat I saw in the forest earlier. You might think to mention it to Lord Danford. If it's savage, it could bite a villager."

Valiant stared at her, his mouth open.

"Did I say something wrong?" she asked.

"Nay, milady."

"Aisley."

"Lord Danford continually reminds me to be respectful of you."

"You are," she said. "Why you are staring?"

"I am amazed that you've seen it."

"Seen what?" Puzzled, she frowned. "The cat?"

"Aye, how big was it?"

"I can't say. I saw this much of it," she said, framing her eyes and part of her nose with her fingers. "It was hiding in a tree and covered by ivy. I'm fairly certain it was a cat."

"It was, just not the kind you think it was. Leopards are good at finding places to hide and not being seen unless they want to be seen."

"The animal I saw was black. My father once told me the Earl of Danford's coat of arms had a leopard on it. Leopards are yellow with spots, aren't they?"

"My ancestors came from a land inhabited by leopards, lions and tigers. In earlier times it was believed that lions and tigers mated and their young became known as leopards. This may not be so, but while it's true that black leopards are rare, they are real and they have spots. You simply have to look close enough to see them."

Aisley shook her head. "I don't know if I believe you. If you are right, why is it here?"

"That is for Lord Danford to say."

"The leopard belongs to him?"

"Again, it is for him to say."

"I've heard such a beast is huge and savage."

"This one is larger than its kind and outweighs many adult male lions," Valiant answered.

Aisley didn't understand. She'd never seen a lion, knew little about leopards, could the beast in the woods hurt a child or a villager? She had to ask. "Would it hurt anyone? Would it hurt me? It would be tragic if it hurt a villager or a child."

"The leopard's purpose here is to protect you and this manor. When you hear it late at night, it's talking to you and only you. It's Lord Danford's way of watching over you when he cannot come to you himself."

"I see," Aisley mumbled. The Earl sent a beast to watch her, but wouldn't come to her himself. This was the man she was expected to marry? Silently, she fumed. She did not want to marry a man she didn't know. That she wanted to know him mattered not at all.

"Tell Lord Danford to keep his beast away from me and Angelica," she told Valiant. "I want nothing to do with it. I want nothing to do with him."

"I'll be certain to," Valiant said with a devilish smile. The squire knew something more, but he was keeping mum.

Refusing to worry, Aisley sat beside Angelica and talked with Valiant, doing all she could to learn about the Earl. Why she would care was beyond her understanding. Something about him enchanted her from the moment she heard a black leopard's roar in the forest and realized that she had heard Lord Danford speak in her mind.

* * * * *

"Both letters have been sent?" Garrick inquired of his clerk as he studied the record of accounts. Usually the clerk performed such a duty, but he enjoyed the intricacy of numbers and figures.

"Aye, milord." The clerk inclined his head. "Missives have been sent to your brothers, Sir Colton Forrester and Sir Grayson Forrester, informing them of your intent to marry and the date of your betrothal."

"Dare I inform you Gray and Colton may not arrive in time to witness the betrothal?" Lucien asked from where he lounged across the room.

"I am aware of my haste, but pray that my brothers can reach Danford before the wedding ceremony. Now, do you not have anything better to do with your time than bother me?"

"I'm comfortable here." Lucien stretched lazily in a plush chair that had been designed by an Abcynian craftsman for a person's comfort rather than the usual hard wooden contraption Englishmen tended to make. "Your man here, what is your name, good fellow?"

"Godfrey, milord."

"Godfrey," Lucien said, looking at Garrick as he spoke. "I am certain the letters were what Lord Danford requested. Be a good man and give us some privacy until we need you next."

Ever the monarch, Lucien sent Godfrey away with a wave of his hand.

"My friend, I am tolerant of most things about you, but do remember that I command my servants," Garrick said once they were alone.

"I'm aware of your rank in England, Garrick. I am also aware that your brothers have earned themselves baronies. Unusual as that may be, I am pleased that the Forresters have secured an Abcynian future in England," Lucien said with a grin. "But I wish to speak to you of your wedding plans. You've hired maids for Angelica and a chamber has been readied for Aisley. Why haven't I seen you visiting your lady?"

"I have reasons for staying away."

In truth, Garrick had thought it was best to remain at a distance from Aisley until the moon waned. But he hadn't been able to resist watching over her. She often walked about the forest without an escort. By visiting her in his leopard form, he could protect her and curb his desire to bed her before her courses began. Being near her before then was too much temptation for an Abcynian male aware of his mate's fertility cycle.

He'd offered her a fortnight. By that time, a new moon would have begun and her courses would have ended. Though she would still be a temptation, he would have better control over his need to claim and she'd be safer in his presence.

While he admittedly did not know her well, he suspected Aisley had never lain with a man. The night they'd met he'd heard her heart racing, smelled her arousal, yet she had seemed unfamiliar with her feminine needs. She would have been raised to remain a virgin until she was wed by law and the Church and lie with a man only to beget a babe. Panthera Abcynians could not honor such a custom. If they wanted something, they took it, and he wanted to share his bed with Aisley every night. Even as he knew this to be true, he realized he would have to earn her affection and trust before they married but he would do all he could to win her favor. Once they married, he would move her into his chamber and keep her close, mating with her as often as he possibly could, whenever he wanted.

"If you must know, I am giving her time to accept what is going to be," Garrick conceded, hearing Valiant's voice coming from Angelica's chamber. "I'd say more but my squire has returned. I wish to see Angelica."

"The child enjoys her visits with Aisley."

"Aye, she does. Angelica deserves a mother like Aisley."

Garrick stood and Lucien followed him to the door. Silently, they made their way down the hallway.

Valiant intercepted them. "Good day, Father," he said. "Lord Danford, if you wish to see Angelica I feel I should warn you that she was asleep when I turned her over to the nurse. She enjoyed her visit with your betrothed and played half the day."

"This is good. I shall let her rest," Garrick decided. "I am grateful you have taken on the task of escorting Angelica to Aisley's."

"I enjoy spending time with them. Do you know Aisley saw you in the forest?"

"Be very careful what you say," Lucien warned. "Listen for servants before you speak."

Feeling it was safe to reply, Garrick addressed his squire. "I wanted her to see me. It was imperative I learn how she'd react to it. She was not afraid."

"That's because she didn't realize what you were." Valiant hesitated and listened for privacy before continuing. "She thought you were a wildcat."

"I'm not a cat." He was half panthera. Being called a wildcat was an insult. "I'll have to teach her the difference."

"That may be difficult," Valiant boldly said, failing to remember his place as Garrick's squire. "Aisley claims she will not marry you."

"She hasn't the choice!" Furious with Aisley for attempting to deny him and with Valiant for being as bold as his father, Garrick almost lunged at the boy. "Aisley will become my wife and you will hold your tongue."

"Might I suggest that you try visiting with Aisley before she comes to live here? As it is, she seems most upset with you for sending your cat to watch over her instead of doing so yourself," Valiant said.

"Valiant, that's enough!" Lucien corrected.

"Lucien, your son has a tendency to speak out of turn."

"Now you might understand why he needs the discipline of knighthood. He is well aware that one day he will lead Abcynian kind and hasn't yet learned humility."

"I'll not be ignored," Valiant implored.

"Be very careful, son. We are in England. Here, Garrick is an earl and you are his squire, nothing more. If you've something to say, ask his permission and speak appropriately."

"My apologies, Lord Danford," Valiant said, lowering his eyes. "I have no wish to offend you. Might I speak?"

"Not if you intend to speak against me," Garrick warned.

"I'd like to speak of my concern for Aisley," the squire explained.

Sensing Valiant's concern for Aisley, Garrick nodded. "Go ahead."

"While I was visiting her, we started talking about English surnames and she asked if you knew her surname. More so, she wondered if you knew who her father was. I felt badly because I couldn't answer. She was concerned about that, milord. What should I have said to appease her?"

"Nothing, you cannot answer for me, Valiant. From now on, you needn't worry," Garrick said. "I will acquaint myself with Aisley's father soon enough. Once I've done so she'll be more at ease with me."

"Pardon, milord, but I'm certain her mother and father are gone. Mayhap from the plague," Valiant ventured to say.

"What mean you, boy?" Garrick demanded.

"You've seen Aisley's cottage from a distance. You must know she lives there alone. She's literate and depends on no one but herself. I suspect her father was highborn or a scholar of some merit. When she talks of her mother or her father, she becomes sad and I do not wish to burden her with further questions about them."

Valiant was right. Garrick knew Aisley lived alone and thought it was due to her work as a healer. She'd told him her parents were nearby and her affection for them had been real. It was possible that her father and mother were buried somewhere near Danford Village, which would explain why she still felt close to her family. It was also likely that she lied because she hadn't trusted his intentions. As angry as he rightfully should have been, he believed she was trying to protect herself from a man she didn't know.

"Garrick, Valiant is right. You should go and talk to Aisley."

"I do not need advice from you," Garrick said, glaring at Lucien.

“Don’t you? Tell me, what is Aisley’s surname?” Lucien questioned, raising a brow.

Garrick walked away. Granted, he’d spent most of the last three days preparing the manor house for Aisley and their betrothal. Admittedly, he’d been so tempted to consummate their pairing the first time he saw her that he hadn’t asked the simplest of questions. Vowing to make amends, he walked down the hall and wondered how long it had been since he attempted to pursue a woman.

Chapter Four

Wading in a cool, rippling stream wearing nothing but her chemise, Aisley fought back tears while adding a clump of sticks and leaves to a makeshift dam. Her throat tightened as memories of coming here with her Mama and Papa came forth.

This was the most trying of all the days in the year. She'd thought her grieving would get easier over time, but it hadn't. She still missed them and wished her parents were here. If they were, she wouldn't have to deal with her feelings for the Earl of Danford alone.

Knowing she wasn't really alone in the forest, she spoke to her companion. "I know you are there, Sir Knight. I feel your eyes upon my back."

When nothing came in the form of a saw or rumble, she straightened.

"I find it strange that I would talk to a cat...nay, a leopard."

A light rumble followed, warning that the leopard was near.

"Might as well confess that, as infuriating as your master's silence has been these last ten days, I like you..." she paused, bending down to adjust the barrier. "But you must have better things to do than following me about." She'd only seen the tip of his tail and a bit of his face so far, but she knew when he was near. "Mayhap you should return to hunting whatever it is you hunt, rabbits, deer, squirrel, mice...I know not."

Sir Knight grunted. He did that a lot. She thought it was because he disliked the task of watching over her.

"Then again, you're only obeying Lord Danford. I wonder, will you ever show yourself?"

A rumbled sawing came forth, sounding much closer. Looking at the embankment and surrounding trees, she frowned. She saw nothing but green and brown forest.

"Hmm, mayhap you dislike the name I chose for you? Mayhap you are as mysterious as the Earl of Danford, but I think it suits you well. Lord Danford's squire told me that the Earl's brothers are coming to the manor and Valiant's mother will arrive soon as well. She is to guard my virtue. This is good, but why, oh why, must I hear such things from Valiant and not the man I am expected to marry?"

Sir Knight quieted. Very strange, she thought. Mayhap the leopard had grown bored and left?

To her pleasure, the temporary blockade had deepened the water from her knees to her thighs. It would be perfect for soaking. The walk to the abbey where her parents were buried had taken the better part of the morning. After saying her prayers, she'd decided a cool bath would be ideal and returned to the stream.

As she was not a simpkin, she'd made certain she was alone before stripping down and stepping into the water. She hadn't wanted her chemise to get wet, so she'd managed to knot the hem at her waist, leaving only her legs visible.

"You see, Sir Knight, I have made a pool deep enough to bathe," she said. In all truth, she'd prefer to bathe unclothed.

With one last look about, Aisley left the stream and removed her chemise. She was placing it with her other clothing when she heard Sir Knight's sawing roar. The savage sound frightened her far more than she'd ever been while knowing he was about.

"Oh nay, Sir Knight, you do not get to act as if you understand what I am doing," she said.

The roaring altered from loud to a soft rumble. Something about the rough sound reminded her of Lord Danford and she fought the need to cover herself with her arms.

"Dear goodness, Sir Knight, you are making me nervous." He was making her aware of her nudity.

Aisley prided herself on her chastity and cleanliness. Her menses had concluded and she wanted a cool bath. She was hot, tired and lonely. The stream would ease some of her troubles and make her smell good again. It shouldn't have mattered that the leopard was near, but somehow she felt as if she were doing something wicked.

"I'm ignoring you, cat." She tried to ignore the beast, but his rumbling increased as she placed her foot into the stream.

The water was cool. Its rippling current teased her bare legs and she suddenly became aware of the sensitive places on her inner thighs and the back of her knees.

What would it be like to feel Lord Danford's big, strong hands touching the same places? Nay, nay, he would never touch her in such a manner!

Suddenly, the leopard roared in earnest, sending birds to flight and Aisley's gaze skyward. "God's teeth, I never thought to look up!"

Sir Knight sat upon a jutting branch, his bright green eyes watching her from above. Perched on his haunches, his long, silken tail hung down and swayed back and forth. Awed by her first full view of him, Aisley stumbled and fell to her knees. Chilly water splashed her shoulders, neck and face, dampening her hair.

When next she looked, the leopard was on all fours. The beast was twice the size of what she'd thought it would be and as dark as the squire claimed. Sunlight revealed spots on its fur.

"How long have you been there?" she whispered, feeling naked, wet and afraid to speak too loudly for fear of having it pounce on her from above.

Sir Knight roared, his repetitive sawing hurting her ears.

"Are you angry, Sir Knight?" She tried for calm, but couldn't stop shaking.

The roaring ceased, then the creature's eyes locked with hers. His fury could not be ignored and she wasn't certain Lord Danford's leopard would not harm her.

"Nay, do not leave that tree." Regardless of her command, he turned and began a graceful descent from its branch.

Sir Knight jumped to the ground before she could blink twice. He prowled at the edge of the stream, pawing and roaring. Thinking the leopard didn't like water, she decided to stay where she was.

"I'll come out if you go back to your branch," Aisley said. Trying to be brave, she scooped water into her palms and poured it over her head.

She prayed the leopard would not sense her fear. She told herself she shivered because of the cold water, not because she thought the big, black creature would attack.

With her eyes on Sir Knight at all times, she drenched her hair and bathed. Abruptly, his unsettling noise stopped and he went over to her clothing and lowered his face to her gown.

"What are you doing?" she wondered aloud, frowning.

The leopard sniffed her meager pile of clothing. He looked huge in comparison. She guessed that he out-weighed most Englishmen. His paws appeared to be a hand and a half in width and could likely kill with one deadly swipe. And, yet, while he was big, he was also regal and proud, commanding her respect.

To her dismay, the leopard grasped her gown and chemise in its mouth and carried them into the woods. "Wait! Nay, bring those back!"

The wretched thing didn't return and Aisley grew angry.

"Fine, beast, remain hidden. I'll not come out just because you've stolen my clothes. Bring them back or I'll inform Lord Danford of your deeds. Then again, he would have to speak to me. Since I doubt that will happen, we're both stuck here. As to your master, if he means to discuss the possibility of marriage, he will have to show himself to me before the close of this day." Feeling it was safe to challenge the Earl while dealing with his leopard, Aisley splashed water over her shoulders. "I'll not marry a man who does not speak to me."

A horrible roar split the foliage and the leopard leapt back into view from an undetermined distance and stepped into the stream.

Aisley cried out. She had no idea something so big could move with such speed.

"Nay, I command you to go. I do not like you this way," she whispered, fearing a raised voice would provoke it further.

He did not obey. Steadily, slightly crouched, the creature came through the water. She felt like his prey and there was nothing she could do to prevent him from attacking her.

Unwilling to watch his approach, she closed her eyes. "Valiant promised you wouldn't harm me. You're supposed to protect me."

Frightened and feeling betrayed, she cringed as heat from the animal's body warmed hers. His muzzle nudged the place where her shoulder met her neck. His

snuffling breath felt nice against her skin and then something tickled her nose. He smelled like cinnamon.

Unable to resist, she sneezed, forcing her eyes open. For several heartbeats, she couldn't breathe as she stared into Sir Knight's eyes and felt as if she knew them.

"If you're going to kill me, do it quickly."

He stood over her, his long whiskers touching her face. They tickled, tempting her to smile until he lowered his jaw to her wrist and took it into his mouth. He didn't bite or hurt her. When he tugged on her arm, she stood. His hold was firm as he guided her safely out of the stream, stopping only once when her foot slid over a smooth rock and she thought she might slip.

"I cannot leave the dam," she said. The slightest tightening of powerful jaws ceased any further objections.

Once they made it to the bank, Sir Knight freed her wrist and nudged her backward. Two ells into the forest, she discovered her clothing. A look about revealed that the leopard had carried her things to an enclosure hidden by bushes and trees.

"Amazing," Aisley said, turning around to discover the regal giant had disappeared.

Mayhap her bare body frightened it away. She rarely looked at herself naked. She didn't know if she could be considered pretty. Her one and only suitor had claimed that she was, though he'd not liked her freckles. Secretly, she wondered if her freckles and birthmark had been the catalyst for Lord Danford's absence.

Trying to hurry, Aisley donned her hose, chemise and brown cote-hardie. It was an old gown, but it was comfortable for a day's work. Highborn women wore houppelandes now, but she didn't have the coin for fashionable gowns.

Fully clothed, she smoothed her fingers through her wet hair and headed back to the stream. She was surprised to see that Sir Knight had destroyed the dam.

"My goodness," she gasped.

Sir Knight returned to her side when he heard her. Belatedly, she realized he was taller than a wolfhound. Valiant had told her leopards were not usually this large. Clearly she was dealing with an unusual animal. He seemed as intelligent as a man.

"Your assistance in tending to the dam is appreciated, but do not expect a reward after hiding my clothes."

Aisley was tempted to scratch Sir Knight behind the ears or beneath his chin the way she'd once done to a kitten. Believing it best to avoid touching him, she clenched her hands and looked about for her shoes.

"I might as well go. I shall look for you on the morrow unless I decide to leave Danford." Sad as that thought made her, Aisley sat on a rock to put on her shoes.

In truth, she did not wish to leave. More so, she didn't want to leave Angelica. But the Earl was Angelica's guardian now and she could not risk the consequences of remaining for much longer. If a brief encounter with Lord Danford had left her recalling

those moments each and every night since they'd met, she suspected he could steal her heart. Worse, if he was the tyrant many feared him to be, he'd keep her from seeing Angelica. It would be easier for Angelica if she left before they became any closer. Already, she wanted to call the child her own.

Sir Knight grumbled and rammed his forehead against her side. "What—cease pushing me." Regardless of her command, the leopard prodded until she started forward.

Walking steadier than she felt, Aisley discovered that the beast was determined to send her back to the village.

By the time she neared the final path to her cottage, her guardian faded into the bushes and she felt a curious disappointment at his departure.

"Probably missed his meal," Aisley grumbled beneath her breath. "I meant what I said at the stream, Sir Knight. If Lord Danford fails to show himself, I will not consider marrying him in the future."

The beast roared within her temples, frightening her far more than the one he'd delivered in the forest. Not a bird, squirrel, rabbit or insect responded to his roar, but Aisley rushed to her cottage, relieved only when she'd closed the door behind her.

* * * * *

Leave Danford, would she? How dare Aisley consider refusing him! He was a member of the Abcynian Council, a panthera Elder amongst his people and the Earl of Danford. He was not some knave to be ordered about by a pretty face and bared flesh.

Granted, Garrick discovered what he'd longed to know from the first night they'd met. Aisley's body was covered in light brown freckles and he'd been tempted to count them. In the near future, he would kiss and taste each one. Her waist-length red hair had been damp and tangled, but it was more beautiful than silk. In spite of his feelings, her generous breasts, firm backside, nicely rounded hips and long legs were not for anyone else to view. She was his and it was time she accepted her fate.

Aisley Reeves had made it a habit of speaking her mind. It was a trait he admired. But he could not let her continue. Bathing naked in a stream was absolutely forbidden for the woman meant to become his countess.

Tonight, he would grant her wish for a visit. On the morrow, she would be moved to the manor house and begin learning what he would require of her as his wife.

Upon following her to the abbey and discovering her parents' identity, he couldn't allow her to reside alone any longer. See him she would and he would set her straight. He actually looked forward to the visit, he realized, more so than he'd felt for any woman in the past.

It was fortunate she had no reasonable idea how much he had wanted her while she lounged in the cool water. He'd been tempted to turn when he took her clothing into the forest. But his panthera instinct had warred with his manhood and proved stronger

in resisting his mate. By the Creator's doing, his leopard half would protect her, even from the man that he was.

"Ah, little one, had I gone to you in my true form, I would have claimed you."

Garrick did not know if he could resist her later that night, but he would not stay away. Aisley would have her visit and they would be alone.

Chapter Five

Alone in her cottage, Aisley spoke to her mother aloud. "Oh, I miss you so," she said "Were you here, I could ask how you came to trust Papa's intentions when he asked you to marry him. It seems so odd that a healer and a nobleman's physician would find each other, but he loved you no matter the consequence. Then again, Papa did not hide in the manor house like Lord Danford does. He lived here in the village with us. The villagers liked him."

Fighting tears, Aisley lifted a drenched cloth to her face. The warm almond-scented water flooded her nostrils. Her mother's scent, she recalled, a bittersweet pang lurching in her stomach. It was rare for one such as her to possess almond oil for bathing, but her father's position in the Earl of Danford's household allowed him to gift his wife and daughter with unexpected luxuries. She'd treasured the vials of oil he'd left behind, using it only when she needed to feel close to her parents.

Squeezing the cloth, she leaned backward a little and allowed water to rain down her naked body. The water cleansed as it should. It could not ease her troubled heart. More than memories of her parents bothered her this night. She'd hoped *he* would have come to her. Thinking such a thing was foolish. She knew that. Yet her heart felt differently. The Earl of Danford could not have known of the wish she'd made to his leopard. He would not come to a mere villager when his rank was far more superior. Laws prevented her from wearing anything that might say she was highborn. How could she possibly think an earl would come down from his manor and visit, even if it happened only once?

"Why, why must everything I hear about him come from a villager or his squire?"

With a bitter laugh, she thought back to her interrupted bath in the stream. She didn't understand how Lord Danford commanded a leopard. The very thought that a savage beast would listen to his master should have frightened her. In truth, she was awed by the Earl's ability to control such a magnificent creature.

What would the villagers say if they knew a black leopard protected the forests around them? They already knew that their lord had chosen Aisley as his countess and many pitied her. She'd tried to claim that the gossip they'd heard was untrue. They did not believe her. Instead some dared to say that she would be in danger if she married him. She wasn't inclined to think he would harm her and decided to keep the existence of the leopard a secret. If they thought Lord Danford controlled a savage animal, they might accuse him of dark sorcery or wickedness. Just the thought of such ugliness touching the Earl made her feel ill.

Aisley lowered her eyes to the bucket of warm water and wished she could return to the stream. As she stared, she whispered to her mother. "I needed Lord Danford this

day and had no way of telling him. Sir Knight was a diversion for a time, but it was Garrick I wanted to see. Even a glimpse would have been enough."

Thinking it was wrong to speak a nobleman's given name aloud, Aisley rinsed her face again. Squeezing the cloth, something caught her eye and she lowered her hands. Burning candles flickered. The fragrance of exotic spices overcame the scent of her bathwater, causing her to tremble and her mouth to water.

She wasn't alone. She was certain. Turning slowly about, she used the small cloth in her hands to hide her womanhood and hoped her hair covered her bare breasts.

Mercy, the Earl...he couldn't...he wouldn't have entered without invitation, would he?

"I can handle your temper, Aisley. Your crying tears me apart. Come to me anon and I will quiet your tears," Lord Danford said.

Aisley's face grew warm as she faced the folded screen she used to separate her bedroom area from her living space. A tallow candle resting on the table nearby cast her figure upon the thin screen. A similar one on the opposite side of the room revealed the Earl of Danford was rising from a sitting chair.

Even though he couldn't see her nakedness, she tossed her cloth aside and grabbed a towel. Not a breath later, he was standing just a few cubits away, looking down at her as if he had the right to be there. That he was the Earl of Danford meant that he did, but Aisley couldn't hide her outrage.

"You are not welcome here!" she screeched when she found her voice.

"On the contrary, I was invited." Lord Danford folded his arm across his abdomen, sweeping a regal bow and extending his hand as he straightened to his great height. "I am your servant, my lady. Tell me this visit has persuaded you to remain in Danford."

Aisley grabbed the pail of water and threw it at him. He deflected her weapon and she watched it fall to the floor, wetting his boots.

"If you ever need lessons in weaponry, allow me to be your teacher," he teased. "But you must first learn your place before being tutored by me."

"Do not mock me. You've no right, oh, nay—" Her knotted towel slipped and she hastily grabbed the edges before she bared herself to him again. He hadn't moved or reached for her, yet she felt his curiosity in the heat of his gaze. Flushing, she looked away as she secured the towel around her front.

"I've every right to speak to you as I wish, Aisley. But I'd rather talk instead of rebuking you. Will you tell me what is troubling you so?"

Dismayed by his willingness to ignore her anger, she stared. Lord Danford was as huge as she remembered. In his blue cote-hardie, white gypon, silver hose and black thigh-high boots, he looked regal and proud. His hair was unbound, reminding her of an animal's thick pelt, tempting her to touch it just to see if it was as warm and soft as fur.

Knowing she should lower her eyes, she trembled and begged, "Please, milord, turn away."

He came closer with a speed that belied his size, moving so close she could smell him. She could hear the rumble in his throat when he breathed out and she wondered how he made such a sound. His sharp glare made her step back in fear even as her heart slammed hard inside her chest, her knees became unsteady. She wasn't certain she had the strength to escape him if he suddenly leapt at her.

"You dare refuse my right to look upon you, yet bare yourself in the forest where any villager or stranger could have seen you. That displeases me, Aisley. I realize you've lived alone for a long time, but you've habits that I cannot allow you to continue." Extending his hand, he almost caught the edge of her covering until Aisley realized she was leaning toward him and stepped out of his path.

"I was alone," she said.

"Are you certain? Did you even take a moment to think that a thief might have come upon you, or worse, a man intent on rape? What if Sedgewick Haywood had returned and tried to take you against your will?"

Aisley couldn't answer. Stunned that he was still so close, she dodged him and strode toward the bed where she'd placed her chemise. Pointedly, she kept her back to him and pulled the thin garment over her head.

"I'll not be ignored," he warned.

"I'm not ignoring you. I refuse to talk while I am undressed." Wishing she wore more than a chemise, she dropped the towel on the floor. She knew better than to test the Earl's patience much further.

"You are clothed now. Come, face me and answer my question."

Aisley shifted around, keeping her distance. She did not fully trust Lord Danford at the moment. He was so huge, so imposing and savage looking, he reminded her of Sir Knight. Folding her arms across her chest, she resisted the urge to flee. She doubted she could ever best the Earl on foot. Silently she wondered if he would pursue her if she dared to leave.

If he caught her, would he attempt to steal a kiss from her lips? The notion of being chased and caught shouldn't have made her womb clench or her mouth to gape open with longing. Yet it did and she quickly cast her eyes to the floor on the chance that he would know.

"I looked for dangers and I had your cat watching over me. I was safe," she said, clenching her teeth.

"There's more to the leopard than you know. If it weren't for him, you'd have found yourself in a great deal of trouble." He sounded tired and she brought her gaze back to his. His eyes were dull. His mouth was tightened by strain. "You do not seem to understand the consequences of your actions."

"I didn't mean to alarm you, milord. I simply wanted to bathe. I will be careful not to do so again," she answered. "But how do you know what I did in the forest?"

"Ah, little one, I know many things about you." In two silent strides, he stood before her. "I know you visited the abbey this morn and prayed over your parents' graves. I know it was on this day three years ago that you lost your mother to the plague. Your father, Archer Reeves, once my physician, died a sennight later and you became the village healer."

Aisley stared up at him, amazed at what he'd learned. She wanted to say something about her parents, but Lord Danford shook his head, warning her to stay silent.

"I was leading my men into another battle with France when I learned plague came to Danford. Bloody hell, the war kept me away for so long I was unaware that my physician had taken a wife and had a child. Mayhap many things would have been different if I'd known about you, Aisley. I would like to think I'd have come home sooner. I know not for certain. For now believe that you are to be my countess and that I've spent the last ten days preparing for our betrothal."

Trying to ignore the way her heart raced at the mention of being Lord Danford's countess, Aisley shook her head. "I confess I don't understand why you'd want to marry me. I'm not highborn. Aren't most noble marriages arranged? Sometimes you frighten me by what you say, milord."

He touched his forefinger to her chin, tipping her head back until she looked into his eyes. His emerald gaze kindled with warmth as he pressed his thumb to her bottom lip and caressed it with the blunt edge of his nail. The rightness of his touch caused her mouth to part, her entire being becoming aware of his nearness, his scent, his size and strength. The most feminine part of her body sharpened with a deep, needful ache that she didn't quite understand.

"You have nothing to fear from me. Though I should warn you, what the leopard knows, I know. What he sees, I see," he said.

"Do not speak of such things too loud." Aisley shivered, trying her best to remain calm when what she really wanted was to be closer. She should be pushing him away. Instead she did nothing to repel him. "Some in the village may think you practice sorcery."

"You needn't worry, I do not." Strangely, he smiled.

"Dare not mock me, milord," she bid.

"Nay, I would not. I am wondering if you would care if someone misunderstood what I am."

"What are you?"

"Would you care?"

Surprised that the Earl wanted her to admit that she'd cared for him, she breathed in sharply, attempting to calm the quiet tremors coursing through her skin. "If you can speak in my mind, shouldn't you be able read my thoughts as well?"

"Aye, I can." Lord Danford eased back a little. With her chin in his hand, he continued the whisper light caress upon her lips. Each sweep of his thumb sent a rush of heat to her belly, her breath catching in her throat. "You also have the ability to share your thoughts or mask them from me when you want to. You were worried about the villagers and Angelica the night we met and I was able to hear what was happening through you. Normally your thoughts are yours to give as you please. I pray you give them to me often, just as I will for you when you're more comfortable with me. Now tell me, little one, would you care if someone were to misunderstand our ability to speak in our minds?"

Surprised by his gentleness, Aisley studied him, forcing herself to remember that she was angry with him. "Aye, I would care if you were accused of something that could see you tried for heresy. But I'm not sure why it matters. I'm angry with you." Poking him in the chest with her finger, she attempted to push him backward. He did not budge. "Valiant told me that your brothers and his mother are coming to Danford. There's a room for Angelica and a chamber for me. I've also learned that the female servants in your household have taken a liking to you because you are kind to Angelica. Not long ago the servants were afraid of you or so I'm told. Suddenly that has changed."

"Are you jealous, my lady?"

"Such an address is inappropriate. I'm not highborn."

"Soon you shall be my countess. You must begin to view yourself as mine."

Aisley shook off his touch and withdrew. "Nay, nay and nay, I don't understand you. I'm a healer, how could I ever become a lady?" Using the only defense she could think of, she sought to make him see that she was a mere healer who should never hope to rise above her place in life.

"Seems as if you've learned quite a bit about me these last ten days," he said.

"I know about some of your deeds. I do not know you. If you'd shown yourself before now, I might have agreed. Now I think it most unwise to be your wife."

"Aisley, there were matters to be dealt with before I could move you to the manor house. Since I've made the necessary arrangements, we may proceed with our betrothal."

"We shouldn't, I shouldn't want this." Pleading with him to understand, to listen, she tried to hold his gaze. Her heart raced wildly as he stared back, his boldness making her wish that she was the right woman to become his countess.

Lord Danford moved closer. This time Aisley was ready and stepped aside, halting when she saw that she stood by the bed. Trembling, she began to retreat.

"Little one, I have every intention of easing your worries. You are the woman I chose to marry. Nothing will sway me from what I want, which is you." Boldly, he pursued her until she was cornered against the wall. She'd have darted away if she could, but he placed a hand on either side of her shoulders, keeping her from getting

away. "Once you reside in the manor house, I shall devote myself to earning your favor."

"Then why are you ashamed of being seen with me?" Stunned that she'd given voice to a fear she hadn't allowed herself to speak aloud, she felt her face grow hot and quickly looked away.

"God's teeth, woman, where would you get such a notion?" he demanded.

"I've been told I am pretty, but I know men dislike my freckles. Some will see my birthmark and think I am wicked."

"I realize some in our society frown upon freckles and marks, but whoever made you think such a thing is a fool. Look at me." Taking one hand from the wall, he gently caught her chin and lifted her face. "You are far more than pretty and I happen to like your freckles. Should you demean yourself again in my presence, I will put your mouth to better use."

"Andrew White said something similar when we were younger," Aisley confessed. "Later I overheard him tell another that he didn't want our children to have as many spots as I did."

"Aisley, he was wrong. Do not allow his words to ruin what we can have."

Why did Lord Danford have to be kind when she wanted to remain angry? She shouldn't allow this. His simple touch had her near swooning and she couldn't break away. If it weren't for the wall and his hand beneath her chin, she'd have fallen. She dared not admit that part of her wanted to stay right where she was. Another part wanted him to be closer.

"What can we have if my freckles and birthmark get in the way?" she asked.

Garrick offered a gentle smile, bringing her attention to the shape and fullness of his mouth. Once again Aisley wondered what it would be like to be kissed by him. Unlike the fumbling kisses she'd known with Andrew White, she was certain the Lord Danford could threaten a woman's chastity with his kisses alone.

"I have a particular fondness for spots, Aisley. Your birthmark is a small spot beneath your chin. It is enchanting. Your freckles are light and meant to be kissed." Rumbling deep in his throat, he leaned closer and pressed kisses to the freckles on the side of her face. "I want to taste each one with my tongue." Sweeping the same freckles with his tongue, his mouth settled very near to hers. Her heart fluttered madly. His scent and closeness warmed her. He smelled nice, like someone who favored putting spices in his wine to keep it from tasting sour and enjoyed frequent baths. He was clean, shaven, his teeth white and even. Though he held her still with one hand and only his mouth touched her, she desperately wanted to be closer.

"Do not, it is improper," she said.

"We are to be married. A kiss between us is not improper," he insisted.

"We are not even betrothed yet, milord." Struggling anew, Aisley attempted to sidestep him, but he held her fast.

"We shall be soon enough. All I want is a kiss. Let me taste you, Aisley Reeves. You want this as much as I do, don't you?" he tempted.

"I do not think —" Firm lips pressed against Aisley's, warm and enticing. Her heart pounded, a pleasant pang tightening deep in her womb at the feel of his mouth against hers.

It felt so right to be kissed by him. She knew then that she'd never again see him as the Earl of Danford. As their mouths moved against one another, he became Garrick, the man she'd secretly wanted to woo her.

Shaping her upper and lower lip with the tip of his tongue, Garrick withdrew, taking a deep breath. "Cease thinking, Aisley, you need only feel." Reclaiming her mouth, he drew her away from the wall and turned a little, bending her over his arm. At his mercy, she sighed with pleasure and grasped his shoulders.

Mayhap she should have resisted. Instead she welcomed the thrust of his tongue between her parted lips and clung to his breadth and size, glorying in the sharp heat that arrowed from her heart to her womanhood. Tasting spiced wine, she hungered for more. He felt hot, masculine and she wanted nothing more than to wrap herself around him and let him devour her mouth. Their tongues dueled, danced and parried, revealing a glimpse of what they could be as a couple.

Unable to remain still, she sought to explore his shoulders and arms. His muscles quivered beneath her touch. A masculine groan vibrated from his throat, giving her a heartbeat to catch her breath.

Worried that she was permitting too much, she thought to object and straightened. He assisted, but kept her in his embrace, the wall still at her back. "We should not be doing such things," she managed to say.

"You're beautiful, Aisley. I cannot believe I've resisted kissing you until now," he whispered. "Everything about you, from your pretty face, freckles and sweet, honeyed kisses, makes you beautiful. I want to kiss you again. Permit me, please." He kept one arm about her lower back, his touch gentle. His other hand came up to frame the side of her face as his hips pushed against hers, pinning her buttocks to the wall. Her heartbeat skipped when his knee nudged her thighs apart, his hardened manhood sliding between her thighs.

Thinking she should resist, Aisley bucked, succeeding in notching him against her. His warmth and strength seeped into her, awakening her senses. Slowly, he ground his hips into her, circling, tempting her with each subtle thrust. Deep, deep within her womb a wicked ache began, compelling her to arch. The ache increased, promising that only Garrick could bring her relief if she permitted him to continue.

Battling between propriety and passion, Aisley soon discovered that resisting Garrick's advances was futile. Her body responded to his, demanding that he was the one man created to fulfill her deepest, feminine desires. She could no more resist him than she could cease the moon's cycle.

"Why did you stay away for so long?" she asked when he freed her mouth. Turning her face into his hand, she was tempted to taste the rough skin lining his palm.

"Aisley, can't you feel how much I want to bed you?" Garrick tightened his arm, angling her to feel the slide of his manhood between her thighs. She moaned aloud, helplessly arching and meeting his purposeful thrusts. Her knees had weakened and she was glad of his strength, for she was certain she'd slide down the wall if he weren't there. "Your father would have raised you to remain chaste until you are wed. I wanted to respect the traditions he instilled in you. Now that I've kissed you and discovered your responsiveness, keeping away from you will be most difficult."

"Be careful. Temptation such as this must be resisted. One of us could get burned." Aye, she thought, and if anyone were to know of Garrick's ability to command a black leopard and speak in her mind, both of them could suffer. "The villagers are worried. They think you practice some sort of evil magic or sorcery. I fear you've cast a spell upon me."

Garrick's gaze met hers. Compassion softened his countenance. Studying her, he tilted his head and the light from a nearby candle made his eyes glow. Right then, she was awestruck by the shape of his pupils. They were the eyes of a cat. Nay, a leopard, she thought, rebuking herself for such foolishness.

"Do not be afraid of my abilities, Aisley. I will not harm you or anyone in Danford. I do not practice sorcery. I've cast no spell. I've awakened your desires and it scares you."

"I don't know if that's true, Garrick." It felt right it to say his name aloud after being kissed witless only moments before. He smelled so good, felt so good, that she found herself seeking another kiss. "Surely it is madness to crave a man's kiss as I now crave yours. Tell me what I am feeling is real, milord."

"I am real, little one. This is real." To prove his word, he whispered kisses from her mouth to her ear. Wanting to be closer, Aisley ran her hand through his long straight hair. It was soft, feeling much like a cat's warm, thick fur. Amazed by the feel of his hair, she lifted her other hand to his neck and kissed him.

"I want you, little one. Will you let me do more than this?" Garrick asked against her lips.

"More than what?" she asked.

Groaning, he nipped at her lower lip. Something odd emanated from his throat, sounding much like a cat-like rumble. A trembling sound that echoed down to her womb, igniting an inner flame, making her toes curl.

Lost to everything save the feel of his teeth nipping at her mouth and the enticing, deliberate thrusts of his manhood, Aisley sighed with need. She'd never wanted anything like this, never felt temptation cast its spell upon her.

"Will you lie with me, Aisley?" Garrick asked, kissing the sensitive skin just below her ear.

Trying for reason when she desired more of Garrick's kisses and caresses, she muttered, "I have never —"

"Will you?" he interrupted.

"I shouldn't. I don't even know your surname, milord."

"It is rarely used. If it pleases you to know, my surname is Forrester," he said.

Ignoring good sense, she allowed Garrick to kiss her lips and shift their weight until her back touched the wall. Surrounded by firmness behind her and his male hardness in front of her, she could not recall her objection.

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Garrick took Aisley's silence as permission to bed her. Her kiss had become addictive. Her touch revealed her innocence. Yet she was instinctively responsive and he wanted her with a fierceness that almost frightened him. With Aisley, he wanted to roar and claim, to sink deep inside of her and bite her throat so that he could convert her with his essence.

A gentleman would not take advantage. He had long been aware that he was not a gentleman. He was panthera and liked to indulge in pleasures of the flesh when his instincts came to the fore. But his desire for her was beyond his experience. Had he felt like this with his previous wives, he would have been a more faithful husband.

Before he could kiss the freckles dotting her cheeks, Aisley stilled and dropped her hands to her sides. When he caught her eyes, he saw her scowl.

"Have you been married before, Garrick?" Aisley asked, keeping him at bay with her hands at his chest.

"Pardon," he said.

"I heard you say something about your previous wives. Am I right? Have you been married?"

"This is not a topic for discussion right now."

"Tell me, please, how many wives have you had?"

Garrick admired her stubbornness, but as much as he wanted to talk of something else, he wondered if it was best to tell her about his wives. The closer he came to bedding her, the more danger existed that he would convert her without her knowledge. For now, he would have to restrain his Abcynian instincts until she knew what he was.

"Are you certain you wish to know?" he asked.

Aisley glared. She wrapped her arms before her chest, forbidding him to touch her and he chose to step back.

"Very well, I have been married and widowed twice. Both marriages were fraught with difficulties, which are best explained another night. Aisley, it is not uncommon for a man to have had previous wives. The past matters not to our future. You needn't

chew on your lips. They are lovely and swollen from my kisses. You should be kissed again and often. I want nothing more than to take you back into my arms."

She shoved away from the wall and dashed across the room. Familiar with chase and capture, he permitted her to keep her distance. He could overcome her with ease when he was ready, though he wouldn't at the moment. Not when she didn't trust him.

With the kitchen table situated between them, Aisley faced him. Her bottom lip quivered, her eyes narrowed with temper.

"Aisley, do not be angry. There is no reason for it."

"There is every reason. Do you, or do you not, confess that the troubles in your marriages were a result of your doing?"

"I do not deny my errors as a husband, but my wives were chosen by the necessities of an earldom and were not meant for me."

She stared at him for a moment, and then lowered her lashes, attempting to hide her brown eyes. "I still do not understand why you'd want me for your next wife. There must be others more suitable for you."

"It is you that I want, nonetheless." Garrick scented her sudden fear and fought his need to take her back into his arms. All he had to do was leap and he'd catch her

Turning away, she began searching the supplies arranged on a shelf behind her. She grasped a small piece of cloth and took it with her behind the privacy screen. He chose not to follow and granted her a semblance of distance.

Watching her hide behind the screen, he waited as she knelt on the floor and mopped the water spilt there. He hated seeing her in such a subservient position.

"Aisley, do not hide. Talk to me."

"I'm not hiding. I'm cleaning this mess. I would like to see Angelica on the morrow. I'll understand if you refuse. Good eve to you, milord," she said, barely raising her chin.

Garrick clenched his fists. "I'll not be sent away like some common servant. I am to be your husband. Rise, face me and request privacy if you wish it."

Behind the screen, she slowly rose, attempting to look brave. He doubted she knew how easily he sensed her pending tears. "Please, I'd like you to go."

"Very well." Garrick walked to the door. "Pack whatever you need tonight and be ready for my men by morning. They will come and escort you to the manor."

Before he reached the door, Aisley shouted, "Wait, milord!"

"You have an objection?" he asked.

Aisley flew around the screen and stormed toward him. "I cannot live at the manor house. It would be wrong. I don't wish to marry you and I'll not be your leman."

Seizing the opportunity, Garrick grasped her elbow and pulled her into his arms. "My decision is final. We will be betrothed by the morrow's sunset. My brothers have been detained, giving me time to persuade you to accept what fate has already chosen

for you. You are to be mine, Aisley. When my brothers arrive in Danford, our banns will be read and we'll marry according to the laws of the Church and English tradition."

"I'll not go to the manor house. Valiant's mother has yet to arrive."

"You needn't worry. The matter has been addressed." Knowing Catarina had arrived in Danford, he bent closer and kissed Aisley's forehead. "I shall miss you until I see you next, little one. Get your rest. Mayhap you would consider taking a walk with me through the garden after you've settled into the manor?"

He kissed her lips before she could refuse and lingered for as long as he dared. Sooner than he wanted, she shook her head back and forth, resisting further kisses.

Lifting his head, he withdrew and left her standing in the doorway, heading for the woods. When he was certain it was safe, he stripped and gave into the leopard's instincts as he bolted into the dense forest.

Chapter Six

"Lord Danford, I bring troublesome news," Sir Brandon Mathews announced, striding into the room.

"Aisley wasn't waiting for you in her cottage," Garrick said to his retainer. Looking out the window, he'd already begun seeking her scent. It was weak but he was certain he could catch her before sunset.

Sir Brandon entered the solar and closed the door, walking across the room on quiet, booted feet. "I'm not surprised you'd know," he said. "She took nothing with her, milord. She must have left on foot."

Suspecting that Aisley might leave, Garrick had remained in leopard form and watched her cottage throughout the night. Before dawn, he'd been forced to return to the manor. He hadn't wanted a villager to see the leopard. He could have changed back at any time, but he worried about her reputation if someone were to find him near her home.

He'd taken the risk to return to the manor and she'd flown. As angry as he was with her, he had to calm his temper. Aisley was scared and he'd done little thus far to ease her simplest concerns. She also didn't know the dangers that could await her beyond the protection of his name and his holdings. It was a mistake he would rectify by any means necessary.

Once he had her back in Danford, he would persuade her to accept being his mate. But first he would give chase and catch her. When he did, he would not give her the chance to flee again.

"Garrick, have you been listening?"

Inhaling the lingering scent of almonds, Garrick inclined his head and turned to face his retainer. "Aye, I have."

"I've arranged a search, milord. She couldn't have gotten far on foot. Have you any suggestions on where the men should look?"

Garrick nodded. "Send men to Prescott Abbey." Even as he spoke, he knew Aisley would not have gone to the abbey. His plan to send the men would keep them busy while he used his most trusted guards to aid him in his search.

"If she needed to attend church, why not visit your chapel?"

"Her parents are buried in the abbey's cemetery. She visits often."

Brandon nodded and made to leave. Hesitating at the door, he looked back. "Might I ask her father's surname? It may help when the men speak to the abbot."

"Reeves," Garrick said, waiting for his friend's reaction.

"Aisley is Archer Reeves' daughter?" Brandon questioned. "Then she knows about you, about the Abcynians."

"She does not know what I am."

Brandon frowned, keeping still as he thought over what he'd learned. "It seems strange that I knew Archer's wife, Heather, had born him a babe, but was unaware of the child's name. Have the wars with France and the plague kept us away for so long that I failed a Guard in some way? Archer was an ally. You trusted him because of me and this is the result. It doesn't seem right, milord."

Sir Brandon Mathews was part of a small group of humans trusted to guard the ancient truths of Abcynian kind. Garrick understood his disappointment in learning another Guard had kept a secret from him.

"Do not be angry with him. By keeping his daughter's name from us, he likely hoped that we would not mistakenly reveal it to one of Zotikos' spies. Because danger exists for the children of Abcynian Guards, the less Aisley knew, the better. A Saturian's greatest trick is using those closest to Abcynians to do their work. Then they turn on the ones who aided them by giving them a traitor's death."

"Then Archer's actions are understandable. He was protecting his daughter, even from us. Are you still planning to wed her?"

"Aisley is mine, Brandon. I must wed her and keep her secure. As a panthera Abcynian it is my duty and honor to watch over her. I've already sent missives to my brothers, the King and the Church that proclaim my intent to marry her. Now that word has gone out, I fear Zotikos may have learned I found my mate. I destroyed most of his family after he killed my father. He would like nothing more than to destroy the woman fated to be my mate. I cannot bear the thought of something happening to her because she's scared."

"It might be wise for you to convert her the moment you bring her back."

"I may be compelled to force her hand in marriage to keep her safe, but conversion should be her choice."

"Very well," Brandon said. "Shall I have a horse saddled for you?"

"Aye, tell Lucien and Valiant to join us at the stables. We will leave as soon as the avener readies our mounts."

"I am certain we will have no trouble finding her."

"Let us hope we do before the day is done," Garrick replied. He didn't say that he would use every hunting skill he'd acquired to find her. He intended to be betrothed to Aisley by sunset.

* * * * *

Having made it to the village of Fernley, Aisley began to wonder if she'd been wrong to leave Danford. Sitting alone in a crowded tavern, she ate dark bread and porridge, worrying over whether Lord Danford was angry, if he would come after her.

Mayhap the meal would make her forget the moments she'd spent in Garrick's arms. She'd repeated her bath upon his departure last eve, yet his scent, his taste, his very touch had marked her. As much as she had scrubbed, she could not remove him from her memory.

She refused to admit how much she wished things could have been different. Were she highborn, she'd have agreed to marry him after a proper courtship. Of course, there was the matter of his marriages and his unfaithfulness with his wives frightened her almost as much as some of his strange abilities. She knew many married men kept lemans and bedded other women. But she didn't like the idea of Garrick going to another woman for his marital pleasures. If his noble wives had not held his interest, what chance did a simple healer have?

Strangely, the villagers had the tendency to gossip about the Earl. Some said he was reclusive, even her father had said Lord Danford was a secretive man. Others said that England's war with France had kept him from staying in the manor house for any length of time, giving him reason to remain distant from the villagers and tenants. But she'd never heard anyone speak of his wives.

"How dare you sit and eat as if you haven't ruined my life?" Sedgewick Haywood's unexpected voice startled her.

"I ruined no one's life," she replied. Lifting her head, she faced him. "I helped a child. She is safe now and treated well."

"Do you know what you cost me? That girl was unlike others of her age, why would you defend such a creature?"

"I defend her because she is not a werewolf's babe."

"She is afflicted."

Angry, she pushed back from the table, "She is eight and likes to laugh and play. In this, she is no different than any other child."

"You defend her, but I see she is not with you."

"She is under the guardianship of the Earl of Danford."

"He'll only turn her over to a convent when he is able."

"He would never do such a thing!" Aisley shouted.

"My, my, healer," Sedgewick snickered. "You're defending him, yet you are alone. He did seem most taken with you that night. Has he turned to another leman so soon after leaving your bed? Don't you know that noblemen take any woman they desire? You were just one of many."

"How dare you?" Unable to remain in place, Aisley rose. "Lord Danford is an honorable man. Please, leave now so I may finish my meal in peace."

Sedgewick laughed, seeming about to grab her when another man stepped in his path.

"Pardon, I cannot allow you to harm the lady," the stranger said.

"This is none of your concern, sirrah," Sedgewick rebuked, shifting to the side.

"It would be wise to avoid disrespectful address with a man you do not know," the other man warned. His voice sounded learned, but something about him troubled her.

Not quite as tall as Garrick, the new arrival's robust frame commanded notice nonetheless. He was handsome, with Norman-styled flaxen hair and keen blue eyes, but she didn't like him.

Slowly, she looked about the tavern. Serving women stared at the well-dressed man with a longing she'd only felt in the presence of Garrick. Men looked at him as if awestruck.

"My dealings with this woman are not your concern," Sedgewick said.

"By shouting, you've invited all in this room to share in your concern."

The stranger wore a russet coat, a gray underrobe and sash and soled hose that marked him as a wealthy merchant or journeyman of some means.

"Who are you to interfere?" Haywood asked.

"Brewster, John Brewster. I interfere because this lady has asked you to leave. A gentleman can do nothing less than obey a woman's wishes."

Uncertain what to do, Aisley reclaimed her seat and stared at her food. Something about Brewster made her uncomfortable and she suddenly wished Lord Danford would come and protect her from these men. She didn't like Sedgewick and she didn't trust John Brewster.

Before rebuking herself for making such a foolish wish, she heard a distant rumble in her mind. A breath later, the rumble became Sir Knight's sawing roar and it was growing louder, keeping her from hearing Sedgewick's argument.

At last, Sedgewick withdrew, but Brewster remained. The leopard's sawing became stronger, more menacing, hurting her ears.

"Tell me he did not harm you," Brewster said.

"He did not, milord. You've my thanks for coming to my aid."

"My duties as a physician would never permit me to allow a man to harm a lady."

"You are a physician?"

"Aye, I have journeyed to these parts to seek a position in the Earl of Danford's household. I'm told Danford is not far from Fernley. Would you direct me to where I might go?"

"You have traveled for nothing. Lord Danford has a physician. Nonetheless, I do not think you are what you claim."

Aisley, hear me now, leave the tavern anon. Garrick Forrester's voice overrode the leopard's sawing. Like the night they'd met, it was spoken in her head. *The man before*

you cannot prevent your passage, nor can he remain without your permission. Should he request anything of you, deny him.

Immediately, Aisley pushed her food aside. "Pardon, milord, I'm no longer hungry. If you will step aside, I shall be on my way."

"Wait," Brewster demanded when she tried stand. "You were right. I am a journeyman seeking work in Danford. Do not let my lie chase you from a meal. Might I sit with you for a little while? Travel has been long and your company would ease the burden."

"I am sorry for your troubles, but I am betrothed to the Earl of Danford. He would be angry if I allow you to sit here."

Fury flared in John Brewster's eyes and Aisley shivered against the chill that crept over her skin. *Do not look at him. Go now, Aisley. He cannot stop you.* Aisley obeyed and turned away.

Aisley walked less than a cubit before the tavern door slammed open and the Earl of Danford marched into the center of the room. His squire, a knight and a large, broad tawny-haired Viking of a man flanked him.

"Leave this place," Lord Danford commanded John Brewster. His vivid eyes trained on the stranger and Aisley feared the Earl might kill him. "Or face the consequences of approaching what belongs to me."

John Brewster turned about on his heel. "Are you threatening an unarmed man? I've done nothing other than assist a lady, milord," he said.

Garrick's right hand tightened on the hilt of his sword. Aisley used the distraction to press herself against a wall. The crowd had grown restless, certain they were to witness a skirmish, or worse.

With all eyes on the stranger, and Garrick preoccupied, she was able to make her way to the still open door. Once there, she bolted, fearing retribution when Garrick finished dealing with John Brewster and came after her. She knew he would and she fled into the forest, both fearing and hoping he would catch her.

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"Milord, Aisley has flown," Valiant warned.

"The further she is from here, the safer she will be, Valiant. Let her go."

"I can stop her."

Reluctant to take his eyes from his enemy, Garrick spoke to his squire. "Follow her and see that she remains unharmed. Do not touch her. She's mine."

"Aye, milord," Valiant agreed and left.

"Leave here at once," Garrick warned Zotikos, the very man who'd tricked the people in the tavern into believing that he was John Brewster, a wealthy man. Garrick

wasn't certain who Zotikos was portraying himself to be, though he was familiar enough with the Saturian to know he could steal a man's soul if he was permitted.

"I'd rather stay," Zotikos said and walked over to an empty table. Two servants approached and rested their hands on his shoulders. "The daughters of the tavern's owner are rather fond of me," he boasted to the crowd at large, causing the women to giggle and squirm. "Am I permitted to stay, lovelies?"

"Aye, milord," one of the girls said.

Zotikos had gained permission to remain in the tavern. Looking around the room, Garrick asked, "Where is the owner of this place?"

"Here, milord," a burly, red-faced man answered, stepping forward. "I implore you not to spill blood within my meager establishment. It is my only means."

"There will be no bloodshed," Garrick promised. He wished Zotikos was outside and away from the tavern's protection. Unfortunately only the owner could make Zotikos leave at the moment. "It would be advisable for you to ask this man to leave. Your daughters are not safe with him."

"I've done nothing to them," Zotikos said.

Garrick cast his eyes on the tavern owner. "This is my last warning."

"Leave be," Zotikos decided. "I do not wish to cause trouble for these fine people. My lovelies, I bid you farewell. Mayhap I shall return in a day or two."

Garrick held fast, knowing Brandon and Lucien were behind him. Zotikos whispered to the ladies as he moved, causing them to glare at Garrick and his men for ordering the Saturian to leave.

The people in the tavern could resent Garrick as much as they liked. They did not realize the ill Zotikos could bring upon them should they view him for what he was. A master at deceit, the man they knew as John Brewster appeared a gentleman of means and privilege. In truth, he was a man made ugly by the evil he embraced.

As he went by the tavern owner, Zotikos halted and tucked his hand into his coat, revealing a small purse. "For your troubles, Burkett," he offered, lining the other man's palm with coins.

Once Zotikos departed, Burkett pocketed the money.

"Lucien, you know what to do," Garrick whispered. "I would go after Zotikos myself, but I must find Aisley. She is my priority now."

"I'll look for him," Lucien said, storming off. "Go and secure your mate."

Garrick remained in the tavern for as long as he could stand. Aisley was running fast, but he had her scent and could track her easily. With Lucien overseeing Zotikos' departure, he could concentrate on securing his mate.

He'd vowed the night before that Aisley would be his betrothed by sunset. The sun was beginning to wane. Relying on the leopard's instincts, he followed his mate's almond scent and gave chase, intent upon catching her.

Chapter Seven

Aisley ran so hard and fast she feared her lungs would burst. Once she'd had to stop when a branch snagged her simple cap and she tore the dreadful scrap of fabric from her head in her effort to be free. But her sides ached, forcing her to slow down. In her hesitation, she looked back and stumbled.

Aisley, I can feel your heart pounding. Do not flee anymore. I'll not harm you. Hold where you are.

Alarmed by how close Lord Danford sounded, she righted herself and fled. If she tried she just might elude capture.

You cannot escape me. I'm a hunter, little one. I have your scent. Finding you in this forest is just a matter of time. Rest now and I will come to you.

Despite the need to press on, Aisley stopped long enough to look about. She saw nothing in the bushes or in the trees above. Oddly she thought she heard Sir Knight rumbling again.

You reached for me in the tavern, Aisley. Reach for me again.

Leave me be! I've refused you, milord. I think it best for you to return to your duties.

You haven't the right to refuse me! I am the Earl of Danford. You cannot escape being mine.

You...you would force me to marry you?

It is not my wish. But aye, I would force you if you do not heed my word. Cease this behavior and accept your fate as my countess. I'd much rather enjoy our betrothal than spar with you. I've seen enough war in my time, Aisley. Let us call a truce and talk.

We are not at war.

I suppose that's true. You are at war with yourself.

Finding it difficult to breathe, Aisley realized how much she needed the rest. Her lungs still burned and her sides ached. To remain upright, she braced herself against a tree and drew a deep breath. Looking around, she belatedly discovered she'd been heading toward Danford.

Aisley, speak to me.

She would not respond. She wouldn't! All she needed to do was change her path. Returning to Danford would be a mistake. If she went back, the Earl would command her to be his wife and she'd never be able to leave. Even though she knew this to be true, she couldn't ignore the fact that part of her wanted to make a home with Garrick Forrester.

Why do you believe it would be a mistake?

That is not fair. I did not give my thoughts to you.

Aye, you did. You've revealed much to me. I know why you've fled, Aisley.

You know nothing.

If you really wanted to leave me, you wouldn't have stopped in Fernley. You knew I would come after you and gave me the chance to find you. It is all right. I'm not like any man you've known. I can do things that frighten you. I understand your fears. Allow me to take you home so I may ease them.

Nay, nay, I want nothing to do with you.

Aye you do, you want to be my wife, Aisley. I felt it in your kiss. Admit it to me, to yourself and we shall work through our differences.

You're wrong! Leave me be.

Aisley pushed away from the tree. She could sense Garrick nearing even as Sir Knight's displeasure faded.

At that moment, Garrick Forrester, the Earl of Danford, stepped around a tree a short distance before her. She had not heard footsteps nor witnessed disturbance within the forest. He must have made his way ahead of her and waited.

"Mayhap it is time to tell you that the leopard is always closer than you think, Aisley," Garrick said. Folding his powerful arms low across his chest, he leaned back against the tree when she started to retreat. "You must cease this behavior, little one. Fate decreed that you would be mine and I intend to honor you as my mate."

"That cannot be. I'm not highborn." Regardless of his warning, Aisley propelled herself backward, keeping her eyes on him. "Go away, it's for the best. Just being near me can bring trouble for you, milord. Don't you realize that?"

"I see. You've tried to escape because you're worried about me." Garrick pursued her slowly, silently, his patience making her feel as if she were being stalked by Sir Knight.

"Aye, if you must know. I'm a healer with red hair, freckles and a birthmark. These are not the traits of a countess."

"On the contrary, you are lovely in face and form. You will make a fine countess."

"That's not what I meant. The villagers heard Sedgewick Haywood call me a witch. They didn't believe him, but what if he takes his tales elsewhere? If I give in and become your leman, you could be tainted by the same lie."

Still backing away, she didn't notice her foot was surrounded by ivy and she tripped. In a thrice, Garrick's arms were about her waist.

"You will never be my leman. You are Aisley Reeves, soon to be Lady Danford."

"Nay," she denied, struggling anew.

"Aye," he said.

He slackened his grip, giving her a chance to free her foot. Taking advantage, she elbowed his ribs, breaking free long enough to stumble over the same patch of ivy. In his urgency to keep her from falling too hard, Garrick tumbled with her. Landing face down in a bed of ivy and leaves, she gasped when his full weight covered her, pressing

her further into the earth. She was caught and a wicked spark of temptation heated deep within her womb. Fighting with whatever strength she had left, she arched, trying to be free. But she only made matters worse by inviting him to nip her neck.

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Aisley, cease this! Garrick struggled to keep most of his weight off Aisley while she fought. She wasn't a weak woman and he finally managed to keep her still by using his teeth. He didn't hurt her, though if she continued to fight, he might be compelled to leave his mark. *I don't want to hurt you. Be still, woman.*

She fought harder, scratching at the earth and pushing her backside upward in an effort to unseat him. He was already as hard as a battering ram at the feel of her soft, warm curves and thrusts. The taste of her skin was on his tongue and her thrusts made him want nothing more than to shove her skirts out of his way and take what was his by Abcynian law.

He wanted her like this, he discovered. He wanted to bury himself in her sweet, tight sheath from behind and take her over and over until he was spent and his seed filled her womb. Thrusting back, he pushed her hips down, holding her thighs between his.

"Let me go," she muttered into the leaves, shifting her hips. His incessant hardness pressing against her buttocks caused her to stop and gasp. "Nay, Garrick, don't take me like this. Not by force."

Furious, Garrick gave her room to flip over to her back, and then straddled her legs to keep her from kicking. "Nothing would ever cause me to take you by force. If you think me capable of such a thing, you're not the woman I thought."

"I don't know who you thought I was. I'm a simple woman, nothing more."

Enjoying their position, he studied her pretty face, flushed by exertion. Her lips were slightly parted, beckoning attention. His manhood throbbed as her pretty brown eyes softened with feminine need. Her almond scent drifted about them.

His manhood throbbed almost painfully when she calmed and her eyes drifted to his lips. As much as she wanted to claim otherwise, Aisley was attracted to him. Granted, she was scared and he would have to reassure her, but he would not lose his mate to fear. Right then he vowed that he would gain her favor. It might take awhile, but he would persuade her to trust him.

"You will never be simple, Aisley. You are mine and you are beautiful," he said.

"Gar—" he silenced her with a kiss.

Aisley's soft mouth accepted his aggression and parted with a sigh. Velvet smooth and warm, her tongue tangled with his as her hands clamped about his shoulders to bring him closer.

Shifting, Garrick aligned himself between her thighs. A perfect fit, he noticed. She was neither too small to take him nor too delicate to bear his weight.

"Ah, little one, can't you feel how good consummation will be between us? You respond to me as no other woman has ever done," he whispered, reclaiming her lips.

Aisley's hips rolled with his subtle thrusts, spurring an ache that had begun at the onset of their chase. He always savored hunting prey and her fleeing had awakened his primal instincts. Now that he had her in his grasp, he wanted to claim her. The panthera inside of him roared in warning when he felt her shift, but he failed to take heed as her tongue stroked his.

Thwack! A slap across the back of the head stung and he withdrew before she struck again.

"Bloody hell, Aisley, that hurt!"

"I pray that it did! Only a knave would view a woman as prey!"

"Ugh," he grunted. Breathing hard, he shifted off her and reluctantly stood. Grateful that his cote-hardie covered his erect manhood, he offered to help her rise. "It's fortunate that I like you or else I'd punish you for hitting me. Bloody hell, I'm beginning to think sharing my thoughts with you is a curse." Rubbing the back of his head with his other hand, he stared down at her.

"I couldn't agree more! How can a grown man savor chasing a woman through a forest while she is terrified?"

"You were never afraid I'd hurt you. Mayhap I should remind you that it was you who'd caused the chase. From now on it would be unwise to play such games when you are testing my patience."

Though he continued to offer a hand to her, she rose on her own. "Forgive me for testing your patience, milord," she dared to mock. "Since I've never been betrothed, much less married twice, I don't know how to be a good wife."

"Ah, so you ran because you are jealous of my former wives," he rebuked.

Briefly she looked away, seeming reluctant to speak. "Nay, I ran because I'm scared," she admitted. "You're not a normal man, Lord Danford."

Surprised, Garrick's temper softened. "Where is the woman I met eleven days ago, Aisley? The one who confronted a stranger for his maltreatment of a child was more courageous than this. Face me and tell me why you are afraid."

At last Aisley lifted her head, her gaze remaining steady as her thoughts turned to Angelica. "I did what anyone with a heart would have done for Angelica. But I wonder what you'll do to Sedgewick now that you've learned that he has stayed close to Danford."

"What mean you?"

"Did you not see him?"

"Sedgewick Haywood?"

"He was in the tavern. John Brewster kept him from hurting me. I didn't care for him, but I cannot say what Haywood would have done to me if the stranger hadn't stopped him."

"God's teeth," he cursed. "Do not be fooled by his aid, Aisley. Brewster is not what he seemed. He is my enemy. He would like nothing more than to take my future countess. If he should align himself with Sedgewick, the danger could be worse. I will do whatever necessary to keep them away from you, but you will have to trust me and stay in Danford of your own accord."

Garrick realized Zotikos had not come to Fernley because he'd learned about Aisley. He'd come for Sedgewick. Mayhap the Saturian had heard of Sedgewick Haywood's banishment from Danford and loss of Angelica. Garrick couldn't be certain. However, he believed the need for vengeance had drawn Zotikos from hiding. It was unfortunate that Aisley happened to be in the same tavern. He'd heard her tell Zotikos that she was betrothed to the Earl of Danford. If Zotikos and Sedgewick Haywood became allies, Garrick would have to confine Aisley to the manor.

First he would protect her by law and bind her to him as his betrothed. She wasn't going to be pleased when she learned his intentions. But he would do whatever necessary to keep her safe.

"What's wrong?" Aisley asked when he continued to stare out at the forest, seeking his enemy.

"Given what I've just learned," he said. "I must take you back to Fernley and speak to a priest. Last eve I vowed we'd be betrothed by sunset. I mean to keep my word."

"Nay, I need more time," she argued.

Refusing to argue, Garrick grasped Aisley's elbow. "Worry not, I'll grant you some time to accept our betrothal, Aisley. When my brothers arrive in Danford, our banns will be read and you'll become my wife."

Immediately, she began struggling. He overrode her resistance and caught her about the waist.

"You cannot force me to want you," she insisted.

Lifting her and casting her over his shoulder with ease, Garrick locked his arm at the back of her knees. "You already want me. I am forcing nothing."

He swung away and stalked through the forest, hurrying to secure his mate from a fate she wasn't prepared to contemplate.

Chapter Eight

It was difficult to argue with Garrick while hanging upside down on his broad shoulder. As much as Aisley tried, it took only a squeeze from his arm braced at the back of her knees and a frightening rumble to quiet her.

A rumble that sounded much the same as Sir Knight's sawing roar. Finding that odd, she remained still until Garrick halted and set her back on her feet. Much to her dismay he took a moment to brush her tangled hair back from her head and placed her commoner's cap back on her head, covering her adequately. When had he found it?

"Hear me now, Aisley," he warned before she could ask about the cap or attempt to draw away. His voice was quiet, his green eyes narrowed as he watched her. "I am willing to listen to your objections regarding the suddenness of our betrothal, but they will only be spoken in private."

"You must realize we cannot—" His thumb pressed against her lips, silencing her.

"Nay, little one, too many ears could be about at the moment. I cannot risk having someone overhear us. For your protection, do what I say until we return to Danford."

Agreeing, she fell into step beside him and remained quiet as they approached the tavern where the Earl's men waited. Each man was posted at the door as though protecting those inside.

"Is he gone?" Garrick asked of the Viking-sized man nearest to Valiant.

"I lost his scent. He must have masked it in someway. It is difficult to say how far he has gone."

Garrick inclined his head, and then looked over at Aisley. "At least Aisley and the people of Fernley are safe." She shifted closer to Garrick's side, feeling more confident being near him. "There is the added complication of Sedgewick Haywood to consider. He was in the tavern when we arrived."

"I will look for him." One of Garrick's knights, Sir Brandon Mathews, stepped forward. Aisley remembered him from the night he escorted her to her cottage. He seemed to be a good man and she felt certain that he was loyal to the Earl of Danford.

"If you find him inside bring him to me," Garrick told the knight. Abruptly, he caught Aisley's elbow and began to escort her away.

They were halted by a man standing in the opened doorway. "Milord, might I ask why you ordered John Brewster from my tavern? Many liked him and were disappointed when he was told to leave. He paid his coin to eat and seemed a gentleman."

Garrick mumbled something and faced the burly man. "I did what I thought just. Brewster was a danger to you and your daughters. While I regret any trouble my

presence has cost you this day, I do not regret protecting your family. If he returns, tell him he isn't welcome and he must go. Heed my word on this, Burkett. Tell him to go. Unfortunately, I have not the time to explain why, but I shall send some men on the morrow to make certain he poses no further trouble for you. Now I must find the closest chapel before sunset. Might you tell me where it is?"

Aisley gasped, bringing the innkeeper's eyes to her. She was about to object when she recalled Garrick's warning by the woods. She wasn't to speak against him in public.

Her hesitation gave Garrick the opportunity to lead her away before she heard Burkett's answer. Refusing to let herself be carried or dragged, she walked proudly beside the Earl. The man that reminded her of a Viking and Valiant followed.

Before long, she was guided inside a simple chapel. A gray-haired man came to welcome them. Garrick spoke quietly, explaining his purpose there and the other man bowed his head in acceptance. The giant, tawny-haired man withdrew a document from inside his cote-hardie and handed it to the priest.

A moment later, she was summoned to the front of the church. She knew then that she was about to become betrothed. Garrick stood beside her and responded to the priest with confidence. His rumbling voice echoed through the stone walls of the church and Aisley was unable to resist speaking when she was addressed. She didn't know if their betrothal ceremony had gone as custom dictated, yet she could not ignore the words that bound them. By rights she should be afraid. Instead her heart soared with wonder and her body trembled as she came to realize that she now belonged to the Earl of Danford according to the law.

When the last words were spoken and the ceremony complete, Garrick escorted Aisley from the church. Once outside, she discovered that he'd honored the promise he'd made the night before. The sun had dipped below the horizon, the sky was gray and they were betrothed.

Unexpected fear gripped Aisley's spine as she and Garrick progressed to the horses awaiting them. Sir Brandon held the reins of the palfreys. She wasn't certain why that should frighten her. She sensed the knight hadn't been able to find Sedgewick Haywood.

"Haywood was not in the tavern," Sir Brandon told Garrick. "I ventured into the woods to look for his trail but found nothing. Mayhap he moved on."

"Let us pray you are right," Garrick said. "We should escort Aisley back to Danford. Once she's safe, we can search the area more thoroughly."

"Look for Haywood, milord," she said. "We can return to the manor later."

"It is best we take you now," Garrick insisted. "Valiant, I will place Aisley in your care for the journey back to Danford."

"You are gracious, milord," Valiant said. He took the reins of a chestnut palfrey and led it toward Aisley.

Before the squire reached her, she asked, "Can I ride with you, milord?"

Garrick shook his head. "I need you to stay with my squire. Valiant will keep you safe." He went to one knee and interlocked his fingers, making a step for her. Silently, she climbed onto the palfrey.

Thinking she'd ride pillion with Valiant, she made to give the squire room. Instead he kept a hand on the horse's halter while Garrick, the Viking and Sir Brandon took to their saddles. Before long, they surrounded Aisley's horse, leaving Valiant on foot. The squire patted the horse and started walking upon the Earl's command. It wasn't long before they found a trail and headed for Danford.

The journey from Danford to Fernley had taken her half a day. She hadn't been familiar with the trail and she'd been afraid of Garrick's wrath when he learned that she had flown. Once or twice she'd stopped and thought about turning around, then pressed on because she was earnestly uncertain that she should marry the Earl.

As much as she wondered over what would happen when they reached Danford Manor, she was amazed at how quickly they tracked through the forest. All too soon they were crossing the stream where she first met Sir Knight. She had not seen him today, though she'd heard him earlier at the tavern and in the woods while attempting to flee from Garrick. She'd heard nothing of the leopard since and Garrick remained a strategic distance from her and Valiant.

She would have been more comforted by the leopard's familiar rumble or Garrick's gruff voice instead of Sir Lucien Hunter's deep, oddly beautiful voice. The man she'd thought of as a Viking was Valiant's father. The squire told her that his father was a marcher lord with a holding near the English and Welsh border and that Sir Lucien's mother had been Norman.

Aisley couldn't recall seeing a Norman before. She wondered if they were all as big and intimidating as Sir Lucien.

As the night grew darker, she found herself looking toward Garrick. He rode at the fore, his attention on the forest and the trail. Foolishly wishing he would at least speak to her, she swallowed her pride and kept silent.

When they reached the stables nearest the manor house, a few servants greeted them with raised torches. Another man bounded from the stable and made to assist the horses. It wasn't long before Valiant lifted her from her horse.

Garrick, Sir Brandon and Sir Lucien handed their mounts to the servants and conferred quietly among themselves. Wishing Garrick would have offered to escort her to her cottage, Aisley turned to the squire.

"Valiant, I would like to return to the village," she said. "I know Lord Danford wants to search for Sedgewick Haywood and John Brewster. He shouldn't be delayed further."

Garrick was beside her in two strides. "Haven't you realized the manor is now your home?" he demanded.

"I cannot live here without a proper maid or lady present," she said.

"My wife arrived last eve, milady," Sir Lucien announced so loudly she thought the entire manor heard him. "Lord Danford asked her to come and choose a lady's maid from the higher-born servants in the manor. Both my wife and the maid will be eager to attend you."

"Why didn't you tell me earlier?" she asked Garrick.

He inclined his head to her ear, his breath awakening a curious ache in her womb. "Hold your tongue for now, Aisley. When I am certain danger is gone from this area, we will discuss this in private."

Annoyed with her body's traitorous response to his nearness, she attempted to move away. "Valiant, would you escort me to the house now?"

"I will escort you to your chambers," Garrick said, gruffer than usual. "Sir Brandon, Sir Lucien, have fresh horses readied. I shall rejoin you when Aisley is settled." With his orders given, he grasped her elbow and turned her from the men. "You can be most difficult at times."

She started to reply, but wisely held her tongue. He was the Earl of Danford. She hadn't the right to speak against him. Mayhap she should attempt to start anew. They were betrothed. It was only right to put aside her temper and make an attempt at finding peace with him.

"Lord Danford, please forgive me. I'm not usually so difficult and ask for patience. I realize much is on your mind and I shouldn't have spoken to you so harshly."

"Much has changed for you since we've met. I wish I could stay and assure you that all will be well between us. Unfortunately, I cannot," he said. "I must secure you in the house and return to my men. Mayhap we could speak of this in the morn?"

Stumbling, Aisley was certain she misunderstood him. "Secure, you mean to see that I am settled?"

Garrick's fingers at her elbow tightened, leaving her to believe more was coming. "It is essential for you to remain in the manor house until I have selected an appropriate guard for you. Unless I deem otherwise, you will go nowhere without myself or a guard in attendance."

Aisley drew to a halt. "Are you so angry with me for trying to leave that you would imprison me?"

Garrick let out a deep breath. "I am not angry. I understand why you left, But I am not certain you will remain here of your own accord. I cannot risk seeing you come to harm because you are scared. As soon as I'm able, I will grant you more freedom. For now, you will remain at the manor."

He resumed their march toward the manor house and led her inside. Aisley would have protested if so many servants were not greeting them as they went by.

Given little time to study the house, she was compelled to follow Garrick. He guided her down a hallway lit by tallow candles. At the end of the hall she noticed an

arched, wooden doorway and shivered. She wondered if she was about to be put in the keep.

"If necessary, I would lock you in the keep to assure your safety."

She attempted to stop and argue, though her efforts failed. Garrick overcame her with ease and kept her walking. "Why is it that you can hear me even when I think I'm keeping my thoughts from you?"

"I've been hearing you since we left Fernley," he said.

"You could have said so. I wanted to talk to you. I wanted to understand why you are so worried about Haywood and John Brewster, or whoever you said he was."

"It was best to stay focused on the trail."

"Nay, you were too busy talking to Sir Lucien Hunter rather than me," she replied.

A low, fearsome rumble emanated from Garrick's throat. "Aisley, I cannot be delayed by an argument. There wasn't a moment during our journey that you were not first and foremost on my mind. You are my betrothed. Protecting you is my right and I will do whatever necessary to keep my enemies from hurting you."

"Very well, I'll go to my prison. Am I allowed to visit Angelica while I'm forced to stay here?"

"You needn't ask. You are not a prisoner. Angelica's upbringing will now be overseen by you. Might I suggest you have Lady Hunter introduce you to Angelica's nurse?"

"As you wish," she said. "When you deem it safe I'd like to return to my cottage, milord. Please inform me when I'll be able to go."

"There is no reason to return."

"I'll need my trunk. Most of my clothes are in it."

"The trunk was brought to your quarters earlier."

"I hadn't prepared it after you'd left last eve," she said. "Did your men pack my gowns?" Though she knew she didn't own many dresses, she did have her favorites that she liked to wear when she was working.

"Just necessities and enough clothing to get you through the next day or so," he said. "Lady Hunter will assist you in choosing an appropriate wardrobe from the bolts of fabric I bought for you."

"What of my herbs and remedies?"

"They can be brought here when the danger has gone."

"A villager might need me before that. I cannot abandon them," she insisted.

Garrick stepped toward her, cornering her against the stone wall. His body was hot and muscled, warming her as he wedged himself so close his knee slipped between her thighs, pinning her where he wanted. "Mayhap you should have considered the villagers before running away?" he challenged, his anger evident in the set of his jaw. "I wonder if you'd thought of them or Angelica when you fled."

"That is not fair." Reminded of her selfishness, Aisley grew sad, doing her best to ignore the pang of temptation that clenched in her womb. "You know why I ran. I was scared. If I'd thought Angelica wasn't safe with you, I'd never have left."

Garrick's hand touched her chin, bringing her face upward. "If you can trust me with a child, can you try to accept my reasons for securing you here?"

"Can you tell me why?" Aisley whispered, melting with the simple touch of his hand and the warm, enticing aroma of cinnamon. She came to realize Garrick's touch would never be simple. His fingers were rough, scarred, speaking of wars and unknown hardships. He was accustomed to wielding a sword and leading armies of men. He was an earl and a warrior and now he was soon to be her husband. That knowledge thrilled and frightened her.

He curled his thumb and index finger about her chin, caressing softly, revealing that he could be gentle. "I am concerned that Haywood may seek revenge against you for saving Angelica and Zotikos could use it to his advantage."

"Zotikos, what do you mean?"

"Zotikos is the man who introduced himself to you as John Brewster," he said. "Didn't you feel troubled when he was near?"

"Aye," she confirmed. "He said he was a physician. I didn't believe him. He then claimed he was a journeyman seeking to ply his trade in Danford. I sensed that he was trouble and reached for you. It was odd that no one else in the tavern saw him that way."

"It was fortunate that you saw him for what he was and obeyed me when I warned you not to accept anything he asked of you. He fooled the others in the tavern with a disguise, Aisley. By doing so he was invited inside and allowed to stay. Usually he pretends to be someone of rank and coaxes with coin. Once he gains permission to enter a town or dwelling, he finds a way to stay. In truth, he is my enemy and he is evil."

Garrick's words left her trembling. "Why would this man come here or threaten me?"

"Because his ancestors and mine have been at war for a long time and he would like to take away what is mine," Garrick answered. "The manor and the people in Danford are largely protected from him because he cannot approach what belongs to me without my permission. Likewise, he cannot remain in another's presence without their consent."

Beginning to fear Zotikos, Aisley felt herself drawn nearer to Garrick's body. She didn't want him to leave. "Mayhap it would be wise if you remain here. Have your men search for him."

"I wish I could stay with you." Garrick leaned in and pressed his lips close to her ear. Her skin prickled with delight at his touch even though she was still angry with him. "There is much you need to learn and I'd like to speak of this further if I could. Unfortunately I must go soon. Lady Hunter awaits you inside your quarters and it is important the two of you become acquainted before she leads you through the

introductions of the household servants. If you hear nothing else I tell you this eve, hear me now. Learn the servants' faces and their names, male and female, no one should go unknown. Should you see anyone you do not recognize, alert me or the guards right away. Do you understand?"

"Aye, but you said he cannot come here," she said.

"He cannot. He could use others to do his work. Remember, anyone or anything that does not seem right, let me or the guards know at once."

"Very well, I'll remain here at the manor and keep vigilant," she promised. She thought he would leave until he dipped inward, his mouth hovering close to hers. "You never told me what I should do if a villager needs my assistance."

"Until I say otherwise, you'll not work as a healer."

"What?"

"You are to become Lady Danford. You need to learn what it means to be my countess."

"I know what it means. Even so, it is not uncommon for the lady of a household to care for those in need."

Garrick withdrew, leaving her bereft and chilled without his warmth. "When it is appropriate you'll be able to resume your work. You needn't worry. My physician will oversee the villagers. I will advise him to come to you for recommendations on the remedies you like to use."

"How gracious of you," she said. "You'd better go, milord. I'd not want to delay your search further."

"The first thing you need to learn is to avoid speaking to me in such a manner," Garrick warned. "For now, inside you go. I trust you will remain respectful of Lady Hunter?"

"Of course," Aisley said.

Garrick inclined his head and departed without further comment.

Furious with his continued arrogance, she fell back against the door, then finally found the strength to enter her chamber. "Arrogant, pompous knave—"

"You must be angry with an Abcynian male," a woman said, almost turning Aisley's scowl into a smile.

Chapter Nine

The voice came from a woman so tall and beautiful Aisley had to blink twice to make certain she was real. Looking again, she realized that the woman must be Sir Lucien Hunter's wife.

Dressed in a green silk gown with open sleeves and a high waist-belt, Lady Hunter reminded Aisley of a queen. Her long, tawny hair was straight and fell all the way to her knees. Her skin was tan, her eyes darker than honey, hinting of experience Aisley could never name. Her face was almost catlike, the tilt of her chin and cut of her nose as precise and elegant as Sir Knight's.

"Forgive me for staring, milady, I've never met someone as lovely as you," she said. Thinking she must look like a simpkin in her simple tan frock, Aisley attempted to stand straighter but she felt small in comparison to Sir Lucien's wife.

"You needn't apologize. I was thinking Lord Danford could not have chosen a better mate," Lady Hunter said. "You are spotted, just as he would favor."

What an odd thing to say, Aisley thought. "I'm not fond of my freckles. I've often tried remedies to lighten them," she replied aloud. "Nothing has worked."

"Foolishness," the other woman said. "Lord Danford told me you were pretty. He's not one to lie. Although I should warn you, like most Abcynian men, he is prone to arrogance."

"Abcynian men," Aisley said. "Is that a branch of knighthood?"

"It is as I feared. You know nothing of us." Lady Hunter walked closer, her silk hem sliding across the floor making the only sound as she moved.

"I don't understand," Aisley said.

"Have you ever heard of the Abcynians?"

"Aye, when I was a child, my father compared them to the Roman and Greek gods."

"Your father taught you many things, didn't he?" Lady Hunter asked, though Aisley didn't have time to answer. "You are learned."

"My father, Archer Reeves, was once Lord Danford's physician. He believed my mother and I should learn our letters."

"I remember your father. He was a good man and well rewarded for his loyalty to the Earl of Danford. But he should have taught you more than your letters. Lord Danford is Abcynian. He is real and his ancestry is older than the ancient Greeks or Romans. It's something you must learn to accept as you learn to become his countess."

"Are you suggesting Lord Danford is not English?"

"Not exactly," Lady Hunter said. "Garrick's loyal to the Crown and his English brethren."

"Your husband Sir Lucien Hunter is a marcher lord. Isn't Henry his king?"

"Aye, he is." Lady Hunter watched her quietly, seeming to consider what to say next. "Mayhap it would be best if we acquaint ourselves properly. I am Lady Hunter. You may call me Catarina."

Aisley frowned. She'd hoped to learn more than this woman's name. "Thank you for your permission, milady, but won't you tell me more about the Abcynians?"

"Lord Danford will answer your questions when he's ready," Catarina said, confounding Aisley all the more. "Wouldn't you like to meet the servants? I overheard your conversation with Garrick. It is imperative you follow his wishes. Zotikos would not hesitate to destroy the very woman the Earl of Danford has been waiting for most of his life."

Not wanting to disrespect Lady Hunter by refusing Aisley bowed her head in agreement. "Mayhap I should meet the servants. Would it be all right to visit Angelica first?"

"Very well," Lady Hunter agreed. "May I suggest you wash and change into something befitting a lady before we go see the child?"

Eager to remove her awful gown, Aisley nodded. "I should."

With a royal inclination of her head, Lady Hunter turned and headed to a door Aisley hadn't noticed when she entered.

Taking a moment to look around her chambers, Aisley found that she liked the way candles warmed the blue and silver tapestries aligning the stone walls. One of the tapestries boasted the Earl of Danford's coat of arms. Clean rushes, a curtained bed, a table with two sitting chairs, privacy screen, her small, battered storage chest, and two larger chests completed the living area. The room was thrice the size of her cottage. She'd need a sennight to study it completely.

Lady Hunter knocked on the door and a maid wearing a clean brown dress and leather mules entered the room. Waiting just inside the door, the small, dark-haired woman lowered her gaze.

"This is Elethea," Lady Hunter said. "Since there are very few women here at the manor, I chose her to attend you because she speaks well and her mother served Lord Danford's household for twenty and five years. I'd have preferred a highborn lady's maid for you but there wasn't enough time to search."

"I am certain you've chosen wisely, Lady Hunter." Watching Elethea dip her head in shame at being Catarina's only choice for a lady's maid, Aisley took pity upon her. "Elethea, would you assist me with this gown?" Uncomfortable making demands upon a servant, she waited for the maid to step forward.

"Aye, milady," Elethea said. "Would you like water to wash with?"

"I would," Aisley agreed and waited for the maid to call a male servant to bring the water.

Shortly after the young man delivered a bucket of warm water, Elethea helped Aisley with her ablutions and chose something for her to wear. Catarina remained in the room, watching the two women as they worked but rarely objecting to anything they said or did.

Aisley was pleased with Lady Hunter's choice for her maid and sighed in pleasure when her tan frock was discarded for a pretty chemise and pale blue cote-hardie.

* * * * *

"You realize the Earl of Danford could have your head for disobeying his decrees?" John Brewster asked.

"I'm not concerned now that I'm well away from Danford," Sedgewick said. As he thought on it, he began to wonder why he accepted a stranger's assistance after he'd crept out of the tavern upon the Earl of Danford's arrival.

Brewster had come from what seemed nowhere and invited Sedgewick to follow him into the forest. There, he revealed two fine horses strapped to a tree and suggested the two of them to ride together as far as they could before nightfall. Sedgewick had known he would need a horse if he wanted to get away from Danford and he'd agreed. They fled, leading the horses through the brush and trees, with Brewster trailing at a slight distance, tossing some sort of powder from a pouch on the ground as they fled.

Now it was dark, their horses were tethered for the night and they reclined beneath an encampment of trees. When he'd offered to build a fire, John refused to let him. He was a bit strange, but the powder he'd thrown on the trail when they left Fernley had kept Danford and his men from finding them. For that, Sedgewick would be grateful.

"Should you push the Earl of Danford or if you are captured near his land, he will see you punished. Even worse, you accused his woman of an apparent wrongdoing in public. I've known him for more years than I care to name. He is a proud man, one who'll not abide disrespect from someone lower-born than he."

"Why do you tell me this?" Sedgewick asked.

"Because you need to know who your enemy is before you face him again."

He'd seen the Earl and his men when they entered the tavern. Lord Danford had not noticed him hovering in the corner. No one in the room thought it wise to move when he broke through the door. The squire's warning of the healer's escape had been the distraction Sedgewick needed to leave before he was caught.

"I do not think I should face the Earl of Danford again," Sedgewick said.

"But you will," John Brewster stated. "You told me what his lady had done. Had she not stolen a child, your pockets wouldn't be empty."

"You also know I believe the girl to be a werewolf's babe."

"Werewolves? Think you they exist?" John scoffed.

"Aye," Sedgewick said.

"It is dangerous for a man to think such things in England. I suspect many in Europe will seek to understand the devastation of plague, a disease that affects commoners and nobles alike. Many lives have been lost during the years of war with France. Wolves live wild in the forests and they've been known to attack villagers. They're seen as evil. Talk of witches and wickedness are beginning to fester, who can foretell what might come of that?"

"I've heard some men have been executed for dealing in sorcery or witchcraft."

"Some, this is true, women as well. Do you find it odd that the healer drew Lord Danford to the tavern?"

"I know not of what you speak," Sedgewick said.

John turned his eyes to Sedgewick. "I speak of witchcraft. The healer had withdrawn and her lips were moving, almost as though she were speaking to someone, but words never came forth. Moments later, the Earl of Danford marched into the tavern."

"Might you be claiming the healer to be a witch?" Sedgewick remembered the small birthmark under her chin and the splatter of freckles on her face.

"I claim nothing," John said. "It is a matter to consider in the future should you wish to address it." With that, he quieted and turned his face away.

"I shall think on it."

Sedgewick thought it might be wise to remove himself from John's influence. As much as the man had assisted him in fleeing from the Earl, he likely had a greater agenda.

"Let us talk of this in the morn. I'd advise you to be here when we wake, Haywood. I'd not like to search for you." Softly spoken as it was, Sedgewick recognized the warning.

* * * * *

"We've found nothing of them," Sir Brandon reported.

Shifting in his saddle Garrick lifted his face to the wind, drawing in the scent of leaves, wind, a hint of rain and animals living in the forest. Zotikos' foul scent failed to reach him and he lowered his head.

He had not detected the scent since earlier that day. Distracted by chasing Aisley, he'd lost it. Lucien had as well. They concluded that Zotikos had masked his scent with something a panthera Abcynian would think belonged in the forest.

Zotikos had gotten away. If he'd joined forces with Sedgewick Haywood, the danger toward Aisley would increase. Garrick would need to keep vigilant and make certain neither man returned.

In the meantime, he would teach his mate about his enemy. His name and their marriage would protect her unless the Saturian used a spy to gain Aisley's trust. Giving her the knowledge of how to defeat Zotikos was the best weapon he could offer her if he wasn't there. He only hoped she would listen and believe that to repel Zotikos all she needed to do was tell him to leave or refuse to allow him to stay. But most people were fooled by his charm and became his minions without realizing that they were condemning themselves to Hell when they joined forces with a man who'd sold his soul for immortality.

"Remaining in the forest will not aid Aisley overmuch," Garrick said. His horse caught the scent of a lion nearby and flattened its ears. "Settle, Knox, you needn't fear Lucien. He's not a good hunter. His mate does the work for him." Brandon smiled as Garrick patted the horse's neck, settling him further.

Lucien led another horse from the trees, striding tall and easy as he avoided snapping twigs beneath his big feet. "I am capable of hearing you well, my friend. Do remember that no matter where we are, I am the leader of our kind. Jests against me will not keep you from being admonished for attempting to seduce your lady instead of finding Zotikos."

"My apologies, I was distracted." Garrick knew Lucien was right, though he didn't like to be reminded of his folly. "As for Aisley, I do not regret my actions this day. She ran and I caught her. I could not ignore her for the likes of Zotikos."

"At least we know she is safe with Catarina," Lucien said. "My wife will teach her what she must know to become your countess."

Valiant came into sight. His horse was smaller than the destriers, but a fine horse nonetheless. "Milord, I've found nothing. Would that I could trace Zotikos or Haywood's scent, but I cannot."

"Do not worry, Valiant. We'll continue patrolling the forest on the morrow," Garrick said. Valiant was still young and had much to learn before he could best a Forrester. "Let us return to the manor. Brandon, have you chosen men trustworthy enough to watch over Aisley when I'm away from the manor?"

"Aye, I have. It would be an honor if you would afford me the privilege of being part of her guard. I chose two other men to share the duty when she is out of the manor and enough to watch the entrances to the house, grounds, gardens and the manor itself."

"You may guard her," Garrick granted.

By fortifying places already guarded by the soldiers in his garrison, he would see that Aisley was kept safe and she'd soon be able to roam outside the manor house. When she visited the village, he'd accompany her or she would have one of Sir Brandon's guards with her. Until he was certain Zotikos and Sedgewick Haywood were gone, she would go nowhere alone.

Chapter Ten

Standing at the window in her chambers, Aisley stared out at the dark rain-drenched night thinking about Sir Knight. Where was he on a night like this?

How odd it was to worry about an animal more than twice her weight! But here she was, listening for his sawing roar, a rumble or anything which would tell her he was near. She didn't completely understand it but there was a connection between the leopard and the Earl. Where one was, the other was certain to be near. On a night that promised more force behind the storm outside, it would be comforting to hear Garrick's gruff voice or Sir Knight's rumbles before falling asleep. Then she would know they were both safe.

At the close of that thought, Aisley felt a familiar presence nearing her quarters. Had Garrick returned and chosen to visit her after all?

Curious to see if she was right, she started toward the door but at the sound of Lady Hunter's voice. "Might I ask what you're doing in this wing so late in the night, milord?"

"I've come to make certain Aisley is comfortable," Garrick said, sounding as if he was just outside her chambers.

Aisley's heart began to beat a little faster. He'd come to her. Now that he had, did she want to forgive him for his arrogance earlier?

"She's fine. I'm certain she's asleep by now," Lady Hunter said.

Aisley wondered if Garrick could sense that she was awake.

"It would be best if you wait until morn to see her. She's had a long day. After visiting Angelica and her nurse, Aisley barely had the chance to study the servants at length. We will begin anew on the morrow."

"You are gracious to accompany her in such an important task," Garrick said.

Aisley couldn't ignore the note of respect he'd shown Lady Hunter. Sir Lucien's wife presented herself as having higher status than the Earl of Danford. As far as Aisley knew, an earl was the highest title for English nobility. Anything higher would be royalty.

Lost in her musings, Aisley missed part of their conversation. Lady Hunter had grown angry with Garrick. "How could you keep the truth about us from her, Garrick? She knows nothing of what you are, yet you expect her to obey your decisions without argument."

"I'll not be admonished in my own house, Catarina." Garrick rebuked. "Aisley was not born Abcynian. I must persuade her to trust me as a man before she can accept what I am. More so, what she will become as my mate."

"Forcing your betrothal and leaving shortly after was an unwise way to begin."

"You know I could not ignore a threat to Aisley or this manor. Lucien would have done the same if Zotikos threatened you."

"Aye, he would. That doesn't matter now, I suppose. What does matter is propriety. I'll not permit you access to Aisley's room, Garrick..." Lady Hunter's speech was drowned out by a low roar that seemed to be emanating within Aisley's head. She looked about and saw nothing, but secretly hoped Sir Knight was nearby. Mayhap he was near enough that she could hear him through the rain and stone walls.

I know you're listening, little one. Permit me to enter, Garrick whispered in her mind, his familiar voice calming the leopard's odd sound.

Deciding to answer the only way she could, Aisley gave him her thoughts. *I think not, milord. Go and spend time with your guests. You have a tendency to address them before thinking of me. I'm certain they would enjoy your company.*

Ah, you are wrong. I think of you often. Come, bid me to enter.

She'd been angry with him most of the evening and she'd begun to forgive him the moment she heard his voice and knew he was safe. She shouldn't respond to him so easily. He'd forced her hand in their betrothal and ignored her during their journey. Nay, she wouldn't give into his request. Mayhap if she let him think she was still angry he'd seek to win her favor.

Nay, I'll not grant you entrance to my room. Lady Hunter is right. I need to rest.

I'm certain it seems as though I've been remiss in my dealings with you, Aisley. Be assured my intentions have been honorable. Until I see you next, sleep well, my lady. Again, Garrick emphasized the words my lady, establishing his claim and producing an unbidden tightening deep in her womb.

"You should return to your quarters, Garrick," Lady Hunter advised.

He murmured something in response and silence ensued. Aisley returned to her vigil by the window. The sawing roar had ceased. Mayhap she had only imagined hearing Sir Knight.

She wasn't surprised when Lady Hunter opened the door. "I'd meant to see if Lord Danford and I had awakened you. It's obvious you haven't been sleeping. Where is Elethea? She should be here to assist you. If she has been remiss, I shall correct her."

"Nay, she's done nothing wrong," Aisley said. "I did not need help preparing for bed."

Lady Hunter strolled further into the room and closed the door. "I understand your unease with servants. You will—"

"Forgive my disrespect, milady, but you do not. Other than my mother, no one has changed my clothes, bathed me or put me to bed."

"My, you're not afraid to speak your mind. Garrick will surely be on his guard where you're concerned." Lady Hunter moved quietly across the floor. She was lovely

in form and stature, yet for all her loveliness, she was very secretive and distant. It was part of the reason Aisley did not feel comfortable in her guardian's presence.

"Pray tell me I have not offended you by speaking so, Lady Hunter?" Aisley insisted.

"I'd prefer you to remain honest. Why don't you close the shutters and get ready for bed? I am willing to help you, if you so choose."

"Nay, you needn't bother," Aisley said even as she faced the window in search of Sir Knight's familiar roar. "I'm not sure I can sleep without hearing from him this eve."

"Him..." Lady Hunter marched closer, her feet uncharacteristically pounding the stone floor. "There isn't a man waiting for you somewhere in the night, is there? Garrick would kill him if there was."

Surprised, Aisley turned back to Lady Hunter. "There's no one. Mayhap I've given you reason to distrust me by leaving, but I would not betray him in such a manner."

"Why did you flee?"

"Dare I admit to being afraid?" Aisley asked. "Less than a fortnight ago I knew only the Earl of Danford's name and that he was feared by his household servants. My father knew him well enough to tell the villagers that their lord was a good man. I had little else to go by. Now I'm betrothed to Garrick. How might you feel given the same situation?" Afraid she'd spoken too boldly, Aisley lowered her eyes to the floor.

"The same," Lady Hunter replied. "Who were you thinking of when you said you weren't sure if you could sleep without hearing from him?"

Reminded of Sir Knight, Aisley lifted her chin. "Sir Knight, Garrick's leopard."

"You know of him, then. I can assure you, the leopard would never harm you or anyone in Danford"

"Your son has told me this often. I'm inclined to agree. After Sir Knight pulled me out of a stream, it is difficult for me to view him as something ferocious," Aisley commented.

"He pulled you out of a stream?" Intrigued, Lady Hunter's voice softened. "Why, had you fallen?"

"Nay, I was bathing. I saw the leopard perched high in a tree and I'd almost thought he understood what I was doing. When he came into the water, he was angry. I was terribly afraid. Amazingly, he never once threatened to harm me. He grabbed my wrist and pulled me out of the water, nothing more."

"Why was he angry with you?"

"I was naked," Aisley confessed.

Lady Hunter looked ready to scold her even as she buried a chuckle. "You'll be wise to avoid doing such a thing again," she cautioned.

"Lord Danford rebuked me for it when he visited last eve," Aisley said. "Somehow he'd known what I'd done. How is that possible?"

"That is for him to say. The leopard and Garrick, they are..." Catarina stalled, looking as though she wasn't sure how much to say.

"Connected?" Aisley suggested. "I'm aware that Garrick has abilities that might frighten or alarm many in England. I suppose if he can speak in my mind, he can talk to a leopard. That was one of the reasons I'd left. Sedgewick Haywood accused me of being a witch and the villagers heard him. I feared my work as a healer might be misconstrued and adversely affect Lord Danford if anyone were to discover his talents."

"Your concern for Garrick reveals that your heart was in the right place," Lady Hunter said.

"Mayhap, but I am responsible for the actions that now have me confined to the manor. Had I been braver, Garrick would have known being a healer was important to me."

"Aisley, you'll practice healing again. Garrick has confined you to the manor to protect you, not to punish. He is a difficult man, but not a cruel one. It is my understanding that he plans to send Jerold to the villagers. You should spend time with the physician and show him how to earn the villagers' trust. You may also remember it is not uncommon for the lady of a household to be responsible for the health and wellbeing of any and all who reside in her domain. I will teach you how to be the Countess of Danford, to speak better than you already do and apply the lessons your father began long ago. Tell me, can you read and write?"

Aisley wondered how much she should admit to. "I can read the healing remedies my father had written down. I cannot write, milady."

"Then I shall teach you. A learned woman is unusual, granted, however you are fortunate in that Abcynian men like Garrick prefer their women to be educated. Your father had the right of it when he started teaching you."

"I would like to learn from you, milady. Just know that I'll not give up healing." It was sad to think she couldn't heal again. Then again, Lady Hunter might be right in reminding her of the work possible here in the manor house. "When the time is right, I will ask Garrick to let me continue my work. Here, my first priority will be overseeing Angelica's care."

"I think that is a wise choice, Aisley."

"You are gracious to say so, milady," Aisley said. "Yet I do wish I could hear Sir Knight before falling asleep. His sawing roar has become comforting."

"The storm has likely caused the leopard to remain quiet." Lady Hunter placed herself beside Aisley at the window. Strangely, she lifted her face toward the sky, as if she were searching for something. The storm was still howling outside and Aisley could see nothing beyond her window other than rain and darkness. "Again, I think he's quiet, but one cannot be certain what Garrick might do on a night like this."

"You mean Sir Knight," Aisley said.

"Sometimes they seem very much alike," Lady Hunter commented. "Mayhap I should leave you? It is late. I urge you to get some much needed rest. The morrow will prove long."

"Aye, I am growing tired." Knowing it was best to get some rest, Aisley smiled at her guardian. "You are gracious for spending time with me this eve, milady. I am thankful."

"Mayhap you will feel more at ease with me now?" Lady Hunter replied as she walked toward the door. "I realize much has changed for you, Aisley. Please know that neither I nor my husband would harm you. Unlike his previous wives, you are Garrick's mate. We shall treat you with respect." Aisley didn't think it was wise to question Sir Lucien's wife and stayed silent. "Do I need to warn you that speaking of the leopard to anyone other than my family or Garrick would be unwise? The garrison is aware of the leopard. They think it is better than a wolfhound, but only Garrick can attend to it."

"I will hold my tongue."

"That is good to know. If you should have need of me, my quarters are at the opposite end of the hall. I bid you a restful night, milady." With that, Lady Hunter was gone.

Aisley reached up for the shutters and started to close them. Halting when she thought she'd heard something distinctly like a roar, she stared into the night. It wasn't Sir Knight's sawing rumble that reached through the storm. The roar was louder and so near it could have come from within the manor house itself.

Thinking she must have heard thunder in the distance, Aisley stood still and listened. She heard nothing but wind and rain. Determined to get some sleep, she closed the shutters and headed across the room.

It didn't take long for Aisley to undress down to her chemise. Once she was more comfortable, she snuffed out the candles hanging in sconces along the wall. Leaving one burning, she carried it to bed.

As she parted the curtains and climbed onto the mattress, the storm outside quieted. Relaxing, she blew out the candle and scrambled to place it on a table nearby. She didn't bother to close the curtains again. Instead she tucked the satin coverlet up to her chin.

The moment she closed her eyes, she recalled what it had been like to lie beneath Garrick after she'd tumbled to the forest floor earlier that day. As if he was there right then, she could almost feel his heavy body on top of hers, pressing her knees apart as his manhood fit snugly against her backside. She'd felt his hardened manhood, had been stirred and intrigued by the melting within her womb that seemed to prepare her body for his taking. Then he allowed her to face him and leaned down to kiss her. Even now she could feel the press of his warm mouth, the way his lips moved over hers and his tongue delved between her teeth. If he hadn't likened her to prey, she wasn't certain what she might have allowed him to do.

Breathing deep, Aisley forced Garrick from her mind when a sharp, unexpected pain shot down her spine, causing her to arch in a vain attempt to alleviate the discomfort. Uncertain what would cause such discomfort, she eased back to the bed as the pain fled, leaving behind a throbbing ache. Troubled, Aisley wondered why her body felt sore, as if she'd strained her muscles.

Thinking of the long day, Aisley pulled the soft cover up to her chin. With a sigh, she closed her eyes and rolled onto her side, hugging a pillow against her breasts. The ache in her muscles eased, allowing her to fall asleep.

Sometime later, cool air stirred Aisley from a pleasant dream. She rubbed her cheek and felt the chilled flesh. The scent of rain and wind washed over her, causing her to open her eyes and look about the room.

Uncertain how long she'd slept, she waited for her sight to adjust to the darkness and spotted the opened shutters at the window. "Strange, I closed them," she whispered, frowning. Though it was still raining, the storm had lessened. It wasn't likely that the wind had pushed them opened.

Reaching out to inspect her surroundings, she touched something soft, damp and cold. "Ah!" Jerking upright, Aisley found herself looking at Sir Knight. His white teeth flashed in the darkness, making it seem as though he was smiling. "Dear goodness, how did you...how did you get in here?"

The leopard rumbled, nudging her to lie back down and tugging the coverlet back to her shoulders. *Sleep, Aisley, Sir Knight will watch over you until morn.* Garrick's voice stirred within her mind, tempting her to speak to him and invite him into her chamber.

Truly tired, she closed her eyes and listened as Sir Knight settled on the floor beside the bed. At peace with the leopard's presence, she snuggled into the covers.

When light spilled through the open window, she scarcely realized how peacefully she'd slept. Searching for Sir Knight, she pouted upon finding herself alone. He must have been a dream.

Chapter Eleven

Using the abilities of a panthera Abcynian, Garrick came upon Aisley's quarters silently. From the doorway, he spied a maid brushing his betrothed's long, flowing red hair. Soon he would return to the duties required of him as the Earl of Danford. For now he would indulge in the pleasure of watching his mate prepare herself for the day.

Sunlight from the window he'd used to climb into her room during the night flooded the room, landing upon Aisley and revealing that she was lovelier than he'd previously thought.

"What should we do with your hair, milady?" the maid asked.

"Normally I wear it plaited down the center and a commoner's cap." Aisley had shifted about to address the maid and Garrick sensed she wasn't comfortable being attended to by a servant. "Mayhap you could advise how ladies are expected to wear their hair?"

"Some are known to wear headdresses. Other women shave or pluck their hair to compliment the headdress."

Garrick saw Aisley shake her head before she objected. "Nay, I do not wish that. Must I wear a headdress?"

"I believe you would be more comfortable going about your day without a head-covering," Garrick interrupted. Both women whipped about. Aisley's eyes widened when she saw him. The maid stepped back and kept her head down. "Lady Hunter will instruct you on when it is most appropriate to wear a veil or headdress should a guest or someone of consequence come to visit Danford. For now I permit you to wear your hair as it pleases you when you are inside the manor. But never shall you be allowed to shave or pluck your hair. I forbid it."

"Lord Danford, you startled us," Aisley said. She looked as if she wanted to challenge his decision, but wisely refrained. "I did not expect to see you this morn. Is something wrong?"

He smiled, hoping to calm her. "You needn't think so. I came to visit with you this morn."

Aisley lifted her chin as he moved closer. She tried to hold his gaze, then relented and looked to the maid. "If Lord Danford approves, leaving it long and unbraided should be adequate for the day's activities."

Garrick nodded his approval. Intrigued with his future countess's compliance, he whispered, "That'll do," gaining a grin from Aisley's sweet lips as the maid began to work.

He'd not realized how the arrangement of a woman's hair could reflect or hide her beauty. Aye, when they first met, he'd noticed that Aisley's clothing had understated her attractiveness.

With her long hair brushed off her shoulders and falling to the small of her back, the curve of her chin was revealed. The shape of her full mouth was more apparent, causing his gaze to linger on the plumpness of her lower lip. He wanted to suck on her lip, to lave it with his tongue and feel her soft mouth pleasure him in ways she'd never imagined possible. The array of light brown freckles on her face were softened by her morning flush and her green gown showed the slight swell of her hips and the round fullness of her breasts.

Garrick also noticed the dark lines beneath her eyes. While he'd known she'd slept during the night, she'd not had enough rest to make up for the strain of the previous day. Right then he wanted to comfort her and bed her. If he took her to his bed, mayhap he would tire her enough to rest without worry. He would undress her down to the skin and align his body to hers, part her thighs and enter so slowly she would cry with need instead of the virginal pain he knew she would feel the first time they joined. He didn't want to be the cause of her discomfort and would strive to soothe her until she writhed and found her pleasure.

Wanting to be alone with his woman, he barely glanced at Aisley's maid hovering nearby. "Leave us, now!" he ordered.

The maid jumped as if he'd slapped her. Garrick frowned when she scurried to the door.

"Hold a moment," he said. "What is your name, girl?"

Surprised by his question, the maid looked at Aisley first. "Elethea," she answered with her eyes cast downward.

"You are the one Lady Hunter chose to be my betrothed's maid?"

"Aye, m'lord."

"I trust you intend to serve her well?"

Elethea lifted her chin, but did not look at him. "Aye, m'lord."

"That is all I can ask," Garrick said. "Your mother served Danford most of her life, as I recall. Your father was the steward."

Mouth agape, the maid stared up at him, then realized her error and hastily looked away. "You remember my parents? They have been gone more than ten years now."

"Aye, I see your mother in you. If your dedication to Danford is the same as your parents had been, I am certain Lady Hunter has chosen a most suitable lady's maid."

Elethea gave a slight bow in gratitude.

"Here after, girl, if I ask something of you, try to remember that it is not my intention to frighten you," Garrick said.

"I shall," she whispered and departed.

"Why did you do that?" Aisley asked.

Garrick turned his attention back to his mate. "I wanted to be alone with you," he said, shifting closer.

"Why did you explain yourself to her?" Her pretty brown eyes rested on his shoulders before lifting to his face. "I never expected you, an earl, would attempt to do so with a servant."

"She did nothing to receive rebuke, and yet, like many of my servants, she is afraid of me. I intend to reside primarily in Danford now that I've found my countess. I don't want the servants and household staff to fear me."

"I am certain they will come to see you as fair, milord. Judith told me that you are always kind to Angelica and that she enjoys the sound of your voice. I cannot blame her. You have the most unusual voice, but I like it."

Surprised, Garrick settled his hand at her elbow. "You like my voice? Why?"

"I shouldn't say." Aisley flushed and attempted to withdraw.

Wanting to kiss her, Garrick smoothed his forefinger along the curve of her chin, steadying her. Her skin was so soft and warm that the first touch beckoned more and he slid his hand into her hair, sweeping it behind her ear. Like her skin, her hair was soft as silk.

She was truly more beautiful than he first thought and his heart raced at the knowledge that this woman was to be his for the rest of their lives. She alone would grace his bed and have his children. At once his manhood hardened almost to the point of discomfort. He wanted her so badly he thought it possible to spill his seed if he kissed her long enough.

"I'm glad you like my voice," he said, aware that his tone had deepened and his breath became heavy. The panther inside of him awakened, scenting his mate and daring him to convert her and claim what was his by Abcynian law. "Won't you tell me why you find it to your liking?"

"Umm...well..." She stalled, blinking twice to regain control of her thoughts. She'd been attempting to hide them from him since he'd arrived. Even though he could likely hear her now, he wanted her to tell him what she was feeling. "You sound gruff at times, but your voice changes with your mood. If you're angry, you rumble and roar. When you speak to Sir Lucien or Sir Brandon, you speak deep and steady. My Papa found an injured kitten in the woods once when I was very young and he would place it in my lap. I'd rub its face and chin and he would rumble like you do when you're alone with me. My Papa told me it's the sound cats make when they're pleased."

"You please me, Aisley," he said. When he breathed out, Garrick could hear and feel the panther's rumble emanating beneath his skin. The leopard wanted its presence known to Aisley, but he would have to guard it. If he revealed himself too quickly, his mate would bolt again.

"Not yesterday. You were angry, mayhap rightfully so, but you were also secretive. If you'd taken a moment to talk to me as we rode back to Danford, I'd have felt more at

ease as your betrothed. Instead, I was placed in the care of your squire and Lady Hunter."

"Aisley, I realize it seemed wrong." Caressing his hand from her temple to her nape, he cupped the back of her head and brought her to him. "As I'd said last eve, my intentions were honorable. Danger lingered in the forest and I could not allow your nearness to distract me. I'll not apologize for protecting you. I left you last eve to make certain our enemies have fled."

"Does that mean I can visit the villagers if they need me?"

"Nay, little one, you cannot, not yet." When Aisley attempted to pull away, he overcame her resistance by placing his arm about her waist.

"Let me go, Garrick."

"Not until you believe that I'm confining you to the manor to protect you. I told you the night we met that I've enemies that would like nothing more than to take you from me. I cannot risk something happening to you, Aisley. Until I know you are safe, I intend to take daily rides to Fernley and neighboring towns to make sure the danger has gone. Sir Brandon and his men will remain here to guard you. Once it's safe, you will be permitted to go about Danford and the village as freely as you wish. "

"What about Sir Knight? Couldn't you send him to guard me?"

"Aside from the best guards in my garrison, most are not ready to understand the leopard's place in Danford," Garrick said. "However, if I cannot be with you at night, the leopard will take my place. I sent him to you last eve, little one. I will continue to do so until we are wed or you permit me to stay with you." Gently keeping her captive, he kissed her jaw and chin. She tasted of almonds, of honey and of woman. It was all he could do not to bite. "As for that, do not think to send me away when you're angry. I knew you needed to rest and meant to stay only for a little while. How can I earn your trust if you will not permit me to try?"

She placed her hands on his shoulders, trying to brace herself against his kisses. She didn't resist for long. He heard her heartbeat and shared her breath with a gentle, persuasive kiss to her soft, parted lips. He knew she wanted him to kiss her and took what they both wanted.

"Last night I was angry," she whispered between kisses. "I'm still angry and being betrothed to you scares me, but I do understand your reasons for guarding me so closely."

Offering kisses from her chin to her lips, he buried a smile when it was Aisley who attempted to steal a kiss. He pulled away, provoking her to pout.

"The newness of our betrothal may frighten you. Are you still afraid of me?" he asked.

"Nay, I'm not. Still, there are things about you that scare me. Lady Hunter told me a little about your family history, but it wasn't enough. She said you'd tell me what I need to know about the Abcynians and I'd like to learn. Won't you share with me?"

"Unfortunately, Aisley, I cannot rush explanations with you. Yesterday you admitted that you were worried about the villagers misunderstanding my abilities. I promise I am not engaged in anything wicked, but I can speak with animals and with you mind-to-mind. I trace my lineage to the Abcynians, an ancient lineage of men and women with abilities that would astound you. If you're willing to be patient, I will introduce you to my heritage one story at a time. Will you give me the chance to reveal my past to you as I see fit?" Garrick inhaled her almond-rich scent, finding it intriguing and sweet.

"We are betrothed now. I intend to honor that commitment. That doesn't mean I'm happy about being forced to stay here."

"That will last only as long as it takes to assure your safety." Giving what allowances he could, he kissed her. Expecting her to resist, she surprised him by sighing and leaning closer, accepting his tongue deep in her mouth.

In the past, Garrick had always thought of kissing as a means to bedding a woman. With Aisley, kissing was a gift, a privilege he'd want for the rest of his life. Her mouth was warm, soft, giving and demanding.

Devoted to the tangle of their tongues, she groaned when he tried to withdraw and caught his tongue between her full lips and sucked. His manhood stretched his hose, making him shift to ease the strain against his sensitive flesh. Bloody hell, he was tempted to force her to kneel before him and take his length between those silken lips.

"Aisley, let me come to you tonight," he asked when she freed his tongue, purposefully keeping her from recapturing his lips. She grumbled and kissed his jaw, explored his neck with little bites and kisses.

God's teeth, he wanted her! Her kisses were heady, sweet, an innocent's seduction, but he was hard as stone and aching to spend himself between her soft, silken thighs.

"Bloody hell, answer me. Let me come to you tonight."

"I shouldn't. I should send you far, far away from me," she said between the kisses she bestowed from his chin to his throat. Her teeth nipped at his pulse, sending blood from his head to his loins.

"Will you consider it?" he asked again, near to begging if she did not cease her seductive torment. "Do you understand what it does to me when you kiss me like this, Aisley?"

"Nay, I only know that I like kissing you. It feels right, but what does that say about me?" she demanded. "A lady should not be tempted by a man. How I feel with you, it is wicked."

"Ah, little one, it is desire that you feel, not wickedness. There's no wrong in this. Be assured that no matter your answer for tonight, I will not ask for more than you're willing to give."

Aisley grinned, part impish innocence, part female curiosity. Garrick knew she was tempted to permit him access to her bedchamber. Hoping to tempt her further, he

nudged his pelvis into the vee of her thighs, revealing his need, and felt her arch in response.

"Garrick, you shouldn't—"

"Aisley is right," Lady Hunter admonished from the doorway. "I must speak against this behavior, milord. You know better than to put her in such a position."

Garrick stepped back, righting Aisley as he steadied himself. Belatedly, he noticed Catarina pointing to the open door. Once again, he'd been thinking only of Aisley and missed a panthera Abcynian's approach. Though he was glad Aisley responded to his kisses, Catarina was right. He should have barred the door. It was an error he would not repeat again.

"Mayhap a guardian for my betrothed isn't needed after all, especially one who corrects the Earl of Danford in his own household," he warned.

"Then I would insist on returning to my cottage," Aisley said.

"You will live nowhere else. Come for a walk with me, Aisley. We could visit Angelica together before I begin my duties."

"I would like that," she agreed, smiling.

"Lady Hunter, will you join us?"

"I believe it safe to give the two of you a few moments alone with Angelica, milord."

More than pleased, Garrick took Aisley's elbow and escorted her from the room.

* * * * *

Aisley wanted to claim otherwise, but she was proud to be walking the halls with Lord Danford. His title, though intimidating, was not all there was to Garrick Forrester. His dedication to their betrothal, his desire to protect her and his devotion to his men and Abcynian heritage were all part of him. Still there was more to learn.

Glancing over at him, she caught her breath, her heart racing as she watched him. Ever the nobleman in a green tunic strewn with bronze thread, he possessed the strength and bearing of a warrior knighted for his leadership in England.

Aye, she wanted to know more, to learn why he intrigued her and why she did not fight against his wish for the two of them to marry. Mayhap there was a part of her that had accepted their fate when he'd first declared his intentions less than a fortnight ago.

"You accepted me during the night of the full moon," Garrick said. Again, she'd failed to control her thoughts. "Telling yourself otherwise would be foolish. You were complaining to my squire and Sir Knight about my continued absence and now here I am. Shouldn't that please you?"

"It is good to know that you are here," Aisley admitted. "But you'll be charging away from the manor shortly and I'll miss—never mind."

"You'll miss me?"

"I did not say that."

"You thought it." Seeming to be a gentleman, Garrick escorted her down the hall. Only she could hear his thoughts. *I shall miss you as well, Aisley. When I return, I will seek your company. It is my hope to find you alone.*

Aisley chose not to respond. They'd reached Angelica's room and entered after a quiet rap on the door. Complete with servants to assist Judith, the chamber was abuzz with activity as a servant of about ten and three whisked a brush through Angelica's hair and others were straightening the bedclothes.

"Good morn, Lady Angelica," Aisley called out as she and Garrick approached the girl. "How lovely you look."

Angelica looked up and her smile was gentle. Then her gaze went to Garrick and, with a squeal of delight, she launched herself at him.

"Gaick...Gaick," she cried out, spreading her arms to Garrick.

Aisley stood there, stunned. It was the first words Aisley had ever heard Angelica speak.

"Angelica, you spoke." Aisley swallowed against the tightness in her throat when she realized she would have missed this moment if she'd been successful in leaving Danford.

"She's been trying to say something all morn," Judith told them from across the room.

Garrick lifted Angelica into his arms, readily permitting her to tighten her grip about his neck. Aisley stared, her heart slamming in her chest as she watched them together.

Right then and there, Aisley believed that the Earl of Danford considered Angelica his daughter. She saw the truth in his green eyes, in the softening of his jaw as he held the girl. He was a father, not just a nobleman with a strange past. How easily she could come to love him. If Angelica trusted this man, mayhap she could too.

"Good morn to you, sweetling," he said to Angelica. "How proud I am to hear my name upon your lips." But Aisley wisely remembered nobles didn't marry for love. How could she think even for a moment that Garrick would come to love her in return?

Angelica squealed again, bringing Aisley's gaze to the beautiful girl. "Gaick, Gaick, fa...fa..." Suddenly, Angelica laughed and shifted about while Garrick tickled her.

Imagine that! The Earl of Danford was tickling the girl and he was beaming as though he'd won a major battle against the French.

"I'm amazed at how she is with you," Aisley said, whispering in Garrick's ear while reaching up to stroke her fingers through Angelica's hair when the girl stilled.

"Are you upset?" Garrick asked.

"Nay, why would I be? This is a miracle."

"It is," he agreed. *I heard your thoughts when Angelica first spoke, little one. Do not admonish yourself for what happened yesterday. You are here now. That is all that matters.*

As if sensing Aisley's momentary distress, Angelica looked at her, smiled and whispered, "Aly," then finally settled her head onto Garrick's shoulder.

"Might I speak, milord?" Judith strolled closer, a smile on her heart-shaped face and a twinkle in her blue eyes. "I believe Angelica's progress this morn has to do with your presence in the manor, milady. She feels safe with the two of you."

"I pray that is true," Aisley said.

"Angelica, would you like to break your fast with your mother and father?" Garrick invited, shifting her on his hip.

Angelica nodded, her understanding clear, thrilling Aisley all the more.

With little ceremony, Aisley and Garrick carried Angelica out of the room and headed for the kitchens. For the first time since her mother and father died, she felt a sense of peace, a part of a family.

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"I was wondering about something, Haywood," John Brewster said, breaking Sedgewick's concentration.

"I'm almost afraid to ask what you're thinking," Sedgewick confessed. "I told you last night, I do not wish to return to Danford."

"Are you certain?" John kept the reins of his palfrey steady and his eyes on the trail. "Several times I heard you complain about the witch ruining your means of living."

"We do not know if the healer is a witch."

"We suspect she is, but you can rest easy, Sedgewick. I was not thinking of the healer. I was thinking about the child she stole from you."

"You were, why?"

"The girl wasn't yours, yet you managed to obtain her from her mother. How is that, I wonder? Even if she's afflicted, I cannot fathom a mother relinquishing her child to a stranger," John said.

"Truth be known, the child's mother died before I had chanced upon her."

"You paid someone for her."

"Aye, a good amount too. Now I've lost everything."

"Who did you pay?" John lifted his eyes off the trail and looked at Sedgewick.

"I think it was the child's aunt," Sedgewick recalled. "She was young, penniless, and incapable of taking care of any child, much less one born of a werewolf."

"Do not worry so about werewolves, Sedgewick. Think of the girl's aunt. If she's still alive, mayhap she would like to visit the child. We could arrange that."

"You forget the Earl of Danford has put a price on my head if I'm caught on his land. I happen to like it on my shoulders."

"There's no such price on the aunt."

"True, there's no any reason why she could not visit Danford."

"Tell me of the village where you found the girl and the aunt. More importantly, what is the aunt's name?"

"Elita, Elisa, nay...I need to think." Sedgewick tried to recall the aunt's name while they rode through the woods.

John remained quiet. Sedgewick was certain that his companion was planning something.

Chapter Twelve

"While considering your strategy, make certain you are aware of the moves your opponent could make as well," Garrick instructed. Ever patient when it came to playing chess, he leaned back in his chair and waited for Aisley to respond.

It was one of his favored activities and Aisley enjoyed playing the game with him. Unfortunately, she was defeated each and every night. They'd begun this routine a sennight ago, but she did not possess the mindset to defeat Garrick yet.

"I am trying, milord," she said. It was difficult to study the board when Garrick's cinnamon scent teased her. She wondered if his skin would taste as good as he smelled. She was glad the Earl's kitchen staff favored the use of spice in food and wine, and cinnamon had readily become her favorite since moving to the manor. She especially enjoyed it in warm, mulled cider, something she'd never been able to have in the village.

Oddly enough, she'd grown bewitched with the scent since meeting Garrick. There had been a time or two during the dark of night when she thought she smelled him in her chamber. Each time she gathered her bedcovers up to her chin, certain he had come to her. But when she looked over, she spotted Sir Knight sleeping on the floor nearby. Rather than being alarmed by his massive presence, she found that Sir Knight's nearness lessened the pang of regret she felt when she didn't see Garrick in her room.

"Would you like me to advise you, Aisley?" Sir Lucien offered from a chair across the room.

The man, though large and blessed with a rather deep, beautiful voice, was easy to like. However he was as mysterious as Garrick at times and acted like a man with a loftier title than a lord. She also suspected the tawny-haired giant could be deadly.

"Nay, milord, I shall learn on my own," Aisley replied after capturing one of the Garrick's pawns.

"Patience, that is all you need learn," Sir Lucien said.

Aisley spared Sir Lucien a glance. He sipped at a chalice of wine. She heard the servants whispering that the wine was made at Sir Lucien's estate. Only Garrick and the marcher lord's family were permitted to drink it and the kitchen servants were watched closely when they poured it into carafes or pitchers. She thought that was odd, but did not feel it proper to ask why.

"Cease distracting Aisley," Garrick warned Sir Lucien.

Aisley watched Garrick capture a significant chess piece. As he straightened, his green eyes lingered on her face. Intrigued by the color, she almost leaned closer to make sure that his eyes were not the same as Sir Knight's.

"Where is Catarina, my friend?" Garrick asked, holding Aisley's gaze. Something warm fluttered to life within her womb, building stronger when his knee nudged hers.

"She decided to retire to our chambers early."

"Is she unwell, milord? I can attend her if necessary," Aisley offered.

"Nay, milady, you needn't concern yourself with my wife tonight. She was tired and wanted to rest."

Garrick eased back in his chair, her captured piece in his big hand. The queen was swallowed by his palm, revealing how large his hands were. "Mayhap you should check on her, my friend," he said.

"I do not think it's wise to disregard my wife's wishes," Sir Lucien replied, laughing softly as he drank his wine.

Garrick loosened his grip and began caressing the queen with his thumb. *Claim you are tired and wish to return to your quarters.* Aisley trembled at Garrick's request in her mind.

"Make your next move," he said aloud. *Permit me to come to you tonight instead of Sir Knight. I want to be alone with you, Aisley.*

Lady Hunter had a beautiful emerald pendant that Sir Lucien had given to her when they'd married. Aisley couldn't help thinking that Garrick's eyes were the same color as the stone. Beguiled, she replied in their way. *You want to lie with me.*

Garrick leaned back in his chair. *I've wanted you since the night we met. We will do nothing that you are not ready for.* His confidence tempted Aisley in a way she didn't understand. What would happen if she permitted him to come to her?

"I haven't any idea how to proceed," she confessed, lowering her gaze to the board.

"Be patient and make one move at a time. There's no hurry." Garrick's voice rumbled within her temples. *Begin to trust me, little one. Let me come to you.*

Aisley made as though she was thinking about chess. In truth, she considered his request. She trusted Garrick to protect her and the people of Danford. She trusted him with Angelica. Mayhap she could trust him when they were alone.

"Aisley, have you made your choice?" Garrick asked.

"Aye," she said. *You may visit.* Lifting her head, she smiled. "After this game is finished, I shall return to my quarters and let Sir Lucien take my place at the board. Surely he is a better opponent when it comes to chess."

"If you aren't careful, the game will be over soon," Sir Lucien said.

"I've already captured the queen," Garrick said.

Curious as to his meaning, she returned her attention to Garrick. The queen still resided in his hand. His thumb caressed its finely etched curves and she imagined what it would feel like to have him touch her and caress her as lovingly as he did a chess piece. His blunt nail edged the queen's breast and Aisley's womb clenched so harshly she feared Sir Lucien would hear her gasp. Her nipples puckered and something warm

and wet trickled down her inner thighs, distracting her from the game and her inevitable defeat.

Not long after, Aisley stood and shifted. She prayed the men were unaware of her sudden need to leave. Her chemise was wet where she'd been sitting and she feared they would know, regardless of being hidden by her houppelande. "It seems Sir Lucien was right. Mayhap we can play again soon, milord," she said to Garrick.

"I would like that, my lady," he agreed, grinning as though he'd won more than a game of chess.

"Until the morrow, gentlemen," she said. A little nervous, she walked across the room and left.

Stopping to close the solar door for Garrick's and Sir Lucien's privacy, Aisley overheard Garrick speaking. "Would you like a chalice of wine?"

"I've already had my needed sustenance," Sir Lucien said. "Your mixture is quite good, Garrick. I shall look forward to more in the morning. For now, I think I'll make my way to my chambers."

"I've something to ask before you go, Lucien," Garrick said.

"Hmm," Aisley murmured and she decided to move on.

What had they meant by that conversation? It seemed as though she had a lot to learn about Garrick. In a few sennights he would be her husband, yet she still knew so little about his past and his Abcynian ancestry.

Wondering if she'd ever understand her betrothed, Aisley found the corridor to her room. Once inside her quarters, she began to question the rightness of permitting Garrick to visit. Mayhap she should send him away and ask him about the wine in the morning.

A knock sounded on the door adjoining Elethea's room to hers, bringing Aisley's attention back to the present. "Milady, may I enter?" Elethea requested in an unusually hesitant voice.

"You may," she said.

Elethea entered, and it took but a glance to know that the maid was ill. She was pale, her eyes and nose swollen and red.

"Elethea!" Aisley rushed over and touched her hand to the maid's brow. She was hot. "Hmm, I can give you something for your fever and aches if you'd like." Carefully, she touched the maid's throat and felt a slight swelling.

"You are gracious, milady," Elethea replied with her face turned away. "I am told your remedies are now in the hands of the physician."

"Then you should go to him at once," Aisley said.

"I am supposed to attend you. Lady Hunter scolded me for leaving you alone."

"You're my maid, Elethea. You'll do as I say. Go to the physician." Aisley decided that if she was going to become a countess, it was time to use some of her newfound rank.

"Are you certain?" Elethea asked.

"I am." Gently, she took Elethea's elbow and guided her to the door. In the hallway, she spotted a page lighting an oil lamp and called to him. "Boy, what is your name?"

"Ben, milady," he said.

"Ben, would you take my maid to the physician?"

"I can assist her," Sir Lucien said. To her surprise, he came around the corner without making a sound, filling the hallway with his presence. "Resume your work," he told Ben.

"Aye, milord," the boy said.

"Sir Lucien, my maid is sick. I insist that Jerold Baines treats her with marigold and barley water."

"I shall see it is done." Sir Lucien offered his hand to Elethea and led her away.

Aisley waited for them to disappear and then returned to her room. With a quick glance down the hallway to see if Garrick would come, she sighed and closed the door.

"Bolt it," Garrick commanded from inside her bedchamber.

Aisley spun about and found him reclining on her bed. How he'd gotten there, she didn't know. While she'd been in the hallway, Garrick had managed to sneak into her room, to tie back the bed curtains and remove his boots.

"How did you get in here?" she demanded, her hands clenched at her hips.

"Through the maid's door," he said. Smiling, he pushed up to his elbows.

"Convenient," she grumbled. "I think it was wrong to allow you to come here."

"It's not wrong. Come and join me. Your bed linens are clean and soft, but they are missing your almond scent. Have I told you I've grown fond of almonds since we met?"

"You should leave," Aisley said instead of acknowledging the compliment.

Difficult as it was, she tried to ignore the rightness of seeing Garrick in a bed they may share. Earlier, he'd worn his long dark hair tied with a leather strap. Now much of it hung down one shoulder to his waist, revealing the broadness of his shoulders. And though he was fully clothed, she could envision him laying there completely naked, herself beside him.

"Dear goodness," she whimpered as the dampness that had begun in the solar worsened. A strange heat tightened low in her belly, sending warmth through her womb and maidenhead. The pedals of her woman's entrance fluttered open, as if her body was preparing itself for Garrick's taking.

"I told you to bolt the door," Garrick said. "I've already taken care of the maid's entrance."

"Please, you really should go." Aisley found it difficult to look away from him.

"That is not what you wanted in the solar."

"I've changed my mind. We are not yet wed. Being alone could cause trouble."

"Our betrothal makes you mine. There is nothing wrong with wanting to spend time together."

"If we were to take a walk about the manor, go to the village or play another game of chess, being alone would be fine." She paced as she spoke, aware that her eyes lingered upon him each time she slowed. "Here it may be impossible to resist temptation. I know what you want, Garrick. You want to lie with me. Mayhap I want that too, but I was raised to hear the vows of marriage before giving in to the duties of a wife. I fear I've become wicked."

As she continued to move, cinnamon and something enticingly male found its way to her nose. Heat coiled within her belly, sharpening her awareness of Garrick. He watched her silently, her arguments deterring him not at all.

"Do not think you are wicked for wanting to lie with me. I want you to desire me, Aisley. Abcynian men mate for life. We mate because we want to show our women affection, to pleasure them daily, nightly. Desire is welcomed amongst my kind. It is always welcome between the two of us." Garrick pushed upward until his feet touched the floor. "This eve you discovered playing chess can be a temptation. Did you not feel the wanting within your body? What you felt then and what you're feeling now readies your body to receive me when I enter you."

"Speak not of such things," Aisley warned, though she'd been thinking something similar. Blushing, she turned away.

"What were you thinking when you first looked upon me in this bed, Aisley?"

"I dare not say."

"Tell me," he insisted.

"You know," she said.

"Say what you were thinking."

"That I wanted to see you lying there..."

"Naked?" he finished for her. "And would you like to lie here with me, Aisley?"

"Aye," she said, flushing even hotter.

The glide of stocking feet on stone brought her around just as she reached for the door handle. Garrick stood, his hand outstretched, tempting her to take it. "Bolt the door and come lie with me."

Goodness, she wanted to do precisely that. She shouldn't. She should be stronger and resist temptation. "If I come to you, Garrick, you'll want to do more than sleep."

"Aisley, I want you whether you're near or far away. The bed will make little difference." When she stayed put long enough, he lowered his arm. "Be assured that I am capable of holding my desire at bay. As I told you in the solar, we'll do only what you want. Come to me."

"I don't know what I want."

Garrick came to stand beside her. The confidence of an earl clung to his shoulders like a cloak as he leaned over and slid the bolt into a notch, locking her in with him. He was a noble, a man used to getting his way, few telling him nay.

"I think I know what you want," he said. "Trust me to protect your chastity until you decide to give it to me."

Unknowingly, he broke the spell he'd placed on her. "If you want me to trust you, tell me at least one thing that you keep from me."

"You've learned much about me since our betrothal."

"Have I?" Refusing his outstretched hand, she retreated. A good distance from him, she leaned back against a table to watch him. "I've learned about your allegiance to England and the war with France. I ached for you when you told me how difficult it was to lead men into battle, knowing many would die. I cried thinking something could have happened to you during those times. I might never have known you at all if you hadn't returned when you did."

"You cried for me?"

"Aye, I do care about you, Garrick, more than I ought." Aisley remained steady in her position, grateful the table offered support. Strangely, her knees were a bit weak. "My feelings grew stronger when I'd learned how deeply you were affected by the loss of villagers and farmers due to plague reaching Danford. It is obvious that your responsibilities as an earl are difficult, but you handle them with dignity and respect. You are not a tyrant."

"Yet you hesitate to come to me?" Garrick frowned as he watched her from the slight distance, his arms at his sides.

"I hesitate because you haven't spoken of your past or your gifts. Gifts you share with Lucien and his family. Can you at least trust me enough to tell me why the four of you drink wine that I am denied?"

"Ah, you overheard my conversation with Lucien about sustenance." Garrick's acceptance of her question startled her.

"Will you tell me about the wine? I would ask Lady Hunter about it if I thought she'd answer, but I'm certain she would tell me to wait for you to explain."

"Aye, you need to know." Garrick pushed away from the door and moved to the center of the room. "The wine is mixed with spices and herbs from my garden."

"We strolled through the garden the other day. The herbs grown there are not normally found in England."

"Nor are they found in any known country unless grown by those of Abcynian lineage."

"Why?" Aisley asked. "Are your ancestors that much different than Englishmen?"

"They are," he answered. "The herbal wine is considered sustenance to Abcynians. It enables us to adapt to the conditions and cultures we've adopted over time. Sustenance aids in healing injuries and illnesses and slower aging."

"Hmm, it sounds rather interesting. Would it be possible for me to partake of it? If it aids healing, it might be something I can offer the villagers."

Garrick's expression grew stern. "Sustenance is forbidden to you for now."

"I see." Straightening, she hoped her dwindling confidence wasn't evident. "What of your wives? Were they privileged enough to drink your precious wine?"

"My wives?"

"You were married twice before, weren't you?"

"You know I was. Have you spoken of Edith or Cambria to anyone else?"

Aisley glared at him. "I have not. Lady Hunter warned it would be improper for me to do so."

"Good," he breathed.

"You haven't answered the question. Does my simple upbringing deny me the right to drink wine reserved only for nobility?"

Garrick narrowed his eyes. "The wine is forbidden to you until we are wed and mated."

"I must lie with you before I can drink spiced wine believed to give better health and a longer life?"

Patiently, he closed in on her, his gaze steady on her face, daring her to keep still. When she made to step aside, a simple touch of his hand to her elbow steadied her.

"I'm doing a poor job of explaining my Abcynian heritage to you," he said, sounding concerned. "I ask you to remain patient. I've never had to explain what I am to anyone, including my wives. They were not my mates."

"You didn't bed your wives?" Unable to envision him being denied his marital rights and unwilling to think of him bedding other women, Aisley attempted to look away. He simply touched his hand to her chin and brought her face back to him.

"I cannot claim such a thing. For Abcynians, mating binds a man and woman more completely than marriage and copulation. Once we marry, we will not be bound by the strictures of society. We will indulge in our desires whenever we want and no one will gainsay us." Gently, his hand caressed upward from her elbow to her chest and pressed inward, her heart throbbing against his palm. "However, until we are truly mated sustenance is denied to you because it could make you ill if you drink it as you are now."

"My body will change after we lie together?"

As primitive as it sounded, thinking of being mated to Garrick made the deepest part of her womb tremble with longing. The beating of her heart grew stronger, faster, deepening her breathing and thickening the blood in her veins until she could feel the pulse pounding in her throat.

"Aye, as will your entire life, Aisley. You'll be stronger, age slower."

"I fail to understand how that is possible."

"Nothing is impossible. Must we speak of sustenance when I'd rather tell you how pretty you look with candlelight reflecting upon your face and hair?"

"Please do not mock me, I know what I look like," Aisley said.

Garrick lifted one noble brow, his warm gaze sweeping over her from head to toe. "Aisley, what must I do to make you believe in yourself as a desirable woman?"

"I don't know. The only man I'd thought I might marry when I was younger couldn't accept my freckles. Mayhap others disliked the color of my hair or were deterred by my birthmark."

"Didn't we discuss this?" Garrick took his hand from her chin and swept it upward to the twin coils wrapped about her nape. Slowly, he unwound them and brought each braid to lie over her shoulders and breasts. "You have a man standing before you right now and I think you're beautiful." Long fingers grasped the braids and brought her closer. "Your hair and your freckles complete you, little one, you wouldn't be nearly so lovely without them."

Aisley wavered, trembling with awareness. This man, this mysterious, though good, man, found her desirable. But a sliver of doubt shimmered down her spine. "Were your wives beautiful? Do I compare to them?"

"I compare you to no one."

"Mayhap it is best for you to leave," Aisley suggested again. "We can talk again in the morn."

"I'm not leaving."

"I haven't invited you to stay."

"You haven't told me to go," he said.

"Did I not just say you should leave?"

"You didn't mean it."

"What if my chamber becomes too crowded?" she asked.

"The doors are bolted. Your maid is ill."

"I was thinking about Sir Knight." Pulling back slightly, she was hindered by his continued hold on her braids. "He comes to the window nightly and –"

Releasing one braid, Garrick touched his thumb to her lips. "Sir Knight comes to you because I permit it. He'll not come this night unless I've gone." Etching his blunt nail across her bottom lip, he held her still while using his opposite hand to unravel a braid.

"You shouldn't be here," she insisted.

"You want me here."

With the right braid unbound, the waves fell in ringlets to her breast and he ran his fingers through the length. Taking his time, he murmured his approval, the sound a deep rumble in his throat. Only when he was satisfied with the fall of her hair did he turn his attention to the second braid.

"I...oh," she gasped. Garrick's fingers grazed her nipple. Every thought flew to the tightening of her nipple when it became apparent the stroke had been deliberate. "Garrick, what—"

"Shh, let me touch you."

Aisley tried to pull away, but her feet remained rooted to the spot. His clever fingers stroked her hair, abrading her nipples, pinching ever so slightly, circling and grazing, over and over. With each caress, her nipples became twin peaks of sensation and a hot tingle trailed to her belly, making the dewy petals protecting her woman's entrance flutter again.

She suddenly wanted to be kissed. Mayhap if she moved, the insistent ache that began within her womb would ease. "Garrick, would you kiss me?"

"It would be an honor." Granting her wish, he smoothed his hands down to her waist and brought her up against his big, muscled body. Her heart racing, he claimed her mouth.

Aisley wrapped her arms about his neck. It was pure heaven to inhale him deep into her lungs. Enchanted, she sighed and lifted to her toes, relishing in the tangle of their tongues. He tasted of cinnamon and spices, a touch of wine and honey. His maleness surrounded her, making her feel wanted, tempting her in a way she didn't quite understand.

Reveling in their closeness, she nibbled his lip, his chin, the angle of his bearded jaw. She liked the slight abrasion, imagined allowing him to kiss her in the same places. Would he use his mouth on her nipples as he'd done with his fingers? The very thought sent flames of need throbbing low and deep in her belly.

"Aye, Aisley, I want to kiss you everywhere you can imagine and some you cannot." Garrick whispered kisses across her cheekbones, dotting each freckle with his lips and tongue. Desiring more, she arched her neck, offering him access to her vulnerable throat. His lips lingered over her pulse, a light nip sent tingles from her neck to her toes.

"Everywhere?" she repeated. Oh goodness, his kisses succeeded in making her hotter, tempting her to demand him to remove her clothes. "Umm, could we open the shutters? I need some cooler air."

"I know what you need," he promised, smiling down at her.

He pulled far enough away to grasp the material of her houppelande. At first she caught his wrists, thinking to halt him. Their gazes met and she shivered. His eyes were such an intriguing mix of green and knowledge that, at times, he seemed much older than appearances told.

"Let me," he urged, tugging on her gown.

With little resistance, she continued to stare up at him and freed his wrists. A breath later, green silk whisked upward, blinding her for a moment before the gown floated to the floor near their feet. It actually surprised her to break eye contact and find herself wearing only a chemise.

"I'm scared, Garrick," she confessed. She'd wanted this, but knowing she was almost naked frightened her.

"I won't rush you, Aisley." He brought her closer and kissed her again, deeply, slowly, sending her heart racing. "Would you like to keep the chemise on?"

He lifted his head, waiting for her response and she whispered aye.

Taking her hands, he gently tugged her toward the bed. "Come and lie with me."

"I know what that means," she said, stilling. "You want to...to copulate." Saying that aloud, she refused to admit she was tempted.

He brushed his fingers through her hair, smoothing it away from her face. "Tonight I only want to hold you. If you permit more, more you shall have. If you say nay, I will wait."

"You promise?"

"On my honor," he said.

Believing Garrick to be a man of his word, Aisley permitted him to lead her to the bed and assist her into the center. It didn't take him long to stroll about the room and snuff all the candles save the one closest to the bed. Once finished, he withdrew into the corner and tossed his cote-hardie and gypon onto the floor.

The light from the candle kept her from seeing if he removed his long hose, but as he neared, she saw his bare chest and torso. He still wore the hose, yet he looked magnificent. His muscles were defined by dark hair that dusted his chest and narrowed down to his waist. Copper nipples peaked through the swirls, tempting her to brush her fingers over his chest in search of the puckered flesh. Were they as sensitive to touch as hers?

"Very," he said.

"I wonder why I'm incapable of masking my thoughts. You told me they had to be given to you."

"In your heart, you want me to know what you're thinking."

Teasing him a little, she said, "What am I thinking now?"

"If I remove them, my promise will be tested." Due to the substantial tenting of his hose, she returned her eyes to his face and refused to urge him to remove the hose.

"Probably wise," she said.

Garrick stripped the bedcovers to the foot of the bed and climbed in beside her. A scuffle and a shuffle later, he turned, caught her about the waist and pulled her to his chest.

"Lie still for a bit, little one," he said.

Trusting him, she eased into his embrace and rested her head upon his shoulder.

"You're beautiful, Aisley, thank you for letting me stay." Garrick's breath warmed her temples as he pressed a kiss near her forehead.

"Am I really beautiful to you?"

"You are." Garrick shifted and touched his finger to her chin. Tenderly, he tilted her face upward just enough to lean down and kiss her.

He broke the kiss first. While she resisted its end, she realized that lying with him like this was what she wanted tonight.

In his mind, she whispered, *I'm not ready for more, Garrick.*

"I understand, Aisley," Garrick assured her with kiss to her brow.

Finding him endearing, Aisley sighed, content, though concerned over where Sir Knight would spend the night.

"He's near," Garrick said, hearing her thoughts. "Close your eyes. I'll hold you until you fall asleep."

"Are you certain? This seems unfair to you. I can feel what you want," she admitted, aware of his hardness tapping her thigh.

"You needn't worry. I will not ask for more than this tonight."

Pleased, she snuggled further into his embrace. As they reclined together, she listened as he revealed the problems he'd faced during the day. Proud that he'd dealt fairly with a tenant who'd been caught stealing bread, she found herself genuinely liking the Earl of Danford.

Aye, he was a good man and his cinnamon scent was becoming a part of her soul.

* * * * *

Garrick awakened feeling rested and content, something which had eluded him for most of his four hundred and fifty years. Having never slept an entire night with a woman in his arms, he'd found a true treasure. Aisley was soft and sweet. Her scent was on his skin, hair and the bedclothes.

Just as he felt the warmth of pending sunrise, his erection throbbed to the point of pain, warning that morning had come. As much as he wanted relief, he knew it would be wrong to awaken Aisley by taking her. He wanted her full consent before breaching her virginity.

Smiling in the darkness, he nudged her ear. "Aisley, open your eyes," he whispered.

"Too comfortable," she mumbled. Lightly shaking her head, she snuggled closer. Unbeknownst to her, her shifting made him harder. "I love when you rumble like that."

"I'll do more than rumble if you fail to wake soon," he warned.

To his disappointment, and relief, she shifted and turned until she faced him. Garrick could see her clearly despite the darkness of the room. Her brown eyes were softened with sleepiness and she had to blink a time or two to remain awake.

"Is something wrong, Garrick?"

"I wanted to kiss you before I leave."

Aisley frowned and shook her head. "Stay, it's still dark."

"I wish I could, little one. Sleeping with you was a special gift. One I wish to experience again tonight."

"You were a gentleman through the night," Aisley said. "I've never slept so soundly...oh dear." Alarmed, she attempted to sit up, but he held her still. "You slept here the entire night?"

"Aye."

Aisley struggled in earnest. Unwilling to hurt her, he let her go. "Garrick, we cannot do this again. We were fortunate to have had privacy during the night, but Elethea will not be ill for long."

"Then I'll take you to my quarters."

"It wouldn't be right."

"It would be wrong to deny ourselves something we both want. Can't I persuade you to enjoy this with me as often as we can until we are wed?"

Aisley shook her head, nibbling her lips to avoid accepting. Refusing to let her say nay, Garrick claimed her mouth and slid his tongue between her lips, pressing her back against the mattress. Positioning her so she couldn't fight him, he eased onto one elbow and kissed her jaw.

"Aisley, don't you realize how much I want you? How much I know you want me? I can respect your wishes to wait," he said between kisses. "I was able to honor my word because I was holding you in my arms. I've never known such peace or slept so well until I felt your body pressed against mine. I'd like to find that again. Permit me to sleep with you at night."

"Will the temptation become worse if I agree?" she asked.

"It will. I want to hold you nonetheless."

"Would you allow me to think on this throughout the day? I'm just not sure."

"All right, you may give me your answer over chess in the solar this eve."

"Very well, will I see you before then?"

"I'll meet you in Angelica's chambers soon." Garrick kissed her gently and pulled away. Leaving her while she looked ruffled and soft and so deliciously tempting was difficult, but he crept from the room before anyone learned where he'd slept during the night.

Chapter Thirteen

While Garrick's duties kept him away from the manor, Aisley spent most of the morn with Angelica, met with Jerold to discuss treatments for the villagers, and had nuncheon with Angelica and Judith. Afterward, she'd spent hours with Lady Hunter, learning to write her letters and speak more appropriately.

Aisley knew she spoke well for a villager, but Lady Hunter insisted that Garrick would want his mate to be fluent in other languages and to be able to speak to nobles as if she were born of the nobility. Sir Lucien's wife needn't have worried that Aisley might balk at the chance to learn. She knew she was granted a rare privilege for a woman to be able to read and write.

But as much as she enjoyed learning, Aisley took the most pleasure in watching Angelica blossom into a sweet, loving child. It would take great patience to overcome the girl's limitations. However, Aisley was willing to help her because Garrick would be with them.

Mayhap his way with Angelica convinced her to permit him entrance into her room at night. Mayhap she was curious to learn more about him or to rediscover the peace she'd felt as they'd slept last night. She didn't know. She only knew that she'd decided that she wanted Garrick to come to her at night.

Whatever the answer, it seemed as though she wouldn't have to worry about it tonight. Darkness had fallen and he'd yet to return.

"Are you all right, milady?" Lady Hunter addressed Aisley.

Sir Lucien had returned a short time ago and stood by his wife with a chalice in his left hand. Several times he offered it to Lady Hunter. It seemed such an intimate thing that Aisley longed for the day when she would be permitted to drink sustenance from Garrick's goblet.

"I'm fine. I was just wondering at some of the secrets you keep," she said to cover her musings.

"You know all that you need to know at the moment," Lady Hunter said.

"Pray forgive me for being too forward. You are my betrothed's closest friends. I meant only to learn more about you."

Sir Lucien straightened and handed the chalice to his wife. "There's nothing to forgive. My wife and I look forward to answering any of your questions after you've accepted Garrick."

"I beg your pardon, milord, I have accepted him. We are betrothed."

"You've accepted him as your intended husband," Lucien said. "It is whether you can accept all of him that is in question."

"I thought Lady Hunter had been assured of my loyalty days ago." Aisley stood up from behind the chessboard. "I admitted to her why I'd fled."

"You misunderstand. There are matters regarding all Abcynians that will require faith for you to accept as the truth," Lucien explained. "When you discover them, all that you've ever believed in may be tested. You may become even more afraid than you were a few days ago."

"I am stronger than you think, milord. Strong enough to insist that any concerns regarding the servants and my lady's maid are addressed to me," she went on, turning her eyes to Lady Hunter. "I wish to show all of you that I intend to honor my commitment to Lord Danford and take initiative when it comes to instructing the staff. I'll not leave again."

Lady Hunter frowned. "A countess must make sure her servants perform the tasks they are given. You need to remember that they're not your friends, Aisley. They need to know their place."

"Catarina," Sir Lucien gently admonished, causing his wife's eyes to narrow.

"In defense of the servants," Aisley said. "The maids keep everything clean and presentable. Judith cares for Angelica well. The kitchen staff keeps everyone fed and the livery cupboards full. Everyone performs their tasks well. If I choose to converse with one of them, to ask about their day or decide to do something for myself, so be it. I am to be the lady of this manner. I wish to earn their respect."

"They already like you, Aisley," Lucien said. His wife frowned. "Sorry, my love, I agree with her. Let her handle the staff as she sees fit."

"Very well," Lady Hunter murmured. "It seems I owe you an apology, Aisley. I shall honor your request and leave the servants to you."

"I hope that doesn't mean you'll cease instructing me on the duties of a countess?"

"You're learning. Garrick is teaching you about the accounts. You've developed a rapport with the steward. You are learning how to plan festivities and are overseeing Angelica's lessons. You will be a good countess. I am certain of it."

"I pray it is so," Aisley said. "I tell you true, I miss tending to the villagers, but learning how to please Lord Danford has been more rewarding than I'd expected."

"You needn't learn how to please me," Garrick said, striding into the room. "You already do."

"It is good to see you, milord," Aisley addressed, feigning a calm she did not feel. "I was beginning to worry. You've been gone longer than usual."

"You needn't have worried. I stayed in Fernley for most of the day because the tavern caught fire. The poor fellow and his family were left without an abode or means of living. I invited them to reside in Danford. Work will be found for them and a home will be built."

"It was good of you to take care of them," Aisley said.

"I could do nothing less."

Garrick went to a livery cupboard where servants had arranged an assortment of foods, a pitcher of the earl's favored wine and some spiced cider. Aisley watched as he poured himself a cup of sustenance and drank in long, thirsty pulls.

"Would you like to play chess, milord?" she offered. Garrick looked distracted. Something was different in the way he walked into the room and she hoped his favorite game would comfort him.

"Not this eve, my lady. I'm in need of a bath and rest. Would you be offended if I decided to retire early?"

"Nay, do whatever you think best," she assured, although she was disappointed. Garrick wasn't looking at her. Had he forgotten his request earlier that morn?

"Thank you for understanding. I shall see you in the morn when we visit Angelica," he replied, at last looking at her, but only for a moment before turning away. After whispering something to Lucien, Garrick bowed out of the room, the cup of wine still in his hand.

I have not forgotten, little one. I will come when my bath is complete, unless you wish to join me?

Your suggestion assumes too much, milord. Mayhap your arrogance needs to be cooled before we can continue as we had last eve. Aisley returned her thoughts. She heard nothing in reply.

Once Garrick was gone, Lucien invited Aisley to join him in a game of chess. Aisley thought it would be nice to compete against someone other than the Earl and reclaimed her seat.

Behaving the gentleman, Lucien offered a mug of cider before they began and she accepted. Although he was a gallant competitor and far more experienced, Aisley thought she might actually win. But she soon miscalculated and was defeated yet again.

Frowning, Aisley bowed her head in tribute to the better player and silently vowed that her strategy would grow stronger over time. She'd like to improve and make Garrick proud of her efforts.

"If it's any consolation, Aisley, you are improving," Lady Hunter said when the game ended. "You made my husband pause a time or two."

"I offer my tutelage at any time," Lucien said.

"You are gracious, milord. Mayhap we can play another eve? It's been a long day and I'd like to return to my chambers."

Lucien nodded, offering a mischievous smile. "You may go. I'll keep my wife occupied," he whispered, covering his intent with a sip of wine.

Aware of heat flooding her cheeks Aisley stood, straightening her skirts. Quietly, she bid her guardians goodnight and left.

Nearing the corridor to her room, she glanced about the candlelit hallway, pausing and looking about for any servants. The corridor was quiet. Elethea would sleep in the

physician's quarters for a few more nights. No one would know if she decided to visit Garrick's quarters.

Decision made, Aisley lifted her skirts and dashed toward Garrick's residence. She quite nearly stumbled in her haste, but soon slowed for fear of catching someone's notice.

Built to resemble a small Norman castle, the manor house was fitted with several towers, the Earl's among them. Aisley found the narrow stone stairway to his room and crept upward. Climbing the stairs, she braced herself for what she'd find behind the closed door.

She did not expect to hear Sir Knight's roar.

"Milord, are you there?" Aisley called out softly.

"I'm here and alone, enter anon," he invited, his voice rumbling.

Concerned, she opened the door and saw a big curtained bed across the room. Moving further through the doorway, she looked about the cavernous chamber until she found Garrick submerged in a giant wooden tub. Only a few candles were lit, allowing her to see his face and part of his shoulders. The rest of his body was hidden by the tub and his long unbound hair.

"I'm pleased you've come," Garrick said. "Does this mean you're willing to join me in my bath?"

"Nay," Aisley refused at first. Looking upon Garrick as he reclined, she noticed the throbbing of a vein in his temple. "Is something amiss? You seemed troubled when you came into the solar."

"Nothing that should alarm you," he said. "It will heal."

"What will heal?" Aisley rushed toward the tub and discovered her answer. Carefully, she touched her finger to his shoulder, sweeping his damp hair aside. "You've been burned." A deep wound had scorched his skin. A flicker of candlelight sparked an odd glow on the back of his shoulder, but it disappeared when he shrugged and shifted a little to his right.

"The tavern owner's youngest daughter was caught in the kitchens. No one realized that she was missing until I heard her cry out. By the Lord's grace, I was able to save her."

"Garrick, you're a hero." Spying a chair, she hooked it with her foot, scooted it closer and sat beside the tub. "A gallant one, I might add."

"I did what any man would have done."

"Hmm, well, you've come to the aid of a child twice since we met. Truth be told, if anyone were to realize how dedicated you are to protecting Danford, they'd know you come to the aid of others daily. Now let me tend your wound before it can fester."

"It's not necessary." Garrick made to pull away just as Aisley bent closer and the minor scuffle caused water to splash over the sides of the tub.

"Careful," she warned. "I'll be gentle, Garrick."

"You needn't worry. I've already tended to my shoulder," he said, gesturing with his chin toward his shoulder. "Sustenance proves more than adequate for cleaning a wound."

Aisley stared at his shoulder, gasping when she saw the burn mark. "Dear goodness!" The wound looked as though it had been healing for more than a sennight. "How is that possible?"

"Abcynians heal quickly. By morn there will barely be a scar," Garrick said. He shrugged, his shoulder moving easier with each breath. "Sustenance heals, though it burns like bloody hell when applied to a wound."

"That explains what I'd heard in the stairwell." Aisley couldn't believe what she'd seen, what she was still seeing. She blinked and looked once again, noticing the changes already taking place from a moment ago.

But wait, there it was again, she thought. A slight glow in his skin caught her eye. She was about to ask him about it when he doused his arm in water and his hair swirled around him, blocking her view. His skin soon looked normal again and she wondered if the flickering candlelight was playing tricks on her.

"Any remedy I'd have used would have hurt just as much," she said. Strangely, she was offended that he had not turned to her to heal his wound. She was his betrothed. It should have been her right to assist him.

"Do not think that way, Aisley." Garrick's warm, wet hand covered hers where it continued to rest on his muscular shoulder. "I tended to the wound because I intended to come to you after I finished my bath."

"Does that mean you were teasing me in the solar?" she asked. "You didn't want me to come to you?"

"You know I did. I heard your thoughts, Aisley. I know you were disappointed when I kept myself from you. My shoulder was hurting and I was worried I would say the wrong thing. I'm pleased you came to me tonight."

"I wonder why I cannot hear your thoughts as clearly as you hear mine," she said.

He removed his hand from hers and touched his forefinger to her chin. The scent of clean water mixed with spice tickled her nose. Intrigued, Aisley leaned a little closer and inhaled. Briefly she was tempted to bend down and kiss his injured shoulder just to see if his skin tasted cinnamon. Licking her lips, she hoped he couldn't tell how fast her heart was racing or how much she wanted to be closer.

"Sometimes I must hide my thoughts from you, little one." His fingers curled about her chin and jaw, keeping her steady. "You are not ready to listen to what I'd say. You are only beginning to trust me. I do not wish to frighten you away again."

"If you tell me about yourself, my trust will grow," she said. "You continue to keep things from me. Mayhap you think I will judge you harshly for whatever you may have done in the past. I know not. Be assured that your secrets cannot possibly make me see you as any less of a man. Look at what you've done for a family you barely knew. You saved the owner's youngest child. Surely there's nothing to worry about."

Garrick lowered his hand. "Mayhap there is."

"Share your concerns with me, Garrick, please."

He was silent for a bit as he thought, his eyes averted to the hot water. "The leopard rescued the child. I worry that she'll remember what she saw."

"Sir Knight was there? Was he injured?"

"Sir Knight's injury was identical to mine."

"I don't understand," she murmured. "How can that be?"

"It doesn't matter how. His wound is healing and it pleases me to know you're concerned about the leopard."

"How could I not be? I find myself talking to him when you're not about. Sir Knight has been a friend. A strange one, I admit, but a friend nonetheless."

"Always remember, what he knows, I know."

"You've said the same before." Aisley had learned to accept that Garrick and Sir Knight had an unusual bond. She'd witnessed much in her life. Miracles, death, birth, laughter and tears, yet knowing the leopard was in Danford made her feel safe when Garrick and his guards were scouring the countryside searching for anything that might threaten her or the manor.

If the villagers learned of the leopard, some would consider him evil because he was savage and had black fur. She didn't know why, but she was not inclined to believe such a thing about Sir Knight. She thought he was as intelligent as a human and that would frighten people more than the color of his fur.

"Garrick, tell me more about you. You're so secretive that at times I think I shall never understand you. Share something of yourself with me. Mayhap then I'll know what I really mean to you." Wishing she'd held her tongue, Aisley braced herself for rebuke. Lady Hunter told her not to ask such things of Lord Danford.

"You're right. I haven't told you how I feel," he admitted, much to her surprise. He lifted his chin and their eyes met. His were luminous with desire, the green of his gaze capturing her attention and drawing her in.

Staring into his eyes, she came to believe that Garrick wanted her as his lover, his fated mate and his countess. It was all there for her to see and feel, to hear in her mind. The truth hit her with such force her womb contracted and the petals of her womanhood fluttered open as drops of feminine dew slid from her opening and dampened her inner thighs.

She was glad her gown hid the wetness, but felt certain that he knew what was happening to her. His eyes widened, his nostrils flared and his wide, masculine mouth parted so that she could see his teeth. For the first time she noticed that his canine teeth were slightly longer, sharper, yet she found that trait intriguing.

You really do want me, she said in their way. Amazed and thrilled, her entire body began to tremble with awareness. Never before had she been aware of herself as a woman, a woman who could tempt the Earl of Danford to sin.

Listen to my thoughts, little one, they are for you. I do want you. I will always want you, never doubt that or think that the pleasures we shall have are sinful. It is right for us to mate, Aisley. By Abcynian law you are already mine, don't be afraid to join yourself with me when you are ready.

"I don't know when I'll be ready," she said aloud. "You must realize it is best for us to be careful. Lucien knows we intended to meet in private. What if Lady Hunter or the servants learn the truth?"

"Lucien will guard his tongue. Having you here is my right. I'll not hear of anyone saying otherwise." With the noble arrogance granted to him at birth, Garrick emerged from the depths of the tub, climbing out to leave a puddle of water on the stone floor at his big, bare feet.

"Oh my, you're naked!" Of course Garrick would be naked in a bathtub, Aisley admonished herself, even as she bit down on her lip to refrain from gaping like a fish. Mayhap some people bathed clothed and some didn't bathe at all, but there was nothing hesitant about this man.

In truth, he was splendid. His long wet hair hung down his broad shoulders, raining droplets of water over his muscular chest, arms and legs. Even his large feet were elegant, clean, the nails kept short. Aisley imagined he would resemble a Roman god with his sleek, sculpted muscles and strong facial features. Unlike a god, Garrick was a man. He was flesh and blood, smelled of bathwater and cinnamon. Curling her fingers into her skirts, she fought the need to touch him, to draw him to her and taste him as she'd longed to do when she saw his burned shoulder.

"Touch me, Aisley," he invited, his voice raw and hoarse.

"I shouldn't."

"I'm not a god. I'm real. If you touch me, I'll shiver. If you stand close to me, I'll want to gather you close and kiss you."

"I'm well aware that you are real," she insisted, feeling a sudden, almost painful pressure in her abdomen that grew tighter and tighter as she stood there, openly staring at a naked man.

Uncertain what to do or where to look, she tried to concentrate on his chest. Like the night before, the dusting of hair beckoned her fingers to explore his copper nipples that had hardened into twin pebbles.

"Aisley, come to me," Garrick demanded.

"I think it best if I bring you something to cover your...nakedness."

"I like being naked," Garrick said.

Ever confident, he remained by the tub. Droplets of water dusted his shoulders, chest hair, arms and abdomen. Her eyes followed the trail of one drop until it reached the arrow of dark hair that descended from his navel to his manhood.

Nay, she wouldn't follow its path. She wouldn't!

She did!

"Should leave," she mumbled. Retreating, she stepped backward and into the chair, even though she stared at the whole of him. Lord help her, she couldn't look away. Having tended men of varying ages, she should have been prepared for the sight of a man's genitals. Garrick was neither a boy nor an elderly man, and he wasn't ill. He was a magnificent, healthy man whose shaft was proportioned to his massive height and stature.

She wasn't small, but she wondered if Garrick's weight would crush her. Secretly, she feared that she would disappoint him if they copulated! She couldn't possibly take a man like him inside of her body. Surely he wouldn't fit.

"Ah, Aisley, do not think of such things." Garrick turned as he spoke, revealing the silhouette of his elongated masculinity and she pulled her eyes away and stared at his face. Strain and need lined his mouth, beckoning her to caress him, to comfort him if she could. "You need never to worry about disappointing me. We were meant to be mated, little one. I promise, you will be able to take me when we consummate our pairing."

"You do not mean now, do you?" she asked, realizing what he'd said.

"As last eve, permission shall be yours to give."

Aisley wasn't certain what to do. Thinking it best to do something other than stare at Garrick, she strode away and grabbed a towel.

"Don't you have a manservant to attend you?"

"He's gone until morn. There's no need to concern ourselves with him."

As bravely as she could, Aisley carried the towel to Garrick. He accepted it and wrapped the cloth about his narrow hips as if his nakedness mattered not at all.

The meager cover didn't help matters, she soon discovered. The towel bulged right where it covered his hardened shaft. Her skin felt aflame and all she could do was stand there and tremble while her heart thumped madly, her breath caught in her throat.

"I'll wear the towel for now," he said. "But you must get used to seeing me naked, I sleep unclothed."

"You didn't last eve. I happen to like sleeping in a chemise."

"You like it because it is familiar."

"There's nothing wrong with that."

"True. Do not fret, soon you'll be more at ease sleeping naked with me. That is our bed, Aisley. I want you to become used to it because there will be few exceptions when you will be permitted to sleep elsewhere."

He pointed to the bed, drawing her gaze to the silver curtains surrounding the enormous frame. "Do you mean we are to sleep together even after we are wed? I thought husband and wives of the nobility did not share quarters."

"It matters not what takes place in other marriages," he admitted. "Ours will not be just a noble marriage, Aisley. When I came to you last night, it was with the intention of seducing you, but you were not ready. I accepted that and will continue to do so. I want

you to get to know me as more than the Earl of Danford. I want you to know me as a man. Here in our bed, I can teach you all you ever need to know about me."

Talk of the bed intrigued her. It looked so inviting and comfortable. She could picture herself lying there beside Garrick Forrester, her husband, for the rest of their lives. She shouldn't want that so soon in their relationship, but she did.

"Did you have the bed made for you?" she asked to change the subject.

"Aye, English beds are too small for me. An Abcynian craftsman carved this one from special wood. Notice the dark grain that reveals the grapevine artwork on the bedposts."

Aisley looked closer and discovered the grain enhanced the rich mahogany of the wood. "It's beautiful. I've never seen furniture or wood like this in Danford."

"You wouldn't. The trees used to make furniture like this are not grown by Englishmen."

"Are the trees grown by Abcynians, as well?" she asked.

"Aye," he answered. "Once they were grown in Abcynia, the land of my ancestors. Abcynia is gone now, but our forefathers saved our herbs and seeds and taught us how to preserve them and make them grow in different soil."

"How odd, I'd imagine any tree suitable for making furniture would take a long time to grow."

"They do," Garrick said, coming to stand very close.

She knew he was going to take her elbow before he did, yet when his fingers closed gently, though firmly, about her arm, she started.

"Come with me," he urged.

Aisley allowed him to draw her to the bed. "Garrick, wait, I'm not ready."

"Easy," he soothed. "I do not want you to be wary of our bed, Aisley. Let me show you that there is nothing to be afraid of here."

He freed her elbow to catch a silk curtain and tug it upward. After fastening it to an unseen notch he did the same with another veil until the entire bed was revealed. Cushioned with pillows of various shapes and draped in blue silk, the feather mattress could support three men twice Garrick's size.

Aisley wanted to touch the mattress, but she knew temptation lingered upon its silken surface. "I really think coming here was a mistake."

"Never think being with me is a mistake. Whether we consummate our pairing or hold one another 'til dawn, being together is right. As my mate, I could claim you here and now, making you my wife under Abcynian law."

"Haven't I the right to say nay?"

"You will always have that right." Garrick remained still, his hands at his sides. He'd do nothing to prevent her from leaving.

"Was last night real, Garrick? You never pressed me beyond what I wanted. Would you do so again?"

"However long you need me to wait, I will wait." Movement caught her eye, bringing her attention upward. Garrick's fingers danced across her cheek. "You're so lovely. I'd like to kiss you. May I?"

She didn't want to refuse. "Aye, milord, you may."

Aisley turned to face him as Garrick's hands framed her face. So gentle was his touch that she gasped when his mouth crashed down on hers. His thumbs caressed. His lips and tongue devoured. His scent and wine-tinged flavor bathed her senses. Briefly, he pulled back and nipped at her lower lip, drawing her flesh between his teeth and sucking ever so softly. Gasping at the sensual play, she reveled in the movement of his mouth and wrapped her arms about his back.

Upon freeing her mouth, he nibbled his way down to her chin, skimming her jaw and throat. His face was darkened with a day's beard growth and she welcomed the slight abrasion along her skin. His lips, tongue and teeth scorched a path to the place where her shoulder met her neck and she went right up on her toes to get closer. Once there, he bit hard and sucked the reddened skin before sweeping his mouth upward to the pulse pounding in her throat. To her surprise, he brushed her skin with his nose and chin, his long, damp hair tickling her neck.

"Fair warning, little one," he said, his breath warming her ear. "I tend to bite when I want to mate. I'll never hurt you, but I'll leave marks on skin as fair as yours."

He was sweet to explain. He didn't have to. His biting and nuzzling excited her, made her heart race with eagerness as something hot and unknown pulled taught in her womb and refused to let go. It wasn't painful, but it made her want feel achy and needful of something she couldn't quite name. "I trust you, Garrick." She'd come to trust him more and more each day. In his own time, his own way, he would tell her about his Abcynian ancestry.

"Let me pleasure you, Aisley."

She thought she knew what he meant and she balked. She wanted to be married before they joined as one. "Garrick, we cannot, this is —"

"Easy, love," he amended. "Let me show you pleasure in a way that does not require consummation." Garrick withdrew and removed her gown before she could object. Left wearing only a chemise, she drew in a breath and permitted him to discard it as well. A froth of satin slipped to the stone floor, where he knelt to remove her shoes and hose.

She was about to grasp his shoulders when she spied that unusual glow on his skin again. He must have sensed her stillness because he shifted and kissed her bare thigh, distracting her.

Slowly he rose and his calloused palms skimmed from her calves to her waist as he placed gentle, reverent kisses on her belly, her rib cage and her collarbone. His soft

body hair teased the same places, feeling like a thousand tiny fingers caressing her skin and her bare, sensitive nipples.

Standing tall once again, he kissed her softly before whispering kisses from her mouth to her pulse. "Beautiful," he murmured, rumbling as he went. Warm, moist lips grazed her sternum, caressed the top swell of her full breasts.

"Your breasts are perfect for my hands, Aisley," he praised and lifted one hand to touch her left breast. Her nipple stabbed into his palm, the roughness from swordplay abrading the pink, puckered flesh. Several strands of his damp velvety hair slid across her opposite nipple and Aisley gasped aloud at the delicious sensation.

"Oh my," she sighed, trying to catch her breath.

"Feel, little one. Enjoy what I'm doing to you," Garrick implored. His fingertip circled her nipple, pinched and tugged, gently, firmly, over and over.

Fearing she might hurt his shoulder, she eased her hands to his forearms and clenched her fingers as his towel fell. The vee between her naked thighs brushed his shaft and a spark of need ignited deep inside, spreading warmth from her womanhood to her navel.

"Garrick, I fear I'll burn alive," she groaned, the heat becoming stronger, centering on a knot of flesh nestled above her feminine lips.

He brushed his hands to her hips and held her steady as his knee slipped between her legs. "You'll not. Part your legs a little more. That's it, just like that. I'll give you pleasure, Aisley. Trust me in this and you will soar." Wetness flowed from between her thighs, seeming to prepare her for Garrick's entrance. To her surprise, he did not remove his knee, nor attempt to forge into her, though she suspected he wanted to. He was moving with her, holding her, rocking into her.

I want you, but not like this, not yet. I'll not take you for the first time while we're standing. Relax and feel, just feel.

Aisley gave in, allowing his knee access to her womanhood. With incredible strength, he arched her backward, holding her steady as he lowered his mouth to her breasts, his hair falling about her rib cage, hugging her body as surely as his arms held her tight. His tongue swept over her nipples, laving each in turn with a slowness that would have sent her to her knees if he weren't holding her.

She whimpered when he caught her nipple and sucked the swollen, tingling flesh into his mouth. His teeth scraped, his tongue swirled, his mouth suckled, creating the most delicious tightening deep behind her naval. Her hips shifted with each pull, grinding against his pelvis of their own volition.

"You're so sensitive, so sweet," he praised, kissing her breast, moving to tongue her other nipple, his fingers tending to the one he'd just pleased.

Continuing to pay homage to her breasts, he shifted his knee and rasped it across her dewy entrance. The rush of wetness alarmed her until he groaned so deep and throaty that she felt certain he was pleased. His bare knee slid between her thighs, caressing the most sensitive of places, the most forbidden. A small bud hidden behind

petal-soft folds awakened, drawing all thought, reason and sensation to that one small part of her body.

As his thrusts grew more urgent, more compelling, the silken hardness of his manhood slid across her hip, her belly, her hip again. Tempted to touch him, she allowed her left hand to drift from his elbow and delve between their bodies.

"God's teeth," he groaned, his hips arching with her touch. Almost desperately he wrapped closer, so close that his chest rubbed against her already sensitive, swollen nipples.

Feeling bolder, she kissed his dark, uninjured shoulder and caressed his shaft. He was greater in size than she'd thought a man could be. She should be repelled or frightened. Instead, stroking his satiny hardness made her feel stronger and more willing to please him.

He captured her hand, showing her how to stroke him. "Aye, my love, touch me. Pleasure me as I pleasure you." He called her his love and her heart soared, her hand squeezing and pumping.

Suddenly, wave after wave of delight tingled through her body, raising her need, guiding her hand and her hips. His knee rubbed against her feminine entrance and she cried out. At last, pleasure, deep and magical, crested within her as she rode his thrusts and soared with Garrick to the heavens, their shared cries filling the cavernous chamber.

Chapter Fourteen

Garrick came to his senses and smiled at the feel of his mate wrapped about him from shoulder to knees. She was clinging to him, still trembling with the aftermath of their passion and all he could do was rock her through it. He didn't want to let her go or acknowledge that he'd been as shaken by what they'd just done as she was.

"Ah, little one, that was beautiful. You are beautiful," he praised.

"What have we done, Garrick?" she asked, gripping his injured shoulder too tightly.

"Nothing to be ashamed of," he said, refusing to wince. "We gave one another pleasure. It was beautiful and sweet. I won't have you feeling badly for it."

Aisley stiffened and he helped her to straighten, purposefully leaving his hands at her waist. With her hair falling in tangles about her face she looked ravished and beautiful. Even though he'd spent his seed, he was already hardening as he looked down upon her. Lovely, he thought silently, and soon she would be his to bed by English law when they wed.

"I cannot feel badly when something feels so good, but I'm not certain we should have done that," she whispered. "At least we weren't joined, not in truth. My chastity remains."

Garrick shook his head, wanting her with a fierceness that awakened his panthera instincts to both claim and protect her. "I would not have known such pleasure without you, just as you needed me. We were joined, Aisley." The leopard wanted him to bite and begin her conversion so that she might accept what he was. The Abcynian wanted to lift her into his arms and carry her to bed, where he would claim her as his own in the most primitive way he could.

Aisley trembled and glanced down, belatedly discovering the evidence of what they'd done on his thigh and hers. Her eyes remained on his manhood, her breath heavy. She watched him lengthen and he felt the warmth of her gaze linger while he hardened. Bloody hell, if he didn't move away he would spend himself again without much more than a glance and kiss. All he had to do was to lift her chin and silence her concerns with his mouth.

"Aisley, look at me," he encouraged. "Don't be afraid." Realizing that she was still shaking, he released her waist and placed one hand on her cheek and jaw, raising her head. "Thank you for coming to me tonight, little one. Being with you was a gift I shall treasure."

A whisper of a smile came to her lips, drawing his attention to its fullness. "Garrick...I should go. I'm new to this and worry that continuing to court temptation is wise."

"You're not going back to your chambers," Before she could protest, he lifted her into his arms and placed her on the bed.

"Garrick? Didn't you hear me?"

"Worry not. I heard you. I'll not press you further tonight. Stay where you are," he insisted.

Turning away, he strode across the room to the bathtub and soaked a clean cloth in the water. Watching her to make certain she didn't move, he returned to the bed and washed her thighs. Only after she was clean did he tend himself.

"You are a kind man," Aisley said with a smile. Her cheeks were flushed innocently from what he'd done, but he was pleased that she permitted him to take care of her.

"Do not let Lucien hear you say that." Garrick tossed the cloth aside and climbed into bed beside her. "He takes too much liberty at my expense."

"It is strange that you allow him to. He is a lord and has sworn fealty to you and the King. As an earl, you hold a higher rank."

Garrick noticed her frown and brought her head to rest on his shoulder. He didn't like when Aisley was unhappy or worried.

"In the eyes of England and Henry, he is beholden to me and the monarchy," he said. "Aisley, you should know that Lucien is the eldest of Abcynian kind. To us, he is the equivalent of a king. Even here in England I wouldn't be surprised if his title someday surpassed mine."

"Now I understand why Lady Hunter reminds me of a queen." Aisley's voice had grown tired, revealing the exhaustion she felt in the aftermath of their pleasure. "Garrick, does the King know about the Abcynians? What would happen if he knew?"

"He does not know about my lineage. Abcynia was destroyed so long ago he would see my kind as nothing more than myth. I was born and raised in England. I'm the rightful Earl of Danford and my family has controlled the earldom for centuries. My brothers were able to earn themselves baronies for their loyalty to Henry. He knows the Forresters belong in England. You needn't worry. For now, I think it best for us to rest and speak of this on the morrow."

"As you wish," she sighed and curled further into his body. "Are you certain this isn't difficult for you? Lying together as if we were wed, I mean."

"I am certain, little one. Being with you like this is a privilege I'll not deny myself unless you are ill or the moon is full. Once we take our vows, the moon will have no consequence on where I sleep."

Aisley hummed, shifting her head on his chest. "Why would the moon change anything?" she asked, though her yawn warned that she was too tired to understand the significance.

"I'll explain when the time comes," he decided, then placed a kiss on the top of her head. "Rest, my lady, I will hold you and keep you safe."

It wasn't long before her breathing slowed and her eyes closed. Content holding her, Garrick brought her closer, offering his mate the protection of his body.

Sleep came upon him easily. When he awakened much later, it was to find Aisley's back pressed to his chest. Her soft, warm buttocks fit nicely between his thighs. He was hard as stone and he wanted nothing more than to slip into her from behind, but he knew it would be wrong.

Aisley wanted to be married before they crossed the final barrier as lovers. Eventually, he would persuade her to trust him and he would have to hold his needs at bay until they wed. When he took her on their wedding night, she would know what he was and he would introduce her to Abcynian desire and mating.

"Go back to sleep, Garrick," Aisley mumbled, half asleep, yet aware of his stirring.

Garrick placed a kiss to her temple and followed her command.

* * * * *

"John, you are an invaluable ally," Sedgewick proclaimed.

"Only because I afforded you the right to a wench's bed," John Brewster granted. With the skill of a warrior, he studied the darkened, crowded tavern and Sedgewick couldn't help admire his friend. "Remember that right will last only for a night. By the morrow, I hope to find Edwina and ask her to join us. If she balks, I will use any means necessary to assure that she changes her mind."

Sedgewick smiled, watching a tavern wench come toward their table. "I will remember," he said.

How could he forget the luxuries John provided since they'd left Fernley? Even though they had slept outside a night or two, he'd never he eaten so well. Mostly, they slept in inns or in houses owned by barons and lords and dined on meals reserved for nobles.

Sedgewick wasn't certain how John worked his miracles, but he was pleased that he decided to follow him to Welford. They'd formed a plan to thwart the Earl of Danford and his witch and they would succeed. John felt as though they would need Edwina Baker to help them. Mayhap his friend was right. But he'd rather not rely on the whims of a woman that had sold her niece for a few marks.

The wench finally reached them and smiled at John. A little jealous, Sedgewick showed her the coins on the table. She smiled and took a seat right in his lap. She felt good, smelled of ale and bread. Her teeth were clean. Her body pleasantly plump. She would do for the night.

"Go and take your lady upstairs," John insisted, tossing two more marks on the table. "Enjoy the whole evening."

The service wench hopped off Sedgewick's lap to reach for the money. "Hold right there, I'll be handing you the money," he warned.

"Sorry, m'lord," the wench said.

"Let's go," Sedgewick ordered with a slap to her rump. Reaching across the table for the money, he made to leave.

"Wait," John ordered. A firm hand snatched Sedgewick's wrist, chilling his skin. It was hot and crowded in the tavern. The man's hand should not feel cold. "Ask your lady for the whereabouts of Edwina Baker," he whispered.

"Can it not wait until morn?"

John shook his head. "It cannot."

"Woman, I'll have your name," Sedgewick asked the wench.

"Hazel, m'lord."

"A very nice name," he said. "Hazel, would you happen to know a woman named Edwina Baker? She once resided in this town."

Hazel's plump face softened with a smile. "She works 'ere in the tavern, she does."

Sedgewick searched the crowd. "I do not see her." His memory of the girl had faded, but he'd been certain he would remember her face when he saw her.

"She works in the kitchens."

John mumbled something and stood. "The two of you may go," he granted.

Sedgewick turned back to the wench, giving little thought to what might happen next. Edwina was the key to bringing revenge upon the witch of Danford and the Earl of Danford. Without Edwina, nothing would proceed. He'd have to trust that John Brewster would convince the woman to help them.

Chapter Fifteen

"The moon will be full this eve," Garrick told Aisley while they strolled through the courtyard.

"Aye, I imagine it will," she said, enjoying the peace they had found over the past sennight. "I would like to walk with you in the gardens at night while the moon is full."

"I'd enjoy the same, but I cannot until we are wed."

Sensing trouble, Aisley looked at Garrick. "What is amiss, milord?"

"Nothing which should alarm you," he said. "I'll not be able to stay with you this eve or any night when the moon is full unless you are my wife."

Aisley frowned. "We've managed to curb our temptations to some extent thus far. Why would tonight be any different?" They hadn't taken their pleasure beyond touches and caresses, yet she melted each and every time he touched her.

"Do you recall the night we met?" Garrick asked. He stopped and took hold of her hands, bringing her about to face him.

"Of course I remember the night we met. It changed my life. Because of you I gained a daughter."

"Do you remember the reason I would not bring you to the manor house?"

With his provocation, Aisley thought back to that night, feeling her face grow warm when the memory came. "You said I was able to have a child that night. Oh no, not again," she whispered.

"Aye, again," he said. "The moonlight and your fertility would tempt me beyond what I can control and we shouldn't risk a babe until we are wed according to English law."

"I don't understand." The very notion of tempting him beyond his control made her feel more feminine, beautiful. "Are you saying that we'd mate if we were to share the same bed tonight? Mayhap you've the right of it to sleep elsewhere, but I believe I could resist you another night."

"Nay, little one, I would do everything in my power to persuade you into becoming my lover in every way. Touches and tastes would not be enough. I don't want to hurt you. Until the moon wanes, Sir Knight will come to you. He will guard you, even from me."

Aisley stared, completely at a loss for words. Garrick smiled, his mouth beckoning attention, his confession making her heart pound inside her chest. He was trying to be a gentleman and she didn't know if she wanted him to sleep elsewhere. She might have kissed him if Lady Hunter and Sir Lucien weren't following at a respectful distance.

"I'd rather have you, but I have missed Sir Knight," she said when she found her voice.

"It pleases me to know you accept the leopard. He's very much a part of me."

Uncertain what Garrick meant, Aisley grasped his hand and knotted her fingers with his. She loved holding his hand. He was so big, strong and protective that when he tightened his hand, she felt safe, feminine and pretty.

"I accept him because I accept you, Garrick Forrester." In the back of her mind, she wondered if the villagers were still questioning whether the Earl of Danford was friend or foe.

She'd not visited the village since she'd come to live in the manor house, but she thought it possible that Garrick had won their favor. They must have learned about his heroic deeds in Fernley.

Feeling bold, Aisley lifted her hand and caressed his cheek. He'd shaven earlier that morn. His skin was smooth. His regal countenance became more apparent without beard growth.

Garrick caught her hand and held it against his face. "Dare not tempt me now, Aisley," he warned. "Trust me when I ask you to be the stronger of the two of us until the full moon wanes."

"Another of your mysteries, I suppose."

"Aye," he admitted.

Frowning, she withdrew her hand when she realized he was right. They shouldn't continue to spend time alone at night and she still did not know much about the man she was to marry. "Mayhap it is best we remain apart until you can trust me with the truth of your Abcynian ancestry. I sense that it has something to do with your ability to speak with Sir Knight and your need to drink sustenance. I want to prove to you that I'm not afraid anymore, that I can be a good wife to you."

"You will be a fine wife, Aisley. What you learn about me must be held in confidence." Though he sounded patient, she jumped when she heard Sir Knight's sawing roar. Dare she admit to seeing Garrick's throat vibrate? Had he made that sound? "By now you should realize that the leopard can speak with you just as I can."

Aisley buried a violent tremor. She would listen. She would not show fear or worry. Garrick was confessing something and she needed to hear it. She needed to understand him. "I wondered about that a time or two. I'm really hearing him right now, not you?"

Garrick nodded, holding her gaze. "Haven't you figured out why?"

Angelica rushed toward them before she could respond. "Aly!" A moment later, a chubby arm encircled Aisley's knees.

"What are you about, Lady Angelica?" Aisley teased, kneeling to the girl's level. "Where is your nurse?"

"She's near," Garrick assured. From where she knelt, Aisley looked up at him and caught him searching the area. "Judith comes now."

Right then, Judith rushed around a row of hedges and stopped abruptly when she spotted them. "Forgive me, milord, milady, Angelica is quicker than I realized," she begged, regaining her stride.

Angelica pulled on Aisley's skirt, demanding attention. She kept one hand tucked behind her back. "Mine!" she declared.

"What have you there?" Aisley inquired, trying not to worry.

Angelica had developed a habit of taking whatever caught her eye. Sometimes it was food, which she ate so quickly it was a wonder if she'd tasted it at all, but more often than not it was things that were shiny such as silver or coins. She and Garrick thought that Sedgewick Haywood had taught her to steal when she wanted something and correcting the behavior was proving difficult.

"She spotted my bracelet. When I showed it to her, she grabbed it and fled," Judith explained. She had reached them by then, her manner calm as she looked down at Angelica.

Aisley thought Judith was quite pretty and would do well with a suitable husband and a family of her own. She'd spied Sir Brandon Mathews staring at Angelica's nurse a time or two and wondered if he would ever approach her.

"Angelica, you know you mustn't take what doesn't belong to you," Garrick said with the authority of a father. "Return the bracelet to your nurse."

"Mine." Angelica pouted, her angelic face difficult to oppose.

"Your father is right," Aisley insisted, standing tall beside him.

"Mine."

Garrick held out his hand. "Angelica, give me the bracelet."

Sullenly, Angelica relinquished her find to Garrick.

"Very good, sweetheart, I know you like jewelry, but you cannot keep what doesn't belong to you," Aisley praised.

"Bloody hell, take it away," Garrick muttered beneath his breath, his palm flat, his face averted from the simple band of gold lying across it.

"What did you say?" Aisley asked.

"You heard me, woman!" Garrick's deep voice sawed in her head, sounding much like Sir Knight's roar. "Remove it from my sight!"

"Why?" Aisley wanted an answer. Garrick was scaring Angelica and herself because of a bracelet.

"I cannot bear to touch it," he said, seeming to mean it.

Aisley plucked the bracelet from his palm and offered it to Judith. Garrick finally looked at them.

"Nay, remove it from the manor, bury it, anything, it cannot remain in this holding," he commanded.

"Pray forgive me if my jewelry offends you, milord," Judith begged. Taking the simple gold bracelet, she hid it away and Garrick straightened. "I'll not wear it again, but it was a gift from my late husband. Please do not ask me to be rid of it."

Garrick listened, Aisley knew, for he turned his head slightly and squeezed his hand. Surely he wouldn't deny Judith's wish to keep a treasure given to her by her husband.

"Remove it," Garrick insisted. "Should I learn that the bracelet remains in the manor, I'll seek another nurse for Angelica."

"Gaick, Gaick, mine," Angelica wailed, launching herself at Judith.

"Garrick, might you be acting in haste?" Aisley asked.

"Gold, of any sort, does not belong in Danford," he stated. "I'll not have my decisions questioned. See to the bracelet."

"As you wish, milord," Aisley declared. It was the first time in their acquaintance where she spied the tyrant within Lord Danford. She didn't understand why he would act this way but she would have to do her best to honor his request. Mayhap when they were alone she could persuade him to permit Judith to keep her bracelet.

"What is amiss here?" Sir Lucien demanded as he and Lady Hunter approached.

"A gold bracelet," Aisley said.

The mighty giant and his wife stepped back as if the jewelry was poisoned. That Garrick and his Abcynian kind held a strange affliction to gold was apparent, but she failed to comprehend the near panic that ensued on such a big man's face.

"I am sorry to cause such trouble," Judith said. Aisley looked at the nurse, finding her thin lips trembling with both fright and contrition. "I'll see the bracelet is taken care of."

"Good." Garrick nodded, turned on his heel and strode away. His footsteps were silent and fast upon the ground.

Catarina and Sir Lucien charged after him.

Judith clutched her bracelet to her chest. "Whatever have I done?"

"You mustn't worry," Aisley consoled. "Allow me to speak to Lord Danford in private. Mayhap he will permit you to keep the bracelet in your room. Until then, be certain it stays hidden."

"Aye, milady, I shall," Judith promised. "Pray do not press him. I'd not want the Earl angry with you."

"I can handle him." Concerned for Angelica, she reached down and brushed the girl's hair with her fingers. "Lady Angelica, surely you'll remember to leave your nurse's things alone in the future?"

Prettily, Angelica smiled and grasped Judith's hand. "Mine."

"Aye, she's your nurse," Aisley agreed.

"I've only just realized there is nothing made of gold in the manor house. The Earl wears only silver or bronze adornments on occasion," Judith said. "I'd always thought nobles relished fine jewels and riches."

"Some do, I suppose," Aisley replied. "It is apparent that the Earl has an aversion to gold. It's a wonder his wives did not object to the lack of jewelry and adornments."

"His wives? Milady, you must be mistaken."

"Nay, he has been married twice. Sadly, both of his wives died," Aisley explained. "Forgive me, Judith, I shouldn't speak so about the dead. Lady Edith and Lady Cambria must have been far more refined than I. They wouldn't have made such an error."

Judith stood, taking Angelica's hand in hers. "The ladies you mentioned were the wives of the second and third Earls of Danford."

"How would you know such a thing?"

"My grandmother was lady-in-waiting to Lady Elizabeth Chambers, who was Lady Edith's mother. Lady Edith was ten and five when she was betrothed to Garrard Forrester, the third Earl of Danford. They wed when she'd turned ten and seven. I know little else other than after delivering her first and only son, Garrick Edward Forrester, she lived out her remaining twenty and five years in seclusion, rarely consenting to see her son even though he'd begun to fight in the wars against France."

"How could that be?" Aisley questioned, her anger turning to worry.

"I know not, milady. Are you angry with me?"

"I am not. I must have misunderstood. Pray, do not discuss this with anyone else."

"I shall hold my tongue," Judith promised, turning to leave with Angelica at her side.

Angry, Aisley stomped in the same direction Garrick had gone.

After failing to find Garrick, Aisley gave up until she spotted Sir Brandon, Sir Lucien and Lady Hunter emerging from a trail leading into the forest. Grasping the fabric of her houppelande, she hurried toward them.

"Where might I find Lord Danford?" she addressed them, her eyes on Sir Lucien.

"He's gone hawking," Lucien said.

"Yet another lie," Aisley accused. "It doesn't surprise me any more."

"Mind your place," Lady Hunter warned.

"My apologies, milord, milady, I am upset with Lord Danford for keeping secrets about his past. I know not what to think or believe anymore."

"He keeps things from you for good reason. It is important for you to remain patient," Lucien commented. "Only when he's ready will you know all you need to know about him."

"Is it because I'm an Englishwoman that he waits?"

"Aye," Lucien replied.

"I see. Sir Brandon, have you Abcynian blood?"

"I do not. I am one of Lord Danford's retainers and his Guard, just as your father was." For the first time, Aisley recognized the emphasis Sir Brandon placed on the word guard. "I've known him for many years. He trusts that I will defend him."

Aisley granted Brandon his due. "It is right for him to trust you. I am expected to marry Garrick, yet I am kept at a distance. That doesn't seem fair."

"You're worrying yourself needlessly," Lady Hunter consoled.

"Well, as my witnesses, I tell you now, I will not marry Garrick unless he reveals everything about himself and the Abcynians when I see him again," Aisley declared. "I'm tired of being distrusted."

Aisley, you do not mean that! Garrick roared within her mind, his fury evident.

So you are near. I'd been told you'd gone hawking, she threw back. *I meant it, Garrick. Reveal yourself and confess your lies or your brothers will wait a very long time to witness our vows when they arrive within the sennight.*

Another ear-piercing roar sawed through her temples, this time echoing through the forest. The trees shook with the force.

"God have mercy!" she screamed. Sickened by the sudden pain that ripped mercilessly through her body, she doubled over at the waist. "Agh—" she whimpered.

"Lucien, help her!" Lady Hunter shouted.

"Leave me be!" Crying, Aisley hugged herself, fearing for Garrick. What she was feeling, he was living. "What's happening to him?"

"It's the change," Lucien said. "She can feel it."

Aisley tried to speak, but the words hardened in her throat, making it difficult to swallow or breathe. Within her temples, Sir Knight roared, the sawing more ferocious than anything she'd heard before.

"He's fighting with the leopard," she said aloud.

Lucien's arms enclosed about her waist, lifting her and bringing her about. "Hush, child, it is not what you think," he schooled with a patience that belied his size. "The first few times an Abcynian's mate feels the change, it is more difficult for them than the one changing. Garrick will be all right, easy now." He tried holding her still, but as strong as Lucien was, he wasn't Garrick. His arms were too hard, his muscles unyielding, his size too overwhelming.

"I'm not a child." As she spoke, the pain eased, but her muscles still ached and her bones trembled as if they'd splintered and become whole again.

"You are to me," Lucien told her once she'd pulled away. "On Garrick's behalf, allow me to say that his hesitation in sharing his secrets stem from his wish to protect you from what you'd just felt."

Aisley's temper returned, tempting her to pound her fists into Lucien Hunter's gigantic chest. Rather than voice her concerns aloud, she turned her thoughts to Garrick. *Garrick, hear me. Come and explain your lies if you dare. I want to know the truth about you.*

A branch broke near the trail and Garrick marched toward them. "What lies?" he demanded.

Aisley couldn't move. Garrick was unclothed to his waist and the tattered remains of what looked like a gypon were clenched in his big fist. His feet were bare. His long hair was matted from sweat, leaves and dirt. Even his face was streaked with mud.

"What happened to you?" Breaking away from Lucien, Aisley made for Garrick and searched him for injuries. "There aren't any cuts, scrapes or marks on you, but you look as though you've been fighting."

Garrick steadied her hands when they reached his ribs. With his green eyes trained on Lucien, he said, "She must know, now. I was wrong to wait this long."

"I hope it's the truth this time," Aisley whispered so only he would hear her.

"What do you speak of?" he challenged.

"Shall we talk of this alone, milord? We wouldn't want to argue in front of witnesses," she said, remembering that he didn't like when she spoke against him in public.

"You may speak freely," Garrick insisted. Confidently, as though he was not covered in dirt and leaves, he stared down at her, one dark brow raised in question. "First I shall have your apology for doubting me."

"Why am I the one to apologize when it is you who refuses to tell me anything unless I provoke you? Failing to warn me about your affliction to gold, for frightening Angelica into thinking that you will send her nurse away because she wears a bracelet given to her by her late husband and for claiming marriage to a woman who was actually your mother is a little mad, don't you think?" It was at the conclusion of her tirade that she realized Garrick had freed her hands.

She was counting his offenses as if scolding a child. He didn't look sorry or rebuked. He looked angry. Regardless of her concerns, he remained arrogant.

"What did you just say about my mother?" he demanded.

Aisley looked about. Lucien, Catarina and Sir Brandon stared back at her, mouths agape.

"Admit it, Garrick," she said quietly. "Lady Edith was not your second wife. She was your mother. What madness has befallen you for claiming to have had two wives? Did you take pride in hurting me with such tales?"

"Who have you spoken to about my wives?" he asked as though he found it difficult to talk.

"What does it matter?" When he didn't reply, she shrugged and pulled back. "Oh, very well, it was Judith. I'd been upset about the bracelet and the words just came out."

"What did she say in response?"

Aisley stomped away, having to fight an overwhelming urge to flee deep into the forest. "Again I am being questioned!"

"I'll have an answer, now." Garrick didn't permit her go very far and she turned back. If she walked off without giving a response, she thought he might punish her this time.

Breathing deep, Aisley calmed herself. "She said Lady Cambria and Lady Edith were the wives of the second and third Earls of Danford. Her grandmother was a lady's maid for Lady Edith's mother. She is familiar with the Chambers family."

Garrick clenched his teeth, revealing his sharp canines for a moment before speaking again. "I should have thought of that before hiring Judith. Were you able to convince Judith otherwise?"

"Nay, I am the one who'd been made a fool."

"You are not a fool, Aisley." Considering his tattered appearance and his word in question, Garrick should have weakened but he remained strong. Confused by the fact that she wasn't nearly as composed, she cast her eyes downward. She heard him move closer and flinched when he reached out to her.

"Look at me," he demanded, forcing her chin up. "I have not lied to you about my wives. Judith believes what I want all of England and the known world to believe. To protect you, Angelica, our future children and the earldom, the truth can only be known to Abcynians and my Guards."

"What truth do you speak of?" Aisley dared, uncertain why she was suddenly shaking. "Judith claimed Garrard Forrester, the third Earl of Danford, was Lady Edith's husband. That would make him your father."

Garrick stepped closer, his manner proud, his eyes were steady on hers. "I was Garrard Edward Forrester, the third Earl of Danford. Before that, I was Garrett James Forrester, the second Earl of Danford."

She blinked. The validity of his word was somehow lost in the scent of cinnamon and Sir Knight's musk. Taking a giant step backward, she took in the blurred faces of the trio behind Garrick.

"You think you were three different men?" she asked, fearful that he had taken leave of his senses. Looking at the others, she saw only admiration. "Do you all believe him?"

"We know he speaks the truth," Lucien Hunter answered. "The earldom was bestowed upon Garrick's father two hundred and thirty years ago. Garrick assumed the title upon James' death."

Garrick attempted to reach out to her again, except this time Aisley stepped out of his reach. She didn't want him to touch her. He was mad. They were all mad.

"It is impossible for someone, even an earl, to live long enough to assume three identities," Aisley managed to say, her body and voice trembling. "You'd have to be very old for something like that to happen."

"How old do I look to you?" For a man who'd gone mad, Garrick looked handsome and capable of shouldering the world if he chose.

"You look older than thirty and younger than forty," she presumed.

"Garrick Edward Forrester was supposedly born on the 3rd day of May 1415. I am believed to be thirty and eight. In truth, I am four hundred and fifty." Garrick's manner grew fierce, determined, one hand beckoning her forward.

"You believe that you're four hundred and fifty years old? To think I'd been concerned about witchcraft when I'd first met you. Instead, you believe you are immortal."

"Only the Creator is immortal, however Abcynians can live for centuries," Garrick said, lowering his hand. "When you are converted you will accept what I say as truth."

"Speak not! You shouldn't claim such things," she almost shouted. If anyone were to learn of Garrick's beliefs, they'd think he was far worse than a man practicing some kind of ancient sorcery. They'd think he was evil. "If you think I would marry you while you believe the impossible...well, you are wrong!"

Ignoring her resistance, Garrick leapt toward her with a speed and cunning a mere man shouldn't possess. "Do not think I will release you from our betrothal, Aisley, do not. You've much to accept, but nothing has changed. You will be my countess." Grasping her by the arms, he pulled her closer, ignoring her attempts to be free. When no one offered to aid her, Aisley gave up fighting. She couldn't break his hold on her and, God help her, she almost wanted to believe him. "This is why I wanted to explain myself to you over time, so you wouldn't be frightened, so you'd believe."

"You're asking me to believe a myth," Aisley said.

Disappointment flickered across his face when she'd denied his claim. More than a little frightened, she made to say something to appease him until her gaze fell upon his broad, still bare shoulders.

"Milord, what manner of mark do you possess on your back?" she wondered aloud.

The height of the sun revealed an eerie glow etched into his skin. It looked like a large cat's paw, unsheathed.

"What is that?" she demanded, wrenching about to look again.

There'd been a few times when she thought she'd seen some sort of mark on his shoulder when they were alone at night. But he'd been very careful not to reveal his back to her. At night their chamber was lit with only a few tallow candles.

"Do not be frightened." Garrick attempted to soothe her again. Aisley's eyes were trained on his back. "The mark emerged when I reached adulthood and symbolizes what I am."

"What are you?" she asked.

Garrick released her and permitted her to inspect the whole of his back.

Like the unsheathed cat's paw on his shoulder, his entire back bore the pale luminous lines of a beast. Nay, not just a beast, she acknowledged, it was a leopard. The leopard's head and face took up much of the width of Garrick's upper back, between

his shoulder blades. Its mouth was curled in a snarl, revealing its long, lethal teeth, regal, though masculine, grace and cunning green eyes.

The eyes were the only part of the design that bore actual color. The rest was as silvery as moonlight. An identical paw to the one she'd first noticed glowed on Garrick's opposite shoulder. The unsheathed claws seemed to be reaching out...for her.

"Garrick, how can you have such a thing on your back and I'd not noticed it before?"

"I hadn't yet revealed it to you," Garrick explained. "And it is most prevalent during the full moon or when I am angry."

"The moon is not yet out."

"You may not see it, but it is there nonetheless." Garrick moved until Aisley could only see a portion of the leopard on his back. It felt as though his eyes followed her regardless of where she stood. "Along with the full moon and the height of the sun, the leopard becomes noticeable."

"I do not understand," she murmured. "Why do you have such a mark?"

"Haven't I already said? It is a symbol of what I am."

"You're scaring me." She was more than frightened, she was angry. "What do you think you are?"

"You were right. We should talk privately," Garrick said.

"I'm not going anywhere with you! Answer me, please. Has it to do with Sir Knight?"

"Bloody hell, I didn't want you to learn this way," Garrick implored. "Haven't you seen the similarities in us?"

"Us?"

"The similarities I share with Sir Knight," Garrick amended.

"Garrick, what do you —" Aisley couldn't speak as he crossed the barrier she'd tried to keep between them and captured her hands, holding them tight.

"Look at me, Aisley. Really look at me," he demanded, squeezing her fingers, though not hurting her.

She lifted her chin, studying his regal, determined face. There was a familiarity to his face and eyes that she'd seen in another's, like the face painted upon his back.

"Whose eyes do you see when you look at Sir Knight? What scent do you smell when either of us is close? Why do you think you can hear him roar when I am near?"

"Be...because he can speak with me as you do," she answered.

How do you think I knew you'd bathed naked in a stream? Garrick's prodding flooded her mind, his need for privacy surprising her. *I was there. I was with you, protecting you.*

"You were spying on me that day in the forest, weren't you?"

Garrick frowned. "Nay, little one, I was with you. I wasn't in this form. The first time you spotted me, I was hidden in a hollow tree, surrounded by ivy. Do you remember?"

"Nay, nay, nay, cease this!" Aisley refused to accept what Garrick meant. To accept it would mean he was claiming to be more than a four hundred and fifty year old man. He was claiming to be – she wouldn't think it. She wouldn't!

"Aisley, I am what you think." Garrick released her hands, capturing her waist.

"Do not say such things. You'll not make me fall into your madness." Relinquishing the struggle to pull away, she pounded her fists on his chest as he held her, giving her temper free reign. He could have struck her, forced her compliance, anything he wanted. He didn't. He simply waited until she calmed. "What is it you want from me? Am I to be played the fool because I'm of common birth? Is that what this is about?"

"Cease fighting, you'll only bruise your hands. I'm not playing you for a fool. You are my mate, my future wife. I'd not mistreat you in such a way."

"Oh nay, I'll not marry you unless you recant what you've said!"

Refusing him in marriage suddenly caused her to hear Sir Knight's dull roar sawing in her temples. The sawing grew louder, repetitive, real.

Aisley stared up at Garrick, for she couldn't look away. His throat was trembling. Trembling as it had the first night they'd met, when she'd mistakenly believed he was making that sound. Now she knew he was.

With one last desperate fist to his chest, Aisley screamed and bowed in defeat. She'd have fallen if Garrick hadn't caught her close. So close she could smell cinnamon and musk, the musk of a leopard, of Sir Knight.

"Aisley, if you do not cease your struggles, you will provoke me into turning to prove what I am. You are not ready to witness that."

"Nay," Aisley whispered. It could not be. "Let me go, Garrick, please."

Refusing, he held her still with one arm and tucked his fingers beneath her chin. For all they'd said this day, she shouldn't allow him to touch her at all. Regardless she couldn't deny that she needed to be near him.

"Believe in me, Aisley. Have faith in what I am." Garrick's request baffled her. It was rare for him to show vulnerability. "Let us go somewhere alone so that we can settle this between us."

"You want me to think that you're Sir Knight."

"I am a panthera pardus Abcynian, a man who can change into a leopard. The one you have named Sir Knight."

"Let me go!" Refusing to listen, she wanted to cover her ears, but Garrick held her fast. "I'll not believe it. I'll not!"

Sir Knight's roar combined with Garrick's impatient breath and she could no longer separate the two, man or beast, beast or man, she didn't know. Too overwhelmed,

Aisley succumbed to oblivion, allowing the darkness that suddenly surrounded her carry her away from his madness.

* * * * *

Garrick watched the color leech from Aisley's fair skin and swept her into his arms as she fainted. Worried, he carried her toward the manor house.

"Garrick, take her to Jerold," Catarina suggested.

"I'll take her to her quarters and see she is comfortable," Garrick said with patience he did not feel. "Aisley has much to accept when she awakens. She'll want to do it in private."

"She's scared. She'll come to accept you once she's converted, milord," Brandon said. "Mayhap conversion would convince her of what you are and what she will become."

"I'll not force Aisley's conversion unless her life is in danger."

Garrick knew he'd been wrong to wait this long to reveal himself. He couldn't change his actions over the past sennights, but he could give Aisley the dignity of accepting what she'd learned in her own way and time.

Garrick felt Brandon and his Abcynian kind following after them and wished Aisley were already converted. As he walked, tiny tremors coursed through her body. He knew those tremors and the ache she would feel upon awaking. He'd been too close when he changed to hunt in the forest alone. He'd needed to hunt, to seek the primal release of turning into his panthera half, but she'd felt his change. Her body thought it had contorted itself into a knot. She would need a panthera's strength to handle it again or she might injure herself.

Before they reached the entryway to the house, Garrick felt a strong hand on his shoulder, bringing his mind back to the present. The same hand caught his torn gypon and arranged it to cover his back.

"Garrick, your lady will come to know the truth," Lucien assured. "She cares for you. When she saw you come out of the woods, she'd forsaken her anger long enough to make certain that you were unharmed. If I dare say so, she loves you. She may not know it, but she'll see the truth of it soon. Be patient with her when she wakes, she'll need you to be."

"I will," he said.

"Should I fetch Jerold for you, milord?" Catarina questioned as Garrick marched inside.

"I expect you to make sure that no one approaches Aisley's wing."

"Is it wise for you to be alone with her? You know why I ask."

"She will go unharmed in my care," Garrick said. "Once she is settled, I will seek the forest. I need to hunt. While I'm gone, see that she is guarded and safe."

"We will," Lucien agreed, catching his wife's elbow and steering her away.

Garrick reached Aisley's quarters and was pleased to find the servants absent. Brandon must have moved ahead of him and cleared the way. Moving faster, he entered the room, shifted Aisley enough to bolt the door and carried her to bed.

Keeping her feelings foremost in his mind, Garrick settled beside her to brush an errant strand of hair from her face. Gazing at her, he found her as lovely as ever, though she'd been smeared with mud and the twin braids coiled in a knot atop her head were beginning to fall.

Gently, he caressed her cheek to awaken her. "Aisley, come back to me," he urged, noticing her color had already returned.

"Umm, Garrick," Aisley murmured.

"Come, little one, open your eyes," he insisted, nudging her.

"Rather sleep," she said more clearly, her eyes still closed. "My whole body aches. I may have caught Elethea's fever."

"You aren't ill."

Aisley's frown deepened. "I must be. Why would I ache so? All I wish to do is sleep."

"You are the healer. Shouldn't you know the answer to that?"

"Healing has nothing to do with how I feel." She opened her eyes. They were deep brown, her brow furrowed. "It is very dark in here, milord. Is it nighttime? Have I been dreaming?"

"It is midday."

Since he could see clearly in the dark, he'd forgotten to light a candle for her. To appease her confusion, he left the bed and opened the shuttered window.

"See, the sun is at its peak."

"Oh," Aisley said.

"We must talk, Aisley, the sooner the better," he suggested while standing at the window. Turning back to her, he heard her sharp intake of breath.

"Bloody hell, it's real. The mark, what was said between us, everything." Remarkably fast, Aisley leapt from the bed, fear in her eyes.

"Cursing doesn't become you," he warned.

"I'll curse for a sennight if you don't leave," she warned. "I'm standing here, alone, with a madman! One who believes himself a werewolf, nay, were-leopard, and is several hundred years old."

"Four hundred and fifty," Garrick amended. "It is necessary for you to accept what you've learned. You are about to embark in marriage to the second oldest of the panthera Abcynians remaining in this world. There are so few of us, Aisley, and many have turned from our ways or denied our ancestry. I have pledged to keep our lineage

thriving and safe while protecting Englishmen with the title of earl. As an Elder, I expect my mate to uphold my standing."

"Forgive me for refusing to bow to your rank and greatness, milord!" she shouted.

Aisley's anger had her pacing, luring Garrick's leopard to the fore. Changing now would be easy and Aisley's frightened back and forth movements were as tempting to the leopard as hunting prey.

"Cease pacing, you'll only provoke me," Garrick forewarned.

"I think it's best for you to leave," she insisted, drawing to a halt in the furthest corner of the room from where he stood. She was frightened and he'd done nothing to soothe her.

"Do not be frightened." Purposefully lowering his voice and breathing out, he sought to calm her with the leopard's unusual rumbling she liked to call a purr. "I'll not hurt you in either form."

"I've asked you to leave," she reminded. "Enough of that rumbling, I detest it."

"Last eve you claimed that I made your whole body hum with pleasure."

Aisley's bravery faded, her shoulders lowering in defeat. "How dare you use that against me," she murmured.

Impatient, he shoved his hand through his tangled hair and sighed. "I shouldn't have said that. Tell me what you need me to do or say to ease your mind."

"I already have," she said, pointing at the door. "Go, I need some time alone or I fear I shall succumb to your madness."

"What madness, my lady?"

"You want me to believe you're capable of becoming a leopard and that you're four hundred and fifty years old."

"I could change right here and now and you'd see me for what I am. But that would bring you too much pain and I don't want to hurt you again. I'd also rather you believe in me before I change in your presence. Until you are calm, I think it is best to leave you to your thoughts."

Unwilling to test her further, Garrick walked to the door and made to unlock it.

"Garrick, assure me that you wouldn't do anything to harm Angelica," Aisley whispered.

Saddened by her doubts, he opened the door. "Never would I harm someone I love," he promised, stalking away.

He was outside before his temper began to calm. In the deepest part of the forest, he tore off his pants and gave into the leopard.

Chapter Sixteen

Aisley waited until Garrick was gone before she lowered herself to the floor. Crying and shaking, she wrapped her arms about her legs and lowered her face to her knees. She feared what would become of Garrick if anyone learned of his madness. It was difficult enough worrying whether the villagers and tenants believed him to be a tyrant or wicked. If they knew he believed himself capable of changing into a leopard, they might turn him over to the Church with charges of heresy and he would face execution.

Mayhap she should speak with Garrick and convince him of the impossibility of his fanciful tales. She had Angelica to consider. She certainly couldn't permit the child to believe he was some sort of monster! At the very least, Aisley knew Garrick would never harm Angelica and that gave her some peace of mind.

"Garrick, what is wrong with you?" she wondered aloud, feeling a strange emptiness within. She couldn't feel him and she shivered against the sudden cold that crept under her skin. "How can I make you accept yourself as a mere mortal man?"

Uncertain of what to do Aisley lifted her head. Sunlight from the window touched her arm, revealing her dirt smudges.

She could use a bath. Mayhap that would help her think and find a way to help Garrick. She had to believe that he wasn't completely mad, that he was a man who lived, breathed and bled just like any Englishmen. But then she remembered that he was more than that. He claimed to be Abcynian and four hundred and fifty years old. Mercy, how could that be possible? How could he think she'd believe such a thing?

"Agh," she cried, wincing painfully as she stood, her muscles and bones ached.

Making her way to the maid's door, she knocked. "Elethea, are you there?" She knocked again and failed to receive an answer.

Giving up, she sought the basin of water kept behind the privacy screen. There, Aisley stripped, grabbed a clean cloth and dunked it in the cool water. As usual, she added a drop of almond oil to the water, hoping to regain a sense of normalcy. After washing, she dried herself and rearranged her hair in two plaits. Feeling a little better, she strode over to her clothing chest and selected a blue houppelande, hose and shoes suitable for walking.

From the window she could hear the daily workings of the manor as she stood doing nothing. Garrick was gone and she suddenly needed freedom. A walk to the village might enable her to think with more clarity.

She opened her door and saw Sir Brandon standing guard at the end of the hallway. Sending him a reluctant smile, she stepped back into the room and bolted the door. A

dash to the hallway leading from Elethea's room showed another guard posted at the end.

Refusing to be caged inside her bedchamber, Aisley returned to the window. Sir Knight had entered the room this way. He was a huge beast, yet he'd been able to come and go at will. She should be capable of doing the same.

Quickly, she scrambled onto the ledge, scooted through the opening and tumbled to the ground. A quick survey of the courtyard revealed no one had noticed her escape and she used it to her advantage.

She'd almost made it to the trail leading to the village when a large man came to stand in front of her. "Where do you go without an escort, milady?" Valiant asked.

Aisley spun about and punched her hands into her hips. "Valiant, what mean you by frightening me?"

"Forgive me, I did not intend to," Valiant said. "Is something else amiss?"

"I need to visit the village." Hoping to fend off his suspicions, she kept her shoulders straight and her eyes upon his handsome young face.

"Lord Danford has strict orders that someone accompany you when you're outside the manor house."

"A walk to the village does not require an escort," she replied.

"Lord Danford would not want you to be alone." Valiant held up his hand before she could protest. "Be assured, I offer myself as your guard."

Without any further recourse, she bowed her head. "Very well, you may accompany me."

"You are gracious, milady."

"Not really," she said and they walked in silence for a little while.

They were well into the woods when Valiant spoke. "You know, don't you?"

"What?"

"You've learned about the Abcynians, about all of us," he said.

"I haven't any idea what you mean," she denied. "Where have you've been of late? I've barely seen you."

"I'm touched to know you care," he said.

"Why would you think differently? You were very kind to me when I was still living in the village. If it weren't for you, I may not have seen Angelica as often as I did."

Valiant stiffened, rumbling deep in his throat much like Garrick when he was getting impatient. "I'm like him."

"Like whom?" she inquired, frowning up at him. He wasn't quite as tall as his father, but she felt certain that someday he would be bigger than his father.

"Lord Danford," Valiant claimed.

"He is an unusual man with strange beliefs. Valiant, if you continue to speak of him I shall ignore you and I'd far rather talk about you. Won't you tell me where have you been?"

"Training with Sir Brandon's squire," he answered.

"Have the lessons been difficult?"

"The Earl is a difficult taskmaster," Valiant returned. "But he is fair and I am learning."

Aisley smiled at the severity of the boy's comment. "How long does it take for a squire to reach knighthood?"

"I suppose it depends on the squire and the amount of money he possesses. Sir Brandon's squire, William, has aided his master since he was ten and twelve. He is almost ten and seven now, yet he has much to learn and cannot afford the expense of knighthood. When he is ready, I suspect he will become a vassal."

"How old are you?"

"Most think I'm ten and five," he said.

Somehow the simple conversation had turned. "You're not ten and five?"

Valiant drew to a halt. Aisley watched him look about as if searching for something or someone before speaking further.

"I am one hundred and fifty," he told her.

"Valiant," Aisley murmured, wishing she'd refused his wish to escort her to the village. "You are mistaken. You've the face of a boy."

He shook his head, seeming earnest, but offended that she'd not believed him. "Nay, after infancy, Abcynians age about ten years for every one hundred until reaching adulthood."

"I dislike talking about this." Worried about Valiant, Aisley tried to make him see reason.

"Why?" he questioned. "You've learned about us. There's nothing to hide from you now."

"There's everything to hide. Do you not know what would happen if someone were to learn of your fanciful notions, of Lord Danford's?"

"Abcynians have been living in England longer than the Normans. We've established ourselves throughout Europe and the Far East. We've been able to guard what we are and we will continue to do so while we protect the land and people we live amongst."

Impatient with him, Aisley started to walk onward. "I suppose you think you can change form?"

"Any Abcynian with the soul of a panther can change into their other half upon reaching adulthood. Garrick is panthera pardus. He can change into the leopard you call Sir Knight."

"That isn't possible," she denied.

"Aye, it is true."

"So you believe you can turn into a leopard as well?"

Valiant remained beside her as they walked, gallantly pushing aside branches and debris. He really was a nice young man. It saddened her to think he was as mad as Garrick.

"I cannot change form as of yet," he said.

"Good, you realize the impossibility of your Abcynian beliefs. Men cannot change into leopards or wolves or...anything for that matter."

"I know nothing of wolves. I cannot change form yet because I'm too young. But I am a full blooded Abcynian and will turn when I become an adult."

Aisley cringed, worried for the boy's sanity. "You'll not become a leopard. People do not become animals. Those are myths, nothing more."

"That's true enough. I'll not become a leopard."

"There, you see, you're a young man training for knighthood."

"Like my father, I've the soul of a lion," he proclaimed with such ferocity she stumbled to a halt. "My mother's a lioness, the matriarch of our pride. In all honesty, milady, there are panthera Abcynians who can change into tigers as well. The tigers are the rarest and most secretive. It is unlikely you'll ever meet one."

Aisley covered her ears with her hands. "Valiant, I beg you to cease this talk. I'll not believe you any more than I believe Garrick."

"You disbelieve Garrick's word?" Looking as crestfallen as Aisley felt, Valiant withdrew a measure and stared. "He's the second eldest of our kind. Few Abcynians question him."

Growing more afraid and angry that she might have been wrong to doubt Garrick, Aisley fought back with the only thing she knew. "I am not Abcynian! I'm an Englishwoman."

"You'll not be an Englishwoman for much longer. Garrick will convert you. When he does, you will become Abcynian."

"I'll not be converted into anything and we'll speak of this no more." An inspection of the area showed they'd stopped near the village clearing, very close to where her cottage stood.

"Milady, I hadn't meant to frighten you, pray forgive me," Valiant apologized and stepped back.

"I'm not frightened," she lied. "Valiant, I'm going into my cottage and I'd like to be alone for a little while. I'll be safe there. Afterward, I wish to visit some of the villagers. When I am finished, would you escort me back to the manor?"

Valiant granted her request with a nod and stayed by the woods as she continued toward the cottage. "I'll wait for you nearby," he called out.

Before she could tell him to return to the manor, he headed for the village common.

Aisley drew a long, deep breath and walked to the cottage. It seemed so small, ordinary, yet she found it familiar, welcoming. Long ago, it had been used by her parents to treat the illnesses and injuries of the villagers.

When plague reached Danford, her parents treated villagers in a makeshift dwelling purposefully set away from the village. Even though they became ill themselves, they insisted that Aisley stay in the cottage, keeping her from getting sick. She'd had the other place burned when her parents died, but she always remembered to thank the Lord for her mother and father's forethought in protecting her when she prayed.

Inside the cottage, Aisley discovered most of her remedies still in their places. She made a quick inspection. Blackberry, horehound, dandelion, peppermint, rosemary, sorrel, yarrow and marigold were used in her favorite remedies. Some of her treatments stemmed from recipes handed down from her mother and her mother's mother.

She knew how to make a new mother's milk begin to flow, bring a babe into the world, how to reduce fever, soothe sore throats, stitch wounds, pull teeth and surgically remove a child from its mother's womb if the mother died during childbirth.

Aye, she knew much about healing, yet she'd almost ignored her knowledge in favor of learning how to be a countess for the Earl of Danford. True, she had liked being with Garrick and enjoyed the times when they were alone. Despite his strange beliefs, he was a most tempting man.

As she stood in her cottage, she could recall the first kiss they'd shared, almost tasting him upon her lips. Yet, she should not have forgotten the villagers or her duties as a healer.

"Well, I'll simply have to convince Garrick to let me continue doing the work I'm meant to," she said.

A knock at the door prevented Aisley from continuing her perusal. "Valiant, please go. I wish to be alone," she said, thinking the squire had come for her.

"It isn't Valiant, milady," Andrew White responded.

"Andrew," she repeated, rushing to open the door. "Why do I sense hesitancy in your voice?"

"Forgive me, milady, I saw you heading for your cottage and I'd thought you might agree to help my wife."

Surprised he'd show such deference by averting his eyes, Aisley frowned. "Andrew, you've known me since we were children. Why do you think I'd not help your wife?"

"The Earl's physician told us you weren't healing any longer," Andrew said, entering the cottage, but remaining near the open door.

"Jerold misunderstood. Since my betrothal to Lord Danford, I've been learning how to be his wife and watch over the manor house. A difficult task, I must admit, but I've not forgotten my duty to the village."

"You are to become a countess, you needn't worry about us anymore," Andrew said. "Milady –"

"Use my name," she insisted.

"Aisley, I'm worried about Nelda," he admitted.

"What is amiss?"

"She's with child."

Aisley smiled. "That's a wonderful thing, Andrew."

"We hope so. Nelda lost our first babe before it was born, remember? Both of us worry the same could happen again."

"Of course I remember. I'll be glad to examine your wife, try not to worry," Aisley assured, already seeking a bag to pack with supplies for a visit to Andrew's dwelling. "How is she feeling?"

"Very tired, and sick in the morn. She works too hard and I try to make her rest when she can," he said.

"Having her rest when she can is good," she replied as they walked outside.

While heading toward Andrew's cottage, Aisley found herself wondering why Andrew hadn't spoken to Jerold about Nelda. "Andrew, have you told the physician that Nelda is with child?"

"Aye, three days past," he said.

"Did he have any advice?" she asked.

"None, save to seek a midwife should Nelda lose the babe or when she's ready to give birth."

"No wonder you are worried!" Alarmed that Jerold would say such a thing, she stopped. "Andrew, I shall assist Nelda with whatever she needs from now on. I would like it if you would inform the villagers of the same. I shall also speak with Lord Danford on what should be done about his physician's error. I thought Jerold would take care of the villagers properly while I was gone. Now that I know differently, I shall resume my duties as a healer."

"Are you certain you should make such a declaration? I wouldn't want the Earl of Danford to become angry at you."

"You needn't worry. Lord Danford is a good man. I feel certain that he'll listen when I explain what's happened. "

Andrew nodded and walked on. Before following, Aisley took a moment to look over her shoulder to see if Valiant was near.

She found him by a well in the center of the village, gallantly assisting villagers in retrieving the heavy pails of water. Oddly, an unfamiliar woman awaited her turn.

Aisley wasn't sure who she was, but the woman was pretty, small of frame, and her hair was covered with a commoners cap. Her eyes seemed to be trained upon Valiant's broad shoulders.

"Aisley, what is it?" Andrew asked.

"Have you seen that woman before, Andrew?" she asked, gesturing to the woman by the well.

"A time or two, she comes from Fernley," he answered.

"Why would she come here?" Aisley questioned.

"It's my understanding that something happened to the cistern in Fernley and the Earl agreed to allow a few of the men to come and draw water from our well and the stream that runs through Danford Forest. We've plenty of water to share. Would you like me to ask her if her husband is near? Mayhap he is at the stream getting water there."

"Nay, Andrew, let her be," Aisley decided, leaving Valiant helping the villagers at the well. He was training as a knight and he was bigger than any man the village. A small woman wasn't likely to harm him.

Inside the cottage, Aisley ordered Andrew back outside and found his wife in bed. After exchanging pleasant greetings, she began examining Nelda and her unborn babe. When she finished, she smiled and sat on the edge of the bed.

"What do you think, m'lady?" Nelda tentatively asked as Aisley pulled a coverlet up to her chin.

Aisley grinned. "Given the last time you had your menses and your sleepiness, you are further along than you were when you lost your first babe. I recommend bedrest whenever you can manage, especially when you're feeling ill. Soon you'll find more strength and the sickness will ease."

"So you believe the babe will be fine?" Nelda prodded.

"I cannot give you promises. I can only say it seems likely you will carry the babe well. Nelda, should you begin to bleed or feel any discomfort at all, I want you to send for me right away."

Nelda relaxed back onto the bed, a scruffy blanket being used for a pillow. "What of the midwife the physician recommended?"

"I am the midwife," Aisley said.

"I can't ask you to attend me, m'lady."

"Nelda, I must say to you what I told Andrew, you needn't be so formal with me." Displeased that those she'd known all her life were viewing her as someone unapproachable, she touched her hand to Nelda's shoulder, offering support. "We've known each other most of our lives and I would like nothing more than to assist you and your child."

"You are to marry the Earl of Danford," Nelda said, looking up at Aisley. "He frightens his own servants. He's kept you from us. Some...some in the village say he is a wizard."

"Why would they say that?" Aisley asked. "When I was living in the village, few people had actually seen Lord Danford, much less thought to accuse him of something evil. He is not a wizard or an ogre. As for his servants, they no longer fear him, especially after seeing him with Angelica, the child he helped rescue from a cozeners." As Aisley defended Garrick, she was amazed to realize the truth of what she said.

Despite the difficult day, she still viewed him as an honorable man. So then, how did one explain or accept his tales? How could she accept that he believed he could change into a leopard, that he was several hundred years old?

"Once the Earl knows what Jerold told you and Andrew about the babe, I'm certain I will gain his permission to continue healing."

"I shall pray that he does," Nelda said.

"He will," Aisley assured, smiling again. "Now, I need to visit some of the other villagers. I'd imagine Howard Jones is in need of more cough remedy. I told Jerold the recipe, but given what I've learned this day, I wonder if he mixed it correctly."

"He's been coughing of late," Nelda told her.

"I must go then," Aisley insisted, gathering her bag and heading for the door.

Outside, she ran into Andrew. "She's fine. Go to your wife."

"I'm grateful you've come," Andrew said, then rushed inside.

Aisley marched back to her cottage, found vinegar, licorice and some honey and made a quart of cough remedy. It took time, but it was worth it to make certain Howard Jones had the medicine that would ease his coughing. Carrying the mixture outside, she noticed Valiant had left his post. The strange woman she'd seen near him was gone.

More than a little worried, she continued on her way to the Jones' house and knocked on the door. Charlotte Jones answered the door.

"Oh, m'lady, I n'er thought to 'ave a visit from a countess," Charlotte greeted as she ran her fingers through her gray hair.

"Whatever you've been told, I assure you that I am still a healer. Unfortunately, I cannot stay long. I just wanted to deliver this remedy for your husband's cough."

Charlotte Jones accepted the remedy and smiled. "Thank ye, m'lady."

Aisley nodded, made to turn away, but hesitated a moment longer. "Charlotte, did Lord Danford's physician bring medicine to your husband?"

"He did," she said. She sniffed the jar. "Wasn't this."

"I see. I'm sorry for that. Give Howard my remedy and let me know if it helps."

"Thank ye," Charlotte said again and closed the door. Aisley headed for the well.

Those who'd been near the well earlier had long departed. The villagers were hard at work. Some were out in the field, and some tended to the bread ovens. Others were

in the woodshops and the water mill and the smell of burning charcoal wafted through the air. Things were as they should be throughout the little village, and yet, something simply wasn't right.

A flash of movement near the village tavern caught Aisley's eye. For a moment, she thought she saw Valiant fleeing into the forest leading away from the village, heading toward Fernley. Curious, she hiked up her hem just above the ankles and rushed in the same direction.

She forged into the green and brown forest and followed a narrow, rock-laden path and the sound of heavy breathing. "Valiant, are you there?" she called out, slightly winded.

A good distance into the cover of branches and bushes, Aisley spotted the small frame of the woman from the well. The stranger ducked and weaved and then hid behind a dying, vine-covered tree.

"You there, show yourself," Aisley demanded.

The woman peeked around the tree as commanded. "M'lady, do not harm me," she begged. "You are to be the...Countess of Danford, aye?"

"How would you know that?" Aisley asked. Carefully, she crept forward.

"Your clothing," the younger woman said. She had the eyes of a doe, her face was flawless. Her frame was tiny, almost frail and lost in her brown dress.

"I'll have your name," Aisley commanded.

"Edwina, m'lady, I've come to meet you," Edwina said slowly. To Aisley, Edwina's words seemed practiced, as though she wasn't accustomed to speaking pleasantly.

"Why?" Keeping her arms to her sides, Aisley stood her ground.

"You have my daughter," Edwina revealed. Aisley's heart leapt.

"That cannot be true."

Edwina shook her head. "My daughter, she acts like a babe, but she is much older. Word came to my village that the Earl of Danford had taken in a troubled girl and I had to come and see if it was so."

Suspicious, Aisley glared at the woman. "Do you even know your daughter's true age?"

"It's been a long time since I've seen her," Edwina claimed, casting her eyes to the side.

"A mother wouldn't forget her child's age, unless she gave the child to someone and wanted to forget."

Edwina frowned, accenting her heart-shaped face. Continuing to keep her eyes averted, she struggled to find words. "To my shame, I gave her away. I was alone. I had no coin to care for a child like her. I'd thought he could help her."

"So you remember the man's name?"

"Aye, Sedgewick."

"Do you remember your daughter's?" Aisley asked.

Perplexed, Edwina lifted her face. "M'lady?"

"You remember a stranger, yet hesitate to say your daughter's name."

"Her name's Merry."

Aisley didn't believe Edwina. "Why have you come looking for Merry after so long a time?"

"I had little money for a journey."

"That's changed?" Aisley tested, finding a bit of truth in Edwina now. Something about Edwina's features held a similarity to Angelica's round-faced features, the possibility of their relationship existed and it scared Aisley to admit it.

"Much has changed. I have married. When I told my husband about the child, he insisted that we come and see if she's safe."

"I doubt anything you say, but hear this," Aisley warned. "I will never let you anywhere near my daughter."

Again, Edwina lowered her face. "I only want to see her once, if you'll permit it."

"I think you should leave before I call for the Earl of Danford and have you removed from his land."

"Nay, you wouldn't."

"I would." Arms akimbo, Aisley stood her ground, prepared to protect Angelica from the likes of a woman who'd abandoned her. "Fair warning, do not return, unless you are prepared to deal with the Earl of Danford's wrath. He is my betrothed. He will protect our daughter from the likes of you."

"What of my husband? He will be angry if I leave without seeing Merry."

"That is for you to deal with. Before you go, tell me what happened to the young man who'd been helping to draw water from the well earlier."

"I don't know any young men from this village," Edwina replied.

"Then why were you watching him?" Aisley demanded.

"If you mean the tall, fair-haired boy, he ran into the woods," Edwina said. "I cannot say why."

"He wouldn't have done that. Did you lure him away?"

Edwina shrieked, "I'd never lure a boy. I'm married!"

"So you claim," Aisley scoffed. "Why isn't your husband with you now?"

"He was afraid to come to the village. He has made camp further into the forest and is awaiting my return."

"You and your husband must leave. Do not attempt to return or see my daughter ever again," Aisley warned.

Lowering her slight shoulders, Edwina bowed her head. "M'lady, I hope that your decision does not upset my husband. He is not a man to cross."

"Nor is Lord Danford," Aisley stated. "Be gone with you or I will call for the guards."

Edwina said nothing and stomped into the brush like a petulant child. Aisley waited, listening, the woods were quiet save for Edwina's small retreating footprints.

A dry twig cracked to her right. Aisley almost wished she would hear Sir Knight's familiar sawing. But as she drew her eyes to the sound, a dark figure rose from behind an enormous bush.

Aware that she'd been lured into the woods by a stranger, Garrick's long ago warning to be leery of strangers came roaring back to her as she turned and fled through the trees. Losing direction, she kept going, hoping to gain distance. Then she saw Valiant lying prone and bleeding. Pausing, she screamed when hard, heavy footsteps approached her from behind. A big arm lifted and her scream died as something thick and heavy cracked into her skull.

Pain and darkness overcame her as she fell to the ground and then she felt nothing.

Chapter Seventeen

"Lord Danford, there is trouble!" Valiant shouted, storming into the Earl of Danford's solar with the hope of finding Aisley.

"Valiant, what is amiss?" his mother asked.

"I need to speak with the Earl," he said.

"He's bathing," she told him. "Can it not wait? By the look and smell of you, you could use a bath as well."

"Mother, I need to know if Aisley returned to the manor. A bath can wait." Impatient, Valiant attempted to smooth his hand through his hair and failed. His fingers were caught in drying blood.

"She has been in her room most of the day." His mother strolled closer, her nostrils flaring when she scented his blood. "You are bleeding. What happened to you?"

Unwilling to be pampered, he stepped back before she could touch him. "It matters not. Aisley has not been in her room. She was with me and I lost her."

"Explain yourself, boy! Why was my betrothed with you?" Garrick commanded from the doorway. Silently, he marched into the room and waited.

"Forgive me, milord," Valiant said, remembering to lower his head and keep his eyes averted. "I accompanied Aisley to the village and was waiting for her by the well when a woman came up to me. She was pretty and I offered to help her retrieve some water. After talking with her, I grew concerned about who she was and followed her into the woods. She seemed such a small woman that I didn't think she could be dangerous, but she outwitted me with a rock. When I woke in the forest, I went to the village. However, I couldn't find Aisley. It is my hope that she returned to the manor safely."

"A pretty woman, the fall of many good men," his father said and stepped into the room behind Garrick.

Surprised that he'd not known of his father's approach, Valiant vowed he'd learn to use his gifts to their fullest extent. He may have caused trouble for Garrick's betrothed and he wanted to make amends. "This isn't the time for jests, Father. If something happened to Aisley, I will never forgive myself for failing to protect her."

"It was not intended to be a jest, tell us more." Lucien replied and walked to a livery cupboard where Garrick kept his ration of sustenance and a supply of cold meat and cheese.

"Aye, continue, first I will send Catarina to Aisley's chamber. If you find her missing, ask her maid if she's seen Aisley," Garrick commanded.

"Could she be with Angelica?" Catarina asked.

Garrick shook his head. "Nay, I've just come from Angelica's room."

"Then I shall check Aisley's chamber, milord," Catarina said and left.

Watching Catarina leave, Garrick fought the need to grab Valiant by the collar and shake him. As soon as he heard Valiant's shout, he'd known something was wrong. Even now, he was certain Aisley wouldn't be in her chambers, but he needed Catarina to look for her anyway.

Aisley's scent lingered about the manor house, though it wasn't as strong. He'd assumed he was at fault for that. He'd withdrawn his thoughts from her when he'd left earlier and hadn't tried to reach for her. He was still wounded by her disbelief and he didn't want to face another battle with his betrothed.

"Are you all right, Valiant? I see you are wounded," Garrick thought to inquire rather than pound his fists into the boy's face.

"Aye, milord, I'm fine." Valiant lowered his hand, showing his bloodstained fingers. Garrick had smelled his squire's injury when he was walking down the hall.

"Drink sustenance and pour some on the wound," Lucien urged, handing a chalice to his son.

"Right now all I care about is whether Aisley has returned," the squire said as he took the wine.

"Your concern is true, Valiant," Garrick said. "Tell me more of this woman you met."

"She was pretty, but sad, like she was lost. She surprised me by asking about Angelica. She didn't say Angelica's name, but she described her well."

Glaring at Valiant, Garrick buried a roar. "Why would she ask about Angelica?"

Valiant stalled, his amber eyes lowering to the floor. "She said she was the girl's mother and wished to speak with the Countess of Danford about her daughter's care."

"What did you say? Go on, tell me," Garrick demanded.

"I did not believe the woman. I couldn't sense any affection for the child. The oddest thing was...she spoke as if someone had told her what to say."

"You forget, son, she gave the child to a cozenor," Lucien said.

"Nay, I haven't, nor did she deny her misdeeds."

"We'll worry about the woman's claim later. First, Valiant, continue. What happened next?"

"I told her to leave or I'd take her to you," he said. "She fled into the forest, heading toward Fernley. I thought it best to follow her. I didn't trust what she might do to Angelica. Aisley had gone to visit a villager and I believed it was safe to leave for a short time."

"Thus explains the knock on the head with a rock," Lucien said. "Son, you have much to learn if you are to take my place amongst the Abcynians. Charging into the

forest was foolish enough. To take your eyes off your foe, male or female, could have been deadly."

"Do not rebuke him, my friend. His instincts were to protect Angelica." Garrick defended Valiant. Lucien's son had meant well by following the woman. "Do you recall the woman's name, Valiant? I will send some guards to look for her."

"Edwina," Valiant said. "Father, I'm aware of my error. Next time there is trouble, I will not fail Lord Danford or his family."

Garrick heard Catarina's quick steps coming toward the solar. As soon as she entered the room, he questioned her. "Was she there?"

"Nay, Garrick. No one has seen her. Nor were they aware she'd gone."

"Bloody hell, how did she leave without passing Brandon?"

Valiant responded. "She climbed out the window."

Garrick scowled and pinched his nose, something he rarely did to show his impatience. "How do you know this?" Hoping he didn't sound angry with his mate, he made certain to keep his voice steady. He wasn't certain if he was angry with her for escaping his guards notice or with himself for failing to stay and ease her fears.

"I watched her." Valiant finished his wine and walked to the cupboard. Pouring more sustenance, he kept his face turned away.

"Garrick, I was in the forest earlier. I did not sense Zotikos near Danford," Lucien said.

"Nor I, but he could have sent the woman. I need to go after her." Deciding on a course of action, Garrick looked at his squire. "Valiant, take your mother to the Angelica and keep watch over her. I'd feel better about leaving if I know the two of you are watching over my daughter."

Saddened because he'd failed to do protect his mate, Garrick vowed to make amends to Aisley the moment she returned. Her fears had been worsened by his temper and he hadn't tried to ease them. He should have been more patient and given her time to accept the truth.

"Is there anything else we can do?" Catarina offered.

"Protecting Angelica is enough. Inform Brandon that I'll need him to keep watch over the manor house while I'm gone."

Finding himself at the doorway, he wasn't surprised when Lucien joined him. He knew he didn't have to ask the eldest of Abcynian kind to help find Aisley.

Together, the two men marched to the courtyard, each taking a moment to look up at the graying sky. The sun was setting and they could have commanded men from the garrison to assist, but they wouldn't need it.

Garrick found Aisley's slightly weakened scent in the woods separating the village proper from the manor house. Aisley's scent grew stronger near the well. He'd also found the scent of a woman who'd recently lain with a man. The man liked to douse himself in ambergris, likely using the scent as both a lure and a mask, as it was more

commonly used by women. Thinking it might trace all the way to Zotikos, Garrick's worry increased.

The panthera within him caught the scent of almond oil over myriad scents lingering in the village. Lucien moved closer, following the scents and two sets of female footprints.

In the woods, Lucien roared mournfully when he came upon a rock stained with his son's blood. Further into the density, only one set of footprints remained and they weren't Aisley's. Her feet were bigger, her walk heavier than Edwina's. Garrick looked about and spied the broken and cracked branches left behind by someone who was large, male and sweated profusely, infusing the ground with a trail to follow.

He had smelled the sweaty male once before. He would never forget it. The man was Sedgewick Haywood, but the ambergris perfume did not belong to him. With such knowledge to track his mate, Garrick looked to Lucien, nodded and stalked into the thickest part of the woods.

Though it was still light, the full moon would aid his change. Quickly, he removed his clothes and tucked them under some brush. Offering a prayer for Aisley's behalf, he lifted his face skyward and called to the leopard.

* * * * *

Pain, insistent and pounding, alerted Aisley to danger. Opening her eyes to find herself staring into a fire, she tried to sit upright and fell back as a wave of sickness threatened to overwhelm the throbbing in her head.

"Easy there, witch, we wouldn't want you to become too ill to stand trial," a voice warned, sounding like Sedgewick Haywood.

Groaning, Aisley swallowed and sat up much more slowly. "Where am I?" Gingerly, she touched the back of her head. Something warm and damp clung to her fingers and she jerked her hand away, wincing as she did.

"Far from Danford, to be certain," Sedgewick said, laughing merrily.

"Are you mad? The moment my betrothed learns I've gone missing, he will come find me."

"That should be the least of your worries," another man said, the deeper voice chilling her to the bones. She recognized it in an instant. "Wouldn't you agree, darling?"

"Most certainly, my husband, given she's stolen my child," Edwina, the woman from the well, replied.

Ignoring the wetness on her fingers, Aisley tried to look about the dense brush. The brightness of the fire kept her from seeing far beyond the makeshift camp. There were two dark figures standing behind Haywood.

"Edwina, I recognize your voice," Aisley said. "I assure you, I'll never believe you to be Angelica's mother now."

"John, would you tell this woman to stop calling my daughter Angelica?" Edwina asked.

"You heard my wife, healer." John Brewster, the man Aisley knew to be Zotikos, stepped into the campsite. "The girl's name is Merry."

As he'd been in the tavern, he was dressed in the finery of a wealthy man. His manner was arrogant, his arm about Edwina's waist controlling, his smile looked lethal. This man meant her harm and his intentions had nothing to do with Angelica.

"She's being raised by a witch. We cannot permit that to continue, can we, darling?" Edwina asked.

"I'm not a witch," Aisley protested. "The Earl of Danford will protect me from your lies and see that the three of you answer for what you've done." Aisley felt calmer when thinking of Garrick. She hadn't any doubts about his ability to find her.

"What have we done?" Zotikos asked, escorting his wife to a log close to the fire and aiding her to sit.

"You know the answer," Aisley replied. A bout of sickness loomed, forcing her to swallowing hard. "It will not work, you know? Marrying a woman who claims to be Angelica's mother isn't going to endear you to Lord Danford. He adores Angelica. He'll not permit you to harm her."

"Witchcraft is evil, you must account for your wickedness," Sedgewick interrupted. Using a long twig, he poked the fire's ashes, his eyes on the flames. "We know you can converse with the Earl without saying a word aloud. What else can you do? Have you a favorite spell?"

"I know nothing of what you speak," Aisley said.

"She commands a beast," Zotikos claimed. "It's a leopard, a black one."

"I've seen what wolves can do to a village. I'd not known there were leopards in England," Sedgewick replied, looking frightened. "Are they like lions?"

Zotikos bowed his head slightly. "They're related to lions, or so I'm told. Some call them panthers," he said.

"Surely a black panther must be possessed of the devil," Sedgewick accused, spitting into the fire.

"I do not command beasts or anything evil." Aisley touched the back of her head, feeling blood. The blood wasn't drying, it was getting worse.

"Don't you, healer?" Zotikos questioned, his face made ugly by the eerie cast of firelight flickering back and forth. "When we'd met in Fernley, I heard the beast follow you into the woods. Did he catch you?"

"I don't know what you mean." Inwardly, she'd known Sir Knight had chased her, yet it was Garrick who'd stepped around the tree.

"I think you lie," Zotikos accused. "Witches are known for their lies."

"Cease, no more, please. Help me or let me go," she pled.

"We cannot help one who refuses to admit to her wickedness," Sedgewick claimed.

Whatever Aisley wanted to say was quelled behind the sadness that warred with the pain throbbing in her head. Uncertainty and fear made matters worse, making her wish to be with Garrick again. He made her feel safe. He would protect Angelica and set everything to rights.

She didn't know if Garrick was capable of changing into a leopard, but she believed he was capable of being a good husband and father. If he came for her or if she found a way to escape, she vowed to listen to him. She would try to believe. Mayhap he really was far more than human, just as he claimed.

Though it pounded mercilessly, her head told her a man couldn't be more than four hundred years old, nor could he change into another being. Her heart, however, compared him to Sir Knight. They had the same eyes, the same dark brown hair and defined, regal features. Both smelled of cinnamon and musk. Was it possible?

"Look, she grows quiet," Edwina said, her words spoken slowly. "She calls for her lover. It is good that we took her away from him. She will answer for her deeds."

"I've called to no one," Aisley whispered. "Leave me be. I've done nothing to any of you. All I did was save an adorable little girl."

"I'm her mother," Edwina shouted. "You've been raising her to be a...a witch. My husband will have you executed and Merry will be mine again. Mayhap the Church can save her soul."

"How dare you!" Alarmed for Angelica, Aisley lunged for Edwina. The bitter fluid of choler burned her throat, causing her to fall to her hands and knees, one hand finding the hot ash of the fire.

"Agh!" she screamed. Plucking her hand from further harm, she fell to the ground and emptied her stomach until there was nothing left inside of her. By the time Aisley sat up, her hand was hurting worse than her head. Her throat felt scorched by the choler, her tongue tasted bitter.

"Can I have some aid, a bandage, mayhap?" Aisley attempted to regain her composure, but she smelled vile and felt as if she'd purge again.

"Why should we help the condemned?" Sedgewick sneered.

"You almost died by the Earl of Danford's hand. I saved you, remember?"

"A mark in your favor, I grant you," Sedgewick said, sounding as pompous as he had the night they'd met. "I warned you not to touch what was mine. Now you know what will happen for defying me."

"You're angry because you cannot earn a halfpenny without Angelica," Aisley replied.

"I've been eating like a Lord of the Realm and sleeping in houses as elegant as Danford's. I don't need halfpennies."

"With Zotikos' coin, no doubt," Aisley said.

"Who?" Sedgewick asked.

"The man you call John Brewster. You shouldn't trust him just because he offers you good food and a place to sleep. Evil can mask itself with wealth and charm."

"As beauty can," Sedgewick countered. "You've a pretty face, regardless of your spots and witch's mark. It is little wonder why a man like Danford chose you."

"It's a tiny birthmark. The spots are freckles, nothing more."

Falling silent, she tried not to look at Zotikos for any length of time. Vaguely, she remembered Garrick teaching her how to defend herself against his enemy. Unfortunately, her hand stung and her head wouldn't cease pounding. Her hair was heavy and wet with blood and she was scared witless.

"Could I at least get a cloth for my head?" she requested. "My hand can wait." Even though it couldn't, she wanted to distract her captors.

"She's right," Zotikos decided, surprising Aisley. "Edwina, go and find something from our bedding."

"As you command," Edwina said.

Aisley watched Edwina walk into the brush with a stiffness that suggested her inability to do nothing other than what she was told.

"Obedient little thing," she murmured to herself.

"I ask and she does," Zotikos said, proving he'd heard. "Isn't that right, Sedgewick?"

"Aye, milord, you've a dutiful wife. I wonder if the healer would have been the same for Danford."

"Cease, my betrothed is coming for me. I know it," Aisley insisted.

Zotikos leaned closer to the fire, the flames appearing to part as smoke floated upward. "You assume he even knows to search for you. His squire may not have awakened yet. It is possible that he didn't awaken at all."

Groaning with alarm and sickness, Aisley closed her eyes against the image of Valiant's prone body.

What a fool she'd been to follow where a stranger led. Garrick had warned of the danger, yet she'd failed to take heed.

"If Valiant is dead his father will kill you, Zotikos."

"Are you mad? The man before you is John Brewster," Sedgewick scolded. "Threatening him is foolish when your life is at stake." He chuckled at that and pointed to the fire.

"You needn't defend me," Zotikos interrupted. "Why don't you go and see where my wife has gone?"

Sedgewick nodded and stalked off in the same manner as Edwina.

"Healer, many have tried to kill me. I always return, in one form or another," Zotikos replied with an evil leer, his face glowing red from the flames around him.

Sedgewick and Edwina might be fooled into believing he was John Brewster, a wealthy gentleman, but everything in her warned that she was looking at the face of evil.

"It doesn't take much to return or stay among those who may initially be reluctant to trust me. Promise vengeance, coin, luxuries unimaginable and I am accepted. Thus far I've become a confidant, a friend, a lover, a noble and warrior. Whatever the need, I provide." He looked at her then, his smile as chilling as winter. "I can provide for you, healer. You only need to join me and I will protect you for life."

Unknowingly, Zotikos had given Aisley the hope of escape. "I want nothing from you."

"You don't want the things I can give you? You will need them to live."

"I want you to leave, Zotikos," Aisley said, spying the stricken look on his face.

He pushed to his feet, his arms across his chest, his purple clothing lending an air of such falseness it was a wonder Edwina and Sedgewick didn't smell it. Firelight revealed the thinness of the silk, the mended patterns and frayed edges. He had become very good at making people think he had money. He smelled like sweat and costly fragrance.

"You haven't any idea whom you're dealing with," Zotikos finally spoke, his voice garbled with menace. "You will do as I say, just as my minions do."

"Go away, I command you," Aisley hissed, ignoring the sharp pain in her head and hand.

"If I go, your wounds will attract animals. Your hand is burnt. The skin is blistered and peeling off. As a healer, you know what that means. You stink of choler. Blood is seeping from your head. Fresh blood, dare I say. I'm good with a needle. I can stitch the wound and wrap your hand if you'd like. Of course, you must permit me."

Ignoring the temptation of being mended, Aisley refused. "Nay, I say to you, nay. Go from me, far, far away. Take your wife and Sedgewick and go."

If she weren't in pain Aisley might have laughed at the strangled moan emanating from Zotikos' throat. He was scared. She had rendered him speechless and his eyes were cast downward.

"I give you one last warning, healer," Zotikos sneered toward the ground, backing up. "Should I leave, I'll not remain quiet for long. I'll return and bring you to your knees. All you need do to halt any trouble befalling you or Danford is to join me of your own accord."

Aisley wasn't certain what to do or say. He wouldn't look upon her and darkness had surrounded him when he stepped back.

"Never," she claimed. "You don't scare me any more. I know how to be rid of you."

"Do you." Zotikos snickered, a strange sound coming from a man who wouldn't, or couldn't, move closer to the fire. "I know what Garrick Forrester is. He is both man and beast. His kind and mine have been at war since before history was recorded by man. Should I need to, I will expose his evil. Charges of heresy will damn him to Hell."

"Nay, nay," she said, shivering. "Garrick Forrester is stronger than you. Be gone."

"You've sealed your demise and his," he forewarned, turning from the fire and stalking into the woods.

"You're letting her go?" Edwina shrieked a moment later. "What of the child? She's ours. You promised she'd come live with me again."

"You needn't fear," Zotikos soothed from a slight distance. "I've decided to leave the healer to the wolves. The animals can have the likes of her."

Fearing he'd return, Aisley managed to stand and withdraw from the fire. Zotikos had said his kind were like Garrick's. Could he change form?

Regardless of what awaited her in the forest, Aisley stumbled forward, her dizziness remaining with each step she took. Looking back briefly, she saw the dim light of the fire and tried to rush on. With a dull thump, she collided with a hard, aged tree and fell back.

On her bottom, aching and scared, Aisley stared upward, catching a blurred glimpse of the full moon. Garrick had said it was easiest to change during the full moon. Had he done so tonight? She hadn't a doubt he'd come for her if he knew of her plight, and somehow she knew he did. Would he come in the form of Sir Knight or himself?

"I believe him," Aisley whispered. "Pray forgive me, Garrick, and know I'll listen the next time we're together." If they were together, she thought, grimacing against the pain.

Thinking of Garrick, Aisley struggled to her feet and limped on. From a distance she heard a deep-voiced command. A frightening howl followed. The lonely sound was joined by another and another.

"Please, Garrick, now would be a good time to hear your voice," Aisley prayed, remembering that she hadn't heard his roar since she awoke in his arms earlier that morn. She would have loved to hear it again. She'd love to hear anything that would quell the howling.

She tried to flee, stumbled a time or two, but made amazing strides considering she hadn't any idea where she was. She'd lost the light of the moon, hidden now by the density of the forest, and darkness set in all around.

And the howling, from the left to the right, from behind and ahead of her, continued. Eerie, threatening and very, very near. Her eyesight had adjusted slightly to the darkness, but the path was blurry.

Suddenly, a scurry in the brush ahead brought her to a halt. Whatever had scurried by had been large and dark. It was then she realized the howling had stopped. Mayhap the wolves had gone away or something chased them away?

"Garrick?" she called out.

Her answer came in the form of a low, menacing bawling. A large black wolf emerged from the brush. Though she could barely see it, she imagined its teeth were

bared. The baying continued and more wolves joined the leader until she was surrounded.

"Easy," she said, quietly, hoping to calm the closest, smallest wolf. "I'll not hurt you. Easy there."

Fighting her fear, Aisley stood still. Bolting would only make them chase her and she wasn't fast enough to get away from a whole pack of wolves.

"Don't," she begged, screaming in earnest when the biggest wolf lunged.

Chapter Eighteen

Garrick followed the trail of Aisley's blood, almond oil, ambergris and the pungent smell of male and female sweat until he detected wood smoke.

In leopard form, he bounded in the direction of the smoke. Her almond scent grew stronger as he went, but Aisley was gone before he came upon the encampment. Zotikos, a woman and a sweating Sedgewick Haywood had gone off without Aisley, leaving her vulnerable from injury.

His lion companion, Lucien, stalked the path Zotikos and his followers had taken, allowing Garrick to search for his mate alone.

Aisley, hear me, he called to her with the strength of his thoughts, believing she wasn't too far from the camp.

Scenting her blood-tainted almond path, Garrick leapt in the direction she'd gone. He'd just crossed a fallen tree when the odor of wolves reached him. Urgently, he surged toward the pack's scent when he heard them howl.

"Garrick, I need you!" he heard Aisley cry, her fear slicing through his gut, tearing his world asunder.

I'm coming, little one, he tried to assure.

It was hardest to speak with one's mate while turned and his concentration had to remain on reaching her quickly. Aisley's screams continued to send chills down his spine.

Her abrupt silence terrified him.

With one last charge, Garrick came upon Aisley and the pack of wolves. He slashed through the pack, giving little notice to the discarded beasts in his path.

Only one wolf remained. The pack leader gave warning as it lifted its face from Aisley's neck and snarled. The wolf's only thoughts were to guard its prey and to eat. Garrick's was to kill. Like the predator he was, he struck and flung the beast's lifeless body away.

Aisley, hear me.

Wanting to change, but fearing she'd be left alone too long or that the change would harm her further, Garrick nudged Aisley's limp form. He smelled her blood, the sourness of sickness and heard her heartbeat. Though it was weak, it continued, giving him hope.

Open your eyes. The wolves have gone, he said, gently nuzzling her shoulder.

Aisley's quiet groan reached him. "Garrick...you came for me."

I could do nothing less.

"Garrick, she has too many wounds for us to move her safely. You know what you must do," Lucien warned in human form.

Garrick couldn't speak aloud to Lucien. He looked only at his mate *If you hear me, nod, Aisley.*

She nodded, opening her eyes slowly. "I...can...hear. Wolves, they attacked. He let me go and sent them to attack me."

"Remain still while we look at you," Lucien instructed, kneeling beside them. "She needs your essence, Garrick."

Garrick knew Lucien was right. Aisley had been bitten and torn, her head wound was gaping open and bleeding and her hand was burnt. His stomach lurched and he shook his head. He had seen the degradation of war and bloodshed countless times before. But if he was in his human form at that moment, he might have become ill at the sight of the woman he loved covered in blood and saliva.

Aisley, I can heal you, but it will begin your conversion. You'll have to trust me to do what I must to save you, he said, praying she'd forgive him for relinquishing her choice. He hadn't intended her change to begin this way.

"I don't think I can be healed," she whispered. She fell silent, her eyes beginning to close.

Do not give up like that. I command you to stay with me. You're mine and I intend to keep you for eternity. If he was in human form, Garrick would have smiled when his orders caused her eyes to flutter open.

"I'm sorry," she mumbled. "You were telling the truth. I believe you now, Garrick. I see the leopard and know it is you. Can I touch you?"

"There's little time to delay, Garrick," Lucien warned.

Garrick responded with a mild roar, telling his friend to give him room. It didn't surprise him when Lucien snarled and touched his hand to Aisley's shoulder. Lucien wouldn't leave a friend in need, even one who belonged to another.

Touch me, if you can, Garrick invited his mate, hoping she would.

Slowly, Aisley raised her hand. Her fingers trembled with the exertion, but it pleased him to know she could move. At last she touched him. No one had ever tried to touch the leopard. Bravely, she smoothed her hand over his nose, his forehead and right to his ear and she scratched him. It felt so bloody good that he could have let her continue for days.

"You're beautiful," she muttered as her hand fell to the ground.

"Garrick, do it now!"

Not needing Lucien's urgent command, Garrick lowered to the ground beside Aisley. *This may hurt. Do not be afraid.*

Lucien grasped her uninjured forearm, tore away what remained of her sleeve and offered Garrick her wrist. Scenting her pulse, he searched for the easiest place to bite and found it on the back of her wrist, where a pale blue vein awaited.

She whispered something in a voice so quiet it barely stirred the air.

Garrick sniffed, licking her skin, hoping that would soothe her. Taking her wrist into his mouth, he bit hard.

She struggled the moment he broke her flesh.

Lucien consoled her. "Settle, Aisley, let him heal you."

"It hurts!"

"I know, child. Feel what he's doing, he's giving you warmth, life. All that he is, he gives you now."

To Garrick's relief, Aisley settled, permitting him to hold onto her wrist without bearing down too much. Her bones could not withstand more pressure. Before she could struggle anew, his canines pierced her vein and his panthera's essence began to flow into her.

"God's teeth," Aisley squeaked, startling Garrick. "He's...naked!"

"You'll not remember on the morrow," Lucien said and moved from Aisley's view.

Garrick didn't talk. He simply gave all that he could and watched as his mate fell into a deep slumber.

* * * * *

"Garrick!" Aisley called out as she reluctantly opened her eyes.

"I'm here, little one," Garrick responded, sounding gentle, but far away.

Aisley looked about. She was resting on a bed, a very large, comfortable bed with blue covers. A second look revealed she was in Garrick's enormous curtained bed, her nakedness hidden by silk covers.

The last thing she remembered was being in the forest, on the ground, with wolves attacking her!

"Oh Garrick," she gasped. She'd come so close to leaving him and never once had admitted her love.

Movement in a darkened corner brought her attention around, revealing Garrick coming toward the bed. "It's all right, Aisley, do not fret. You're safe now," he said.

Upon nearing the bed, he pulled the gossamer curtains aside and looked down at her. Large, regal and confident, he wore only a silk tunic and breeches.

"How do you feel?" he asked, perching on the bed nearest to where she lay.

"Umm, sore, I think," she said, uncertain.

Although her muscles and bones protested movement, her first instinct was to touch her head. Her hair was freshly cleaned, soft, sleep ruffled, but untangled. She couldn't find a lump, but there was a tender spot just above her nape.

"What happened, had I dreamt being captured by Zotikos?"

"It wasn't a dream."

"Oh," she breathed.

How could it be that her head, which should have borne a terrible wound, had almost healed? On second thought, she'd burned her right hand. Able to see enough with the dim candlelight cast upon the bed, she gaped. She hadn't really looked at her hand until now, but it should have been blistered. Her palm was dark pink and tingled.

"How can this be?" she finally demanded as she struggled to sit up.

"Lay back, little one," Garrick instructed. "You're healing better than I'd hoped, but you'll still feel sore and must continue to rest."

Frowning, she checked her bare arms. She'd been bitten by the wolves. Scars lined her skin, but they were small and thin. "Have I been sleeping so long my injuries are almost gone?"

"You've slept for two days. Aisley, do you remember the bite?"

"I remember many bites. There were wolves, I think." Acknowledging she did need to lie back, she sighed gratefully when Garrick fluffed her pillows and eased her head to the cushions. "Weren't there wolves?"

"Aye, there were many." He shifted on the bed, scooting her to the center as he swung his legs up and reclined beside her. She was supported by pillows, he by the elaborate headboard. "I was terrified for you, little one. Had I lost you, I'd only have myself to blame for the way I handled telling you about me. I frightened you and that was never my intention."

Sensing the truth in his confession and his need for solace, she blurted, "I believe you. I mean, I believe in you. I know I was wrong to doubt your word, Garrick. Pray understand. I needed to accept your gifts in my own way."

"I knew you would soon enough. Abcynians believe that our true mate is destined long before we meet. A true mate is someone that we can trust, someone who can accept us and guard the truth of what we are." Aisley half expected him to be angry with her, yet he wasn't. "I'm pleased that you accept what I am, Aisley. Now, I pray you will accept yourself as well."

"I do not understand."

"I'll try to explain."

In the candlelit room, she could see the similarities he shared with Sir Knight. The arch of his cheekbones, the shape of his nose and the width of his full mouth spoke of the leopard's regal features.

"Again I ask, do you remember the bite?"

"I umm...well...oh, wait, you bit me!" Suddenly alarmed, Aisley bucked upward. It was Garrick's much faster reflexes that caught her and his strength that kept her from harm. "Garrick Forrester, you bit me and it hurt."

"Only for a moment," he agreed, his green eyes softening with concern. "Think on it, Aisley. What do you remember of the bite?"

"That it hurt." Sir Knight's jaws had clamped on her wrist, holding her still. His canines had gouged her flesh, tearing it, as if searching for...a vein. "I thought you were trying to drink my blood. And then..." she stalled, uncertain if she really remembered. "Then something warm flowed into my arm and spread throughout my body. It was like being hungry and then given a feast fit for royalty, where one eats so much that they can sleep for days afterward. Is that how I was supposed to feel?"

"It depends upon what your body needs. You needed healing and the leopard's bite gave you rest and replenished your blood. If I'd bitten you while I was bedding you, your pleasure would have been enhanced."

Remembering the pleasures she'd already known by his hands and kisses, Aisley realized they were alone in his bedchamber once again. Wickedly, she wished she weren't so sore. She'd very much like to share kisses and touches with Garrick again.

"Umm, I realize this is not what we've been discussing, but what time of day is it?"

"The sun has just risen."

"Does anyone know you are here?"

"Lucien has been aware that we've been sharing a bed for some time now. He probably knows where I am," Garrick confessed. "Aisley, no one will speak against you. He certainly will not give us away. You needn't worry." Sweetly, in a gesture she hadn't expected, he leaned forward and kissed her jaw. "Let us return to the conversation, shall we? What else do you remember?"

"I fell asleep while you were biting me. After that, I cannot recall much."

"I was compelled to bite you twice more. Your wounds were serious enough that Lucien and I felt uncomfortable waiting to bring you back to Danford to tend you."

"Truly?"

"Aye," he said. He took her left wrist and brought it into view. "Look, Aisley, you wear my mark."

Two puncture marks were present on the back of her left wrist. The candlelight reflected upon them, revealing iridescent swirls leading from the punctures, which resembled a pair of eyes. On closer look, a leopard's face had begun to take form. It was nearly identical to Garrick's mark, only much smaller.

"What does this mean?" Intrigued more than frightened, she glanced at him, her wrist and then back at him again.

"I gave you the essence of the leopard when I bit you."

"You mean I can change into a leopard?" Uncertain if she liked that, Aisley made to scoot away. Garrick held her still with one arm.

"As far as we know, only those born with panthera blood can change form. You, however, will gain the abilities of a leopard. You will possess the strength of several men and hunt with a predator's instinct. In truth, the next time you play chess, your ability to adapt and strategize will come to the fore. You may actually beat me at the game."

Aisley smiled at that. "Will I always have these abilities?"

"The change is permanent. It will take time before you fully realize your strengths."

"You said only those born with panthera blood can change form, why is that so?"

Garrick drew in a breath, his nostrils flaring, and she knew he detected her almond scent. Just the same, she smelled him, cinnamon, musk and man.

He smiled, lowering her hand to rest close to his heart. "I wish I could give you the answer you seek. Understanding Abcynian lineage is difficult, especially for those of us who are like me. I cannot tell you the why of things, only what is."

"Do you have a suspicion as to why you can change and I cannot?"

"Lucien and I are among the second generation of Abcynians capable of changing into their panther halves. My father could, but my grandfather could not. Many believe it took a very long time for our bodies to adjust to the panther within and not allow the animal to overtake us. Abcynians live long lives, we always have. My grandfather was over fifteen hundred years old when he died, my father a thousand. He'd have lived longer had he not been killed in battle. He first changed upon reaching adulthood at two hundred. Lucien's father was the same."

"I imagine living to such an age can be both difficult and blessed."

"Aye, little one, you speak true. Longevity has allowed my family to maintain an earldom and two baronies. All of which provide for our children, Abcynians, and more so, defense for our English brethren from Saturians."

"Saturians?" she questioned.

"Zotikos is Saturian. Saturians have the ability to live very long lives and they can convert others, much like Abcynians. But the converted must drink Saturian blood daily in order to maintain their gifts. My ancestors have been at war with the Saturians for centuries."

"It must be difficult to live such long lives and face what seems like an endless war," Aisley said.

"It is unexplainable. Like the Saturians, we must witness the deaths of friends and confidants. That is largely why I strove to remain distant from my servants and soldiers."

"There were other reasons for maintaining your distance, weren't there?"

"It was necessary to keep anyone from looking too closely at the disguises I used to assume the identities of three earls. Sometimes I wore my hair very short, sometimes long or as dictated by fashion. A full beard can alter a man's face. The absence of a beard can make one look younger. I wasn't afraid to use dirt and kohl to enhance, hide or create lines or aging spots upon my face. I also had the benefit of Abcynian Guards, humans who learned of us and vowed to protect what we are. As wrong as it may seem to hide our gifts, it was necessary to protect our family and to assure that our kind thrives."

Believing Garrick was saddened by the necessity of disguise, she asked, "Couldn't you have given Danford to one of your Abcynian Guards or a younger Abcynian male?"

Garrick stared for a moment, seeming to contemplate how to answer. "I inherited the earldom after I was able to change. While burying my father, I vowed to uphold the title as was my birthright. Fortunately, once we have sons, we will have a way to maintain the earldom," he said.

Aisley had to smile at that. Garrick may have been born Abcynian, but he was also an English nobleman. He viewed the earldom as his God-given right. To relinquish it to another would not have occurred to him unless he had an heir.

"Do leopards live long lives?" Aisley wondered aloud, curious to learn more about Abcynians and the abilities she was to gain.

"Not necessarily," he said.

"Does that mean that I will only gain the leopard's abilities?"

"Aye, if only the leopard bit you."

Aisley didn't quite understand what he meant. It was Sir Knight who'd bitten her, so it would be his instincts she'd possess. She wouldn't age as Garrick did. Saddened, she lowered her eyes, hoping to hide her disappointment.

"Do not look away," Garrick countered, touching his hand to her chin. "Why do you hide from me, Aisley? Have I said something to upset you?"

"Aye, a little, I may change, but I'll not be like you." Unable to stop herself, she admitted, "Garrick, I love you. I've loved you since the night we met. I shall honor my commitment to you as your wife, but you'll stay young and handsome and I'll age. Upon my death, you'll seek a new bride and—" A firm thumb pressed to her lips, silencing her.

"Do not think such a thing, much less speak of it, little one." Garrick grew impatient and propped himself on his elbow. "Didn't you hear me say if you were to be bitten only by the leopard?"

"Aye, you bit me when you were changed."

"Just as I shall bite you as a man," he told her.

Aisley scowled. She could understand why a leopard might bite, but a man? If she understood the process, he'd have to bite hard enough and deep enough to reach her vein.

"Why would you do that?" she asked.

He grinned wickedly and her toes began to tingle. "Biting is part of Abcynian mating and conversion. Through biting, we share our essences, allowing you to age along with me."

"Is that what happened with your wives, Garrick?"

"I never converted them." Oddly pleased by his confession, Aisley permitted him to ease his head to her pillow so they could share it. "Right or wrong, I chose my wives by

the dictates of the earldom. Like many arranged marriages, we lived separate lives. Cambria was always frightened of me and chose to go into seclusion after losing our babe shortly before he was to be born. Edith told me she was with child and hid the truth until the babe was to be delivered. I'd foolishly believed I'd finally have a son, only to learn he was a lie to keep me from getting her with child. I never knew she harbored a fear of childbirth until her death or that she took some sort of potion to prevent having a babe. To the world, both marriages produced heirs. In reality, there was much bickering and hatred. I never developed the trust needed to tell them what I am. The fault, I confess, was my burden, not theirs."

"Yet you wish to convert me?" Aisley inquired, disliking the vulnerable wobble in her voice.

"Of course," he said.

"Why?"

"Look into my eyes and see for yourself. Hear my heartbeat, feel it," he invited, pressing her palm flat to his chest.

Steady and sure, his heart thumped against her splayed hand. The tingle, still present from the healing, increased, warming as Garrick's breath fanned her fingertips.

Unable to move, she stared into the emerald depths of his eyes, discovering her image reflecting back at her. Garrick saw her, every asset, every freckle and the small birthmark near her jaw, and she knew he found her beautiful.

"You love me," she finally realized, wishing she'd known all along.

"I love you with every breath of my being." Facing each other, their heads still resting upon the pillow, Aisley found she didn't want to be anywhere else but beside Garrick Forrester for the remainder of her life. By rights, she should be terribly frightened, yet his honesty about his past and his love enabled her to trust his intentions implicitly. "I've told you from the first that you were meant to be mine. I came to the village the night we met because I sensed you and I had to learn if my instincts were right. I fell in love with you the moment I watched you face a dastard's sword to save Angelica."

Her heart pounding, Aisley reached over to brush his long hair from his chin. "I wish I'd known sooner, I might have believed you when you revealed your secrets."

"I thought it best to earn your trust in me as a man before you learned of the leopard."

"Thinking back on it, I'd have to admit you were right to persuade me slowly. So, what does this mean, Garrick? If we mate, how does that differ from marriage?"

"Biting and sharing our essence is as binding as marriage vows. However, I understand that you need the vows of Christian marriage to feel secure as my wife, thus I want that as well," he added, grinning mischievously. "I want the vows and the customs any English noble should expect. Not until our wedding night will we mate. Once we do, you will grow old along my side."

"How could you have known that I would be your mate the night we met?"

"The leopard knew. You must understand that when I'm in leopard form, my soul recognizes you and I can speak with you through our minds. The panther knows you only as my human mate and can do nothing other than protect you. Should I ever be so cruel as to hurt you or turn to another, he would risk death to defend your honor."

Amazed, she caressed her fingers across his chest and wished he weren't wearing a linen gypon. "Will you tell me more of your Abcynian past? I want to know everything. My father spoke of Abcynians as myths, but he knew what you were, didn't he?"

"Aye, as did your mother. They were part of the Abcynian Guard. Without the Guards, Abcynians would not have kept their place in the known world."

"And your past?" she prodded.

"The history of Abcynians is older than you'd think. What I know has been passed down from a time not recorded by men. At one time we were great in number and flourished in a land prevalent with animals, great and small. The Creator enabled us to communicate with the animals, panthers among them."

"You've spoken of panthers several times. Is that another name for a leopard?"

"Lions, tigers and leopards are part of the panther family and the three great beasts roamed free in Abcynia. It is believed that a lioness trained Lucien's great-great grandmother to hunt and she handed her knowledge down to her children. When the Saturians came to our land, they longed to use the panthers to devour rival civilizations. They fooled Abcynians with promises of gold. If we were to join them in war and conquer faraway lands, they would have given us riches beyond imagining. Our forefathers almost conquered great civilizations for gold, but they resisted and Saturians turned their love of war on us. Abcynia was destroyed. Many were killed. By a miracle, the Creator saved as many of our kind as he could by sending the remaining panthers to them."

"Am I right to presume the panthers bit those who had lived?"

"Aye," he said. "It was a long, long time ago, Aisley. Not even our forefathers remember the whole story, nor do we know precisely where Abcynia was. You see, upon the conclusion of the war, the bitten were sent to sleep. They woke in a strange land with clothes on their backs and seedlings from our homeland lying beside them.

From that day forth, Abcynians forged their lives among the ancient civilizations, the Greeks and Romans among those you'd recognize by name. Some scattered and became part of the barbarian tribes, the Goths and the Vikings among them. It is believed that in the days of the Roman Empire, some went to Hispania and Asia. Others, like my grandfather, came to Britannia, and because they could adapt and appear to be of the same lineage, Abcynians have long been part of what's now known as England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland. To maintain our abilities, we must drink sustenance, avoid touching gold, for it led to Abcynia's downfall, and protect those we live amongst."

"Garrick, I am so sorry. The Saturians took much from Abcynian kind. It is little wonder as to why you detest Zotikos."

Garrick's lip curled. "Zotikos is the eldest of his kind, yet he is different in his decision to accept immortality at the cost of his soul. His current body can be destroyed. It has been done many times. He possesses something inside him that is incessantly evil and can return. He can mimic goodness, control another's mind once he's earned their trust. He is perceived as a man of wealth and privilege. While not all Saturians are like him, he has managed to convince enough of them that Abcynians and anyone who befriends us should be destroyed. Once he sent a spy to infiltrate my father's retainers. Because of his treachery, my father died on a battlefield when one of his soldiers thrust a sword into his back and Zotikos pierced his heart with a dagger."

"Dear God, it is little wonder as to why you've wanted to protect me from him. Is there anyway to stop Zotikos?"

"Aye, you know what it is. His evil must be allowed, hence the reason he mimics goodness and prosperity. He's charming to the ladies, generous to men, coaxes vengeance, temptations, jealousies, all of which become spellbinding."

"He can cast spells?" Vaguely, she recalled how strangely Edwina and Sedgewick acted in the forest.

"That's the simplest way to explain his power over others. As I've told you, he cannot stay where he isn't invited. As an earl, Danford is mine. The lands, the tenants and the villagers fall under my protection. Zotikos cannot come here without my permission."

"What of me? As your betrothed, I'd think I would be protected as well."

"You are, as long as you don't accept his presence willingly."

"I didn't accept it, and yet, he took me from you."

"He lured you away from Danford by sending a woman claiming to be Angelica's mother."

Aisley drew back. She loved Angelica as though she was her own daughter, but she'd not thought of her until now. "I haven't asked about Angelica, I'm ashamed."

"You've been through much these last few days. Angelica is fine and eager to visit with you."

"I do love her, Garrick."

"I know. She does as well." He permitted her to rest her hand on the mattress between them, his fingers combing through her hair. She sensed that Garrick needed to touch her, even in such a small way, and she wanted him to keep touching her. "Let yourself heal and come to terms with what you shall become as my mate, Aisley. It's all right to have a conversation that doesn't include Angelica. I promise the same when we have more children."

"You want more children with me?" Touched, and growing warm at the thought of having Garrick's babes, Aisley reached out to stroke his hair as well. It was so soft, like silk, and she remembered Sir Knight's coat feeling similar.

"Aye, I need an heir and would like both sons and daughters. Fortunately, I will know when you are able to conceive and we can decide when we should have children," he stated, serious even as his eyes sparkled. He'd begun to purr and she knew his thoughts were turning wicked. "I give you fair warning, little one. Abcynian males need to copulate frequently, especially when their mate is fertile. When we're ready, we'll have many children."

"Aren't most men that way?"

"Many enjoy bedding women, but not necessarily the way Abcynians do. When I take you, Aisley, I will devote myself to your pleasure and demand the same from you. Unless you are ill or unable to receive me, there will not be a night when we do not mate."

She suspected that, as much as they'd shared previously, her betrothed had held much of his ardor and needs at bay. He would likely continue to do so until they married. She only hoped she had could resist him now that she knew he loved her.

"Dare I admit how much I want to be with you, my lord? But if you wanted more now, I fear I'd disappoint you. I'm very tired all of a sudden."

"You could never disappoint me. You're still healing and need rest. I'll bring you sustenance and it will rid the last of the scars and return your strength."

"Being bitten by the leopard enables me to take sustenance?"

"Aye, you should drink it daily from now on." He smoothed his hand to her nape, bringing her a little closer, his lips touching hers. "I've a most important question to ask you, my love," he said, his words so sweet that her heart flipped over. She liked being called his love.

"Ask away, my lord," she returned.

"When we marry, will you let me convert you?"

"Hasn't that already been decided?"

"Nay, you'll be my wife and my countess. I'll never free you from that. I want your complete conversion to be of your choosing. I want to give you my love, my essence, everything that I am, I want to give you. Accept and we will live as man and wife for centuries."

"I accept you, Garrick Forrester. If you give me your love, I shall protect, honor and cherish it for the remainder of our lives."

"As will I," he vowed with a kiss. His lips were firm, insistent, yet tempered with gentleness.

"I must ask, is Valiant all right? I spotted him in the woods near the village and he'd been —" Garrick silenced her with another kiss.

Still gentle, he teased the outer edges of her lips and slipped the tip of his tongue between them, breaking the seam and deepening the kiss. He tasted and smelled of sustenance, spices, cinnamon and man. When he withdrew, she protested and attempted to capture his tongue by sucking it deep.

"Aisley," he groaned upon being released. "Continue doing things like that and I'll not be capable of waiting until our wedding night. You haven't any idea what that does to me."

"Does that mean my hero has an Achilles heel?"

"Your lips are plump and sweet. Kissing you will never be a weakness."

"Good, I hope you'll kiss me often. But what of Valiant?" she insisted.

"He's fine. He alerted us to search for you."

"I'm glad he's well. I like Valiant very much."

"That's good. When his parents leave, he will remain my squire and learn the ways of a knight, more so, the ways of Abcynians."

"I can think of no one better to teach him than you, Garrick. He has remarkable features and I suspect he's going to be bigger than his father. I imagine he'll need guidance regarding the ladies as he grows. They will want him."

"Careful, you'll not want me to become jealous. Any rival for your affections can be considered prey."

"Are you teasing me?"

"Only a little, I would never hurt Valiant. I trust your loyalty and he knows you are my mate. However, should anyone attempt to take you from me, I would kill them."

"Garrick, Zotikos threatened to come after me when I'd foiled his plan. I remembered he had to seek permission to remain in my presence and I wouldn't grant it. He was furious and tried to persuade me to join him by threatening to cause trouble for you. I know not what he meant or what he plans, but I fear what he might do in the future."

"We need to continue living our lives the way we always do. I'll not let him ruin our happiness by ignoring our duties to each other and the earldom. I'll also send messengers to Henry to ascertain whether he's heard anything regarding us or this land. I have the King's trust, he should protect us regardless of what he may hear or learn from Zotikos."

"Know I trust you to keep Danford safe."

"It is good to have your trust." Garrick's confidence came to the fore, as apparent to her as his gruff voice and regal countenance. "Let us not concern ourselves with Zotikos any further. The morn has just begun. I propose we break our fast in bed and plan our ceremony. We can marry as soon as you're ready."

Aisley felt her eyes widen. "Really?"

"My brothers and their wives arrived last eve," he said.

"You should have told me sooner. I should be attending to them."

"You should be resting. They know what's happened, do not fret."

"If you are certain, when do you wish to marry?" Sounding surprisingly calm, considering she was to meet his entire family, Aisley awaited his answer.

"Tonight would be my preference," Garrick answered, a half smile on his wickedly sensual lips. "But you're not ready for what I have in mind for our wedding night. We'll have the banns read during mass and marry when it is proper according to the dictates of the Church."

"This day's mass?"

"The morrows' will suit. I haven't any intention of leaving this bed anytime soon."

"What if I say nay, we'll wait a month?"

"Then I shall persuade you to change your mind."

Aisley was tempted to see how he'd convince her, but she didn't have the strength to proceed.

"What say you, Aisley?"

"I'd like nothing more than to marry you the moment our banns are completed." Soon she would become the Countess of Danford, Garrick Forrester's wife. Pleased, she wondered whether they could include Angelica in the ceremony. "Tell me of Angelica and how she has fared these last two days."

"Besides you, a sweeter topic I couldn't imagine. First, little one, I will have some food brought to you." Garrick kissed her and left the bed long enough to do as he'd said. Shortly his chamberlain came to the servant's entrance.

Stepping into the hallway to block the chamberlain's view of the bed, Garrick said, "My lady has awakened. Bring the simplest of meals so she may break her fast, but let no one else disturb us until I say otherwise. She's still very weak."

"Aye, milord, I will see she is taken care of." With that, Garrick strode back into the room, closing the door behind him and returning to the bed as if he couldn't bear being separated from her.

Reclining beside her, he gathered her into his arms. As he spoke of Angelica, the rumbling sound in his voice revealed his affection for their daughter. He laughed several times when he mentioned Angelica's way of saying his name, and then grew serious when he admitted he wanted her to call him father.

Then and there, Aisley knew she was meant to grow old with Garrick Forrester. There were things about him that should be terrifying, yet she was not afraid of him. He had managed to assume three titles and protect the people of Danford for a very long time, never once threatening their livelihoods or exposing them to evil. And he was a good father to little Angelica, a girl whom some would have abandoned at birth.

Regardless of all Aisley knew of Garrick, one fact remained, permitting her to know she was right to accept all that he was. She loved him. Because she did, she would

become his mate, accept whatever she was to become when converted and honor their family until her dying day.

Chapter Nineteen

A fortnight after their banns were read, Aisley stood proudly beside Garrick in the manor chapel and listened as the priest extolled the virtues of marriage. It was the morning Mass and the pews were filled with witnesses. By the time the man of God offered his benediction, she and Garrick would be man and wife.

Garrick's hand remained at her waist, his lordly presence unwavering and steady. When he cast his green eyes upon her, she spied the love he felt for her and she offered a smile as her heart danced with joy.

She hadn't expected the ceremony to be so grand. But she was pleased with Garrick's willingness to provide the very best for their wedding day. To Aisley, it proclaimed to all of England that he was honored to make her the Countess of Danford.

Aisley, it is time to speak our vows, Garrick said so that only she could hear.

Turning her face up to him and permitting him to take her hand, Aisley repeated the words that would bind her to her husband. While Garrick returned his fervent vows, his roughened voice filled the rafters, making some of the lanterns sway and her breath catch in her throat as her heart slammed nervously in her chest.

At last the priest declared them man and wife and a sense of peace and belonging settled in Aisley's heart. She was truly meant to be Garrick's mate, to stand beside him for the rest of their lives.

Garrick laughed, keeping his eyes on Aisley as he bent his head and pulled her to the tips of her toes. *Before family and witnesses, I claim my wife with a kiss.*

Aisley's knees grew weak as she welcomed his gentle kiss. Soon they would depart the chapel for a day of feasting to celebrate their union and she cherished the feel of his lips on hers for as long as they dared possible.

Are we allowed to do this in front of the Church? Aisley asked, not really caring if they were to be admonished.

It matters not if we are right or wrong. You are mine now. I want all in Danford and England to know that you are the Countess of Danford. Although it might be best if we part or the whole congregation is going to know what you do to me, Aisley. And Lucien is letting everyone know he's hungry and ready to enjoy the feast.

Must we attend guests in the great hall? Aisley asked.

As much as I would like to carry you to our chamber right now, I fear our duties must be fulfilled. Come, we shall partake in the feast and revel with our friends. Later I will join you in our chamber. I vow, once we are there, you will not have to worry about food, guests or servants for a sennight.

Sighing softly, Aisley knew he was right. But that did not prevent them from sharing another sweet, subtle kiss that promised more to come later that eve. Garrick slowly withdrew and tucked Aisley into his side.

His silver and blue clothing complimented Aisley's silver cote-hardie, and she could not help but realize that she was now Aisley Forrester, the Countess of Danford. Never had she thought she would one day become Lady Danford.

"Shall we go, my lady," Garrick invited.

Aisley accepted her husband's guidance down the aisle to the back of the chapel. There, Judith and Angelica moved forward and Aisley offered her hand to her daughter.

"Lady Angelica, it is time to celebrate," Aisley said.

Dressed in a girl's version of Aisley's gown, Angelica dashed forward. Briefly, Garrick moved away from Aisley as he knelt to pick her up. Carefully placing her on his big, wide shoulder, he locked his arm about her thighs and turned back to Aisley.

As a family, Garrick, Aisley and Angelica paraded out of the chapel. A chorus of applause and well wishes sprang from all directions as the congregation followed, and the villagers waiting outside shouted in welcome.

For Aisley, it was amazing to watch Garrick socialize with the villagers. Not once did anyone look upon him as though he were evil. The change had not come immediately, but as she watched, she remembered the days preceding their ceremony.

She'd had kept herself busy with Angelica, visited the villagers daily and she'd made certain Garrick knew of her wish to continue healing. He'd agreed and escorted her to the village. Because of his steadiness and quiet charm, many started to view him as a man, not a fearsome overlord.

She'd also spent time getting to know Garrick's brothers.

The eldest of the two, Sir Grayson Forrester, Baron Somerton, was slightly shorter than Garrick and a bit more muscular. Like Garrick, he had the same dark hair and deep, rough voice. His wife, Glorianna, was pretty and kind. Their children, numbering two thus far, embraced Angelica as a cousin.

The youngest, Sir Colton Forrester, known as Baron Wolcott, had short tawny hair but equaled Garrick in size and stature. Recently wed to his mate, Jillian, they'd yet to conceive. Aisley hoped they would have children of their own, as she'd seen Colton play with his nieces and nephew and thought he would be a fine father someday.

Returning to the present, Aisley and Garrick invited all in attendance to join them in a feast. In the great hall, an elaborate meal would be provided, along with minstrels, jesters and delicious marzipan subtleties. Angelica had gone to sit beside Valiant during the meal. Although Aisley missed her daughter's nearness, she relaxed knowing that the squire would look after Angelica.

By the time the first course was served, Aisley had begun to relax and accept herself as Lady Danford. From time to time, she became a little nervous knowing that it

wouldn't be long before she and Garrick withdrew from the festivities. Yet he never once pushed her beyond taking a bite of pork or quail or politely offering sustenance from a silver chalice. Because of his patience, her nervousness faded and Aisley enjoyed celebrating the day with her husband.

* * * * *

Aisley would remember her wedding day for the rest of her life. Now, as she waited in the master chamber while Elethea fussed with her hair and nightdress, she became nervous. Garrick would arrive and send the lady's maid away. Soon they'd become man and wife in every sense of the word.

Aisley prayed her nervousness wouldn't interfere with either Garrick's enjoyment of the night or hers. She wanted to please him when they lay in their marriage bed, to prove she was worthy to be his mate.

I hear your worries, Aisley. Ease your mind and all will be well. Garrick's voice reached her, his awareness of what she was thinking causing her to straighten her shoulders in anticipation of his arrival. She didn't want him to find her slouched or worrying.

"Elethea, I believe Garrick is coming. I would like to be alone when he arrives."

"As you wish, would you need anything else before I leave?"

"You've done enough, I am pleased."

Scenting a touch of cinnamon through a crack beneath the door, she knew Garrick had arrived. Her sense of smell had already begun to increase, but it was a wonder she'd not known he was near before then. He claimed that he knew where she was in the manor house at any given time and she hoped someday she'd be able to find him the same way.

Your gifts will continue to grow, worry not. We shall speak of them on the morrow. For now, inform the maid you'll not need her assistance anytime soon.

"Milady, are you all right?" Elethea asked. "You've become distant."

"I'm fine. I shall summon you when I need you next."

Elethea left through the servants' doorway. Aisley would have liked to take a few more moments to inspect the candlelit room, the supplies brought by Garrick's chamberlain and her appearance, but she'd only managed to brush her hand down the gossamer fabric of her chemise before her husband stepped into the room.

"You needn't inspect anything or worry over your appearance," Garrick said.

Dressed to suit his title, he looked both the conqueror and the gentleman in his silver and blue finery. His stance was confident, yet wickedly inviting as he leaned back against the closed door. For a moment she thought he planned to stay there all night just to watch her.

"You are beautiful, Aisley. I am proud to call you my wife."

With a simple sentence, Garrick eased any doubts about her features. He found her beautiful and she felt that way because of him.

"I fear I've been remiss this eve, milord. I should have offered to assist in the removal of your cote-hardie or given you a goblet of wine."

"You've done nothing wrong," he quickly assured, pushing away from the door. The distance between them closed more rapidly than she expected and she almost stepped back until she remembered that this was Garrick. As large as he was, she knew he wasn't going to hurt her. He was capable of gentleness and persuasive charm and he was now her husband. Feeling her heart pound at the rightness of accepting his nearness, she reached out and took his hand.

"You look lovely in the chemise Grayson's wife made for you," he complimented, his bold emerald gaze sweeping her length from head to toe.

"It is beautiful," she said. "Though I think it is nearly transparent."

"It looks like moonlight dancing across your skin." With his free hand, Garrick touched her shoulder, his fingers caressing the shimmering fabric. It was so light, its cloth unknown to Aisley, but she too saw the similarity between the moon's full glow and the pale chemise. "The candles behind you reveal your silhouette within the gown. I can think of little else but removing it simply to enjoy viewing you unhindered."

Aisley smiled, warmed by Garrick's words. He returned her smile, his beguiling, and with a flick of his fingertip, he found the cleverly hidden tie keeping the chemise in place and tugged.

One side of the gown dipped, revealing the creamy expanse of her shoulder. For once Aisley did not wince at the thought of his seeing her freckles.

"Garrick, mayhap we should sit and talk for a bit, hmm?" she suggested before he could work his magic with the opposite shoulder.

With a glance, Garrick silenced her need to talk. By his heated gaze alone, she knew beyond a doubt that he wanted her.

"Mayhap I should trust you to guide me through this night," she said.

Garrick freed her hand and tucked his thumb and forefinger beneath her chin. "It is my sincere wish that I never do anything to betray your trust, Aisley. I've confessed to you the sins of my past. Knowing you accept me for what I am has humbled me."

"I've humbled you?"

"Aye, and tamed the leopard within me. You are my true mate." As he spoke, his fingers splayed outward to cup her face.

"Just as you are mine," she claimed.

His breath caressed her face as he bent closer to pull her further into his embrace and seal them with a kiss. His lips feathered across hers, the briefest contact causing her to gasp. With her invitation, his tongue slid deep, touching hers, tangling, dueling, retreating and repeating until she could do nothing but cling and feel. She felt the

persuasiveness of his kiss right down to her toes. Her knees weakened, her fingers trembled and her womb pulsed in anticipation of whatever he would do next.

His scent, so familiar now, mingled with her almond fragrance, combining the fragrances until she felt in danger of swooning. Having sensed her lightheadedness, Garrick changed his hold and kept her steady. All the while he kissed her, mimicking the cadence they would soon undertake with their bodies.

Against her will, Garrick withdrew, though not very far.

"I liked that," she protested.

"Fear not, we've the rest of the night and centuries ahead of us, we'll kiss many times before our time together ends."

"I will hold you to that promise. Mayhap you'd like some wine or something from the table your chamberlain laid? Mayhap you could tell me what lies beneath the cloth?"

"That is for us to enjoy a little later," he hedged, saying nothing more about the covered table sitting close to the curtained bed. "Would you like some wine, my love?"

"A little would be nice, my lord," she agreed.

"Allow me to pour a chalice for us to share while you reposition the bed curtains."

"As you wish," she said.

Straightening her shoulders, Aisley headed for the bedside and fixed the silver curtains. It wasn't long before Garrick stood beside her and offered her the first sip of wine. She reached for the goblet, but he shook his head and placed the rim to her lips.

"Drink, I shall ease your thirst," he offered, tipping his hand until the spiced wine flowed into her mouth. The flavors tingled on her tongue, telling her they were partaking of sustenance mixed with cinnamon and spices from his homeland.

Upon quenching her thirst, Aisley caught Garrick's wrist and gently let him know she'd had enough for now. "Shall I do the same for you?"

"I'd rather taste wine from your lips," he said, leaning close to take another kiss. Still holding the wooden goblet, he touched his other hand to her waist and pulled her closer. Slowly, he pushed his tongue through her parted lips and explored her mouth, humming deep in his throat when she sighed in pleasure.

"So sweet, I can never get enough," he said upon releasing her.

"The wine is wonderful."

"Not the wine, my love, the kiss."

Aisley smiled at him, amazed anew at how much she'd come to love him. "I haven't told you how grateful I am for this day. The ceremony was so much more than I'd dared to dream."

"I wanted to please you. But let us wait until the morrow to talk about the ceremony. I have other things in mind."

"Do as you please, Garrick."

"You please me." His breathing grew harsher, his right hand sweeping upward to the remaining tie near her shoulder. With a twist of his forefinger the gown melted to the floor at her bare ankles.

Aisley would have continued to stare at the satiny fabric if Garrick hadn't caught her chin and tilted her head back. Just as she'd felt when he first walked into the chamber, she knew he found her beautiful, bare skin and all.

He really did like the freckles that dotted her shoulders, her arms, her thighs and the few splattered across her breasts. With a look, the tiny brown flecks began to tingle, as if her skin sensed his desire to kiss each and every spot, even those he couldn't see aligning her back and shoulder blades.

"I do and I will," he whispered, answering her unspoken question.

"Have you always been romantic?" she wondered aloud.

"I haven't any idea if I'm romantic," he earnestly said. "I am doing what seems right. You, Aisley Forrester, deserve my very best."

Feeling as though her insides were melting, Aisley reached for the chalice of wine. After taking another sip, she offered some to Garrick. As he had done for her, she held the chalice to his mouth and waited for him to take enough to satisfy before lowering her hand.

It didn't occur to her to be uncomfortable about her state of undress until Garrick took the chalice and placed it on the table. Growing flushed, she attempted to turn away, but he halted her.

"As I felt the first time I saw you naked, I find you more beautiful than I can describe," he confessed.

Charmed, Aisley caught his gaze. "Then would you be so kind as to undress, Garrick Forrester? I'd like the pleasure of looking upon you again as well."

Garrick nodded. "Assist me?"

She stepped closer and drew his cote-hardie off and tossed it aside. Shortly, Garrick's gypon joined the array of clothing lying on the floor. As he stood before her, bared to the waist, she enjoyed looking upon him, especially the part of his mark visible on his shoulders that glowed as though the moon were full.

With growing confidence, she touched his shoulder, curious to feel his skin. "It's hot," she said, comparing the mark to the warm skin surrounding it. "How can something that looks so cold feel so hot?"

"The mark responds to my mood," he answered, staring down at his shoulder.

"You're feeling hot?"

"Aroused," he said.

"Is that why the mark is glowing while the moon is not full? It hasn't done this before when we were alone. Were you not aroused then?" she wondered, hoping she'd not failed him when they'd been together previously.

As if sensing her concern, he grinned and leaned closer. "You didn't know about the leopard then. I thought it best to keep it hidden. But that's no longer necessary. Look at your wrist, Aisley."

Turning the same hand she'd used to touch his shoulder, she caught sight of the small leopard's mark on her wrist. Like the giant one comprising much of Garrick's back, the one on her wrist heated even as she looked at it. Heating because she wanted to lie with him, she discovered. Enjoying the warmth that flowed from her wrist to her heart, she watched the mark a moment longer, finding her new abilities as amazing as knowing that they were about to consummate the vows they'd taken earlier that day.

"Come, little one, lie with me," he urged.

Silently, she nodded and Garrick edged her to the bed. The pillows, already plumped, embraced her head and shoulders as she reclined and made room for him to join her. It took a moment for him to arrange the covers at the foot of the bed, but he was soon lying next to her.

"Next time I shall carry you," he said, shifting to look at her more directly. "I believe you've become more beautiful since I first walked into our chamber tonight."

"You are gracious, Garrick. I've little doubt as to how you see me."

"Aisley, it isn't just how I see you. I know you're beautiful. It's essential for you to know it as well."

Touched, she smoothed her hand through his hair, easing it away from his regal face. He'd become so much more to her than she'd originally thought he could be. That first night she saw him only as the compelling, mysterious Earl of Danford. Now he was her husband. He would soon be her lover, her mate, the father of their children. He was a panthera pardus Abcynian and the second eldest of his kind. Before the night was through, she would be completely converted and become more like him. The thought was a little frightening, but with Garrick, she knew he would help her adapt to what she was to become.

"You've given me the confidence to see myself as I always should have," she said.

"Have I? I think you've always been confident in who you are."

"As a healer, I have been, but not as a woman," she admitted.

"There may have been a time when you disliked your freckles and birthmark, but you never let them rule your perception of yourself. When we first met, I saw a woman full of grace, courage and strength. Since I've gotten to know you, I believe you to be all of that and more."

Pleased, Aisley sighed when Garrick spanned her waist with one arm and propped himself up with the other. "You are lovely," he whispered, gazing upon her face, shoulders, breasts and forearms. "And all mine."

"All yours," she said.

Garrick leaned inward, dotting the freckles along her cheekbones with kisses, a curious hum whispering within her as he found each one. The hum was indistinct and came mainly from her throat, yet she felt it all over. Then she realized what was happening

"Garrick, I'm rumbling like you do when you're pleased."

Garrick soothed her by kissing her face and chin. "Aye, do not be alarmed. Your panthera traits are making their presence known."

"I didn't know I'd sound like a cat. Can I control it?"

"You'll learn. Abcynian panthers can make such a sound when they're angry, frightened, contented or ready –"

"To mate," she completed.

"Aye," Garrick said.

"I like how it feels. It rumbles right to my womb."

"I like how you feel when you tremble like this," he teased, returning his attention to her freckles.

Dear goodness, she adored his attention and the touch of his firm, wide mouth sliding over her skin. Their combined rumbles warmed her body while he kissed her chin and jaw, laving her birthmark. Finally he found the sensitive hollow between her collarbone and throat and swiped a delicate circle with the tip of his tongue. There, he nipped, once, twice and bucked for the next, but he didn't bite thrice. Her every nerve ending and thought centered on that spot, wanting him to bite hard enough to pierce her skin and offer his essence.

"Garrick," she gasped.

Rubbing his nose and face against her shoulder, he moved to lie nearly on top of her. When she would have shifted her legs to grant him better access, he halted and said, "Not yet. Soon you shall have all that you want from me, love. If I bite too soon, I'll take you before you're truly ready."

Because she wanted more of his sensuous play, she arched her neck, giving him access to whatever he wished. Garrick's soft hair fell across her, some mixing with her red tresses, and she stared at the mix of dark brown and red, light and dark. His torso connected with hers, chest to breasts. Her slightly crushed breasts supported his heavier mass, their nipples touching, inviting them to elongate on contact.

"Garrick, you've given me such beautiful moments before this night and I know it must have been difficult for you to hold back. I don't want that anymore, do you hear? I'm ready to experience more." Aisley grasped his head with both hands and nearly jerked him to her.

Refusing to remain passive, she kissed him with all that she was, with all that she was to become. Her desire flowed into the kiss, allowing both of them to savor the richness. Wanting to play, she caught his tongue between her lips and sucked until his entire body shivered. All the while, his chest hair abraded her breasts. His skin felt hot, the coarse hairs tickling and caressing, inviting her to groan.

A deep rumble sounded in his throat and she released his tongue. Shifting, he caught her waist and rolled her over until she straddled his hips and looked down upon his remarkable face.

"You're still partially clothed," she complained, feeling the significant bulge behind his breeches. "How is this fair?"

"If I wish to avoid ravishing you, it is necessary," Garrick confessed, grinning. "Control is something I've mastered, until you."

"I think that's a compliment."

"It is," he said.

"In that case...oh, wait..." She lost her voice, his questing hands causing her to writhe and squirm. His fingers and thumbs found her nipples, tweaking them, sending showers of warmth to her womanhood. With each flick and gentle pinch, they grew more sensitive. Her womb wept with a longing she was only beginning to understand. She wanted him to surge inside of her, to ease the ache his fingers were inducing.

"I hear you, Aisley, but you're not quite ready to accept me inside of you. Soon, you will." Palming her breasts in each hand, he squeezed, kneaded and thumbed her nipples. Never had anything felt so good.

Nay, she was wrong. The stroking and twirling of Garrick's tongue around each peak felt right, wonderful and achingly familiar. It had been so long since he touched her like this and she groaned with renewed pleasure. All the while, he hummed, letting her know that his feasting was as pleasurable to his tongue as it was to be tongued.

Curious, she lowered her eyes to watch. His dark head was framed by her breasts. Alternately, he stroked her breasts with the tip of his tongue, laving and sucking her nipples and the soft skin beneath each globe.

Releasing one tight nipple, he rose from the bed and embraced her. His arms about her were steady, the hairs of his forearms tickling ever so softly. A few locks of his hair spilled over her shoulder, falling to her waist and tangling with her red tresses. Garrick's scent flooded her senses, enhancing her own almond fragrance and the tingle of spices on her tongue. They weren't kissing outright, yet she could still taste him.

Their lower bodies were connected as closely as possible, but there was still room to allow Garrick to pay homage to her breasts. Their hips and thighs touched, his manhood throbbed against her upper thigh, seeking a response from her womanhood. Her womb melted a little more with each flick of his tongue and caress of his hand down her spine.

"So sweet, like berries," he praised, lifting his head just enough to blow hot air upon the moistened tip of her breast.

"Oh my," she cried out, startled when he turned his head and caught the nipple between his teeth. "Be careful."

"You know I'll not bring you pain." He captured the nipple and sucked long and deep.

"Garrick!" Loving what he was doing, Aisley grasped his shoulders. Garrick's rumbling teased the very core of her being. The tug and pull of his warm, wet mouth was sheer bliss. The scrape of his teeth had her writhing and moaning aloud, demanding more as her heart pounded like a wild thing.

Garrick's love was all she'd hoped it would be, and more. The glimpses he'd bestowed on her previously were to be treasured, but right now he was showing her the power of their love and passion, a passion that did not have to be restrained.

Every part of her was aware of him. He was ravishing, yet mindful of her inexperience, gentle, yet confident. She suspected there was much more to learn after their first night together as man and wife.

"Much more, lay back, you'll like what I have in mind," he said, aiding her in settling on her back with her head toward the footboard. A wicked gleam caught his eye as he shifted to reach his mysterious table.

"Are you certain you wouldn't like to remove your breeches?" she asked.

"I will when it's time. This will warm you a bit." Revealing a small flask, he tipped a small portion of its contents into his palm.

Carefully, he put the flask aside. Aisley waited, a little nervous, but he eased her concerns when oil dripped to her belly. Slowly, with only the tips of his big, calloused fingers, Garrick worked the oil from her navel to her breasts.

"That's nice," she praised.

"It gets better," he promised.

"Garrick, something's happening," she realized aloud. She wasn't imagining the heating of her skin. The oil, scented with something vaguely familiar, grew warmer as she breathed. "What is the scent? It's nice, but the oil feels warm and it's getting hotter as you rub it into my skin." Oil could be a slippery mess, but Garrick's giant hands were weaving magic, leaving her feeling soft, scented and amazingly feminine.

"It's cassia," he told her. "It may remind you of cinnamon. They're similar in scent, though cassia is a bit coarse and has to be ground very fine. The recipe was handed down to my father from my grandfather. He told my father to use the oil only with his mate, for it is regarded as part of the mating ritual of panthera pardus Abcynians."

"In all honesty, I like the traditions of your ancestors," Aisley said, pleased that Garrick shared the tradition with her.

Even as she spoke, she realized it was nearly impossible to remain still. Her hips began to shift in time with Garrick's caressing fingertips. Though his hands were a bit rough and abrasive from callouses, she reveled in the bold strokes of his fingers over her breasts, shoulders, arms and thighs. It seemed as if no part of her would go untouched by his hands and she wondered where he would caress next.

Garrick pulled back a little, his hands stalling at the dip between her hips and thighs. His fingertips grazed the tender skin of her inner thigh, causing her to arch into him. "Do not fear what I'm about to do," he forewarned.

A moment later, he parted her knees, settling between them. Aisley stared as he leaned forward. His hair fell about them, momentarily blocking her sight. Brushing the length back over his shoulders, Garrick kissed her breasts, her stomach, repeating the same path he'd taken with his oiled hands, further enhancing the heated pleasure she was feeling throughout her body.

"Touch me, Aisley, please." She needed no further coaxing. Smoothing her hands along his shoulders, seeking his spine, she relished the chance to pleasure him. "Ah, that's right, touch me."

Realizing he needed more, Aisley used her left hand to caress his bare rib cage and coaxed him to lean back so she could reach his chest. The springy hair defining his chest caught her attention, inviting her to explore his nipples, his abdomen and finally his navel.

"Take me in your hand," he husked, looking at his tented breeches.

"Are you certain?"

Garrick grasped her hand and pulled her a fraction closer, wrapping her fingers around his shaft. Even though he was still partially clothed, she could feel the heat of him pulsing against her hand. "I am certain. Feel how I want you."

Intrigued with the power of touch, Aisley stroked and caressed him through the fabric. She wished he'd remove his breeches soon. They'd become an obstacle she was tempted to shred. Mayhap if she conveyed her thoughts, he would comply.

"Not yet," he warned. He shifted some and moved her hand, reclaiming his position between her spread thighs and sending kisses down her abdomen.

"You said that before."

"Patience," he urged, nipping at her hip. "Or you could miss this..." he hinted, his lips moving to her inner thigh where he nibbled gently with the very edge of his teeth

"Nay," she bucked.

"Aye!" Purposefully, he positioned himself to keep her still. From between her legs, he looked up, his head a dark contrast to her fair skin, and she didn't dare look away. Even in such a position, Garrick Forrester looked like a conqueror and her womanhood clenched in anticipation of how he would claim her.

"Garrick, should I let you do this?"

"Nothing we do in this bed is wrong. Trust me, my love."

"I do trust you," she replied, easing back. She loved him. If she could trust him with her heart, she could trust him with this.

Garrick widened her thighs and lowered his head, blowing hot breath upon her woman's entrance. His breath awakened a secret knot, inviting it to unfurl as a bud bloomed beneath the morning sun.

"All mine," he murmured, whispering more hot air across her mound, his mouth very near.

It was intimate and wonderful to watch Garrick. His tongue darted outward, tracing the knot of flesh he'd awakened with his breath and Aisley bucked to receive him. Softly, gently, he stroked her intimately with the tip of his clever tongue, one of his hands pushing her back down to the bed and holding her still for his seductive ravishment.

His other hand caressed from her hip to inner thighs. Abrasive, yet gentle, with only a hint of oil left, his palm smoothed upward, inward and, finally, to her very entrance. His tongue twirled over her bud, licking the swollen folds of her entrance before easing back and positioning one of his fingers to slide inside her. There he thrust his hand slowly, preparing her with oil, her feminine dew and the wetness of his tongue.

"Aisley, I cannot hold back much longer," Garrick pronounced, suddenly sitting up. His face was flushed, though he still looked regal and fine. "I'm sorry, I tried. Bloody hell, woman, I want you."

"You don't have to wait, Garrick. Take me."

To her relief, he removed the rest of his clothes and threw them on the floor. Fully naked, he was magnificent. The candlelight nearby reflected the glow of his panthera's mark, which reflected so strongly now, the entire bed seemed to be afire.

Still lying where Garrick had settled her, Aisley waited to see if they would shift. She wanted to touch him and explore the leopard's face on his back with her fingertips. She already knew the mark was warm to the touch, but she wondered if it could burn. But to her surprise, he stole a pillow and stuffed it beneath her hips, lifting them before positioning himself between her legs.

"Don't hurt me," she murmured, bracing herself. As a midwife, she'd heard women complain about the discomfort they'd first felt when their husbands took their maidenhead, especially during childbirth when they would blame all their pain on the men. She didn't want to feel anything but pleasure with Garrick.

"I will be as gentle as I can," he promised, soothing her with his gruff-spoken voice. Together their combined rumbles shook the massive bed, easing her momentary fears. "I love you, Aisley. You need not fear our joining. Our first time together will be good if you allow me to guide you through it."

"I offer myself to you," she responded. "I know you will take care of me."

Anxious and needful of something she couldn't name, Aisley welcomed the way Garrick folded himself around her, rubbing against her, chest to breasts, hips to hips, knees to calves. She felt protected, safe, consumed by his massive body, yet loved!

"While I'm inside of you, we will mate," he said. "It takes a bite from both of us. Do not be afraid, even if the bite stings at first, all right?"

"Aye, I trust you."

"Good," he praised, leaning close for a long, thorough kiss.

Their kiss mimicked the instinctive, primal dance of mating, their tongues parrying and thrusting, their hips grinding in unison. Aisley knew precisely when she was ready to accept him, and with the touch of his hands on her knees, she bent them slightly and held steady as his manhood nudged inside of her.

Wanting to feel him, she adjusted her hips to accept more. Garrick pushed in further. "Ah love, you feel so warm and soft, like a wet, silken glove. I need to claim you," he admitted as he thrust, tearing her virgin's sheath with a bittersweet sting. At once he stilled, staring down to catch her wincing.

His jaw tight and his eyes half closed, he remained still. "I'm sorry, Aisley. This will never hurt again. I promise."

"I'm fine, Garrick. Don't stop. Just as the biting might hurt the first time, the pleasure will far exceed the minor sting I've just felt."

"Are you sure?"

"I am. Please, I need you so much."

"You have me, you always have," he said, withdrawing and thrusting, slow and deep.

Accepting Garrick's loving, Aisley moaned at the feel of him sliding in and out. Gasping at the rightness of it all, she parted her knees a bit further and arched, encountering the full measure of his prowess. Again he withdrew, thrust and withdrew, repeating his movements with a gentle cadence. She moved her hips in unison with him, wanting more, demanding that he take her harder. His sudden deep thrust took her breath away as he entered her to the hilt and roared. His brow beaded with sweat, his arms trembled with his efforts to move slowly, yet Aisley wanted his release.

"Love me, Garrick, love me!" she called out, crying even louder when he answered as she wanted and took her even harder.

Mysterious as copulation had been to her until Garrick touched her, it felt both primitive and instinctive to respond to every thrust of his hips and welcome the length of his manhood. They kissed, caressed, touched and loved. She felt sensuous as she arched and flexed. Her hands found his buttocks, kneading the taut flesh and smoothing down his slightly hairy thighs to the backs of his knees.

Garrick grunted, lowering his head to her throat. "Now we become mated," he said. "Bite after I do, it matters not where." Laving her pulse with his tongue, he pressed a kiss to her skin and bit hard.

"Oh my," she mumbled. Finding the sting rather sensual, she kissed his shoulder and licked him twice. As she bit, she was shocked to find her two canines lengthening enough to break his skin. Thinking she'd have to drink Garrick's blood, she hesitated.

Nay, little one, do not take, give, the panthera within you will know what to do.

Hoping she understood, she said, *I will give.*

I will guard your heart for our eternity, Aisley. All I am, I give to you now because you are my mate and I am proud to love you.

As am I, Garrick Forrester, be assured that I will love you just as long. Upon her vow, spiced warmth flowed from the point of Garrick's bite to her heart, filling her with his essence. Her leopard's instinct responded and gave in kind, granting Garrick the right and privilege of guarding her heart, her love. She knew then that she was his mate and he was hers.

Garrick withdrew, licking the bite wound gently, and then he bit deep one more time, sending his essence from her heart to her womb. Pleasure swelled as his thrusts became urgent, his taste, scent and maleness surrounding her. Release crashed through her, sending wave upon wave of pleasure from her womb to her heart, where it beat in time with Garrick's continued, forceful thrusts.

With each thrust, Aisley found herself longing to ignite again. In tune with her needs, Garrick's hand eased between their entwined bodies. His forefinger slipped between the dewy folds of her womanhood and danced across the swollen, needful bud.

Breathing hard, she arched her hips, wanting him to carry her straight to heaven. With a harsh, sawing roar, he pushed his palm against her sensitive knot and plunged deep, holding himself still while she soared. Crying out at the beauty and passion she'd found in her mate's arms, she wrapped him closer as he spent himself inside her body.

Unwilling to move too soon, Aisley hummed in pleasure and closed her eyes, welcoming the knowledge that Garrick Forrester, the Earl of Danford, was well and truly her husband, her lover and her mate.

Chapter Twenty

Reluctant to move, Garrick stirred slowly, enjoying the heat of Aisley's warm, silken sheath for as long as she would permit. Bloody hell, she'd been everything he could hope for in a mate, sweet, innocent, ferocious at times and passionate. He'd never felt more like a man as he did when Aisley cried out his name and her inner muscles clenched around his shaft, draining him of his seed while they'd shared their essence.

Anticipating taking her again, he felt himself harden inside of her. But as much as he wanted her, he knew that his wife would need a little time to rest.

"Garrick," Aisley whimpered, reminding him of his weight when she tried to scoot from beneath him.

"Don't move, not yet. God's teeth, you feel good." He wanted to remain joined with her for as long as he could.

"Umm, I love being joined with you, Garrick, but you're heavy."

"Sorry, little one." Moving off her, he appreciated the sight of her flushed body as they moved to recline upon the pillows. "Come and rest," he invited, bringing her to lie against his chest.

"That was amazing," she whispered. "Now we are truly mated and wed."

"Now you are truly mine," he replied.

As they rested, their bodies trembled with the distinctive panthera pardus rumble of contentment and pleasure. He'd never shared such an intimacy with another woman and was glad he'd found it with Aisley.

Shifting, she gasped and licked her lips. "Garrick..." Her soft voice trailed off when her eyes darted to his manhood. Twice she licked her full mouth, then nibbled her swollen lower lip, drawing his attention to how pretty and disheveled she looked. "Did I fail you? You're still...umm...hard."

"Aisley, dare not think such a thing. You could never fail me. You were so sweet and responsive it took everything I had to make certain you found your release before I allowed my seed to fill your womb."

"If that's true, it was your doing, not mine."

"Your passion is instinctive, never doubt that."

To his pleasure, she laughed softly, her warm, naked body shaking against his. "Do you think we could mate again now? Since you're ready, it seems a shame to waste the moment."

Garrick smiled. "For your sake, it's best to wait a bit."

"If you say so," she said. "Might I ask you something?"

"You needn't ask."

"How long will Lucien and Catarina remain in Danford?"

"Lucien would stay for as long as I asked. Catarina is anxious to return to their pride land."

"I suspected as much. As helpful as Lady Hunter has been since her arrival, I've always felt as though she wanted to be elsewhere."

Garrick agreed. Catarina came to Danford because her husband summoned her. She'd been devoted to chaperoning Aisley, but Catarina wanted to be with her mate and her children.

"You should let them go when they are ready," Aisley said.

"I shall. My brothers intend to remain at the manor and act on my behalf while we are enjoying the first sennights of our marriage. A fortnight might be long enough for us to remain in seclusion."

"A fortnight?"

"Didn't you know? Aside from food, sustenance and baths, we are not leaving this chamber for any length of time. I'd originally asked for a sennight and my brothers promised two."

"Angelica will need us."

"In which case, we can visit Angelica every morning. Other than that, no one will see us."

"The servants will see us."

"I've told my chamberlain to leave us alone unless I call for him. He'll inform your maid likewise."

"Is it customary for newly married couples to travel?"

"I'd like that. I've other estates to show you. Although I think we should wait until I ascertain whether danger lingers beyond our borders."

Garrick detested being hindered by Zotikos, but he wasn't about to let Aisley or Angelica fall to harm. He also wasn't willing to remain captive on his land and had already sent messengers to Henry warning of potential danger in Danford.

"Are you certain there is nothing we can do to rid ourselves of Zotikos' threats?"

"Patience and vigilance are our best options," he advised.

"I'm beginning to wonder if we should dare speak of him on our wedding night."

Garrick couldn't have agreed more. He pulled out from beneath her and turned to the table beside their bed.

"What are you doing, searching for more oil?" The longing in Aisley's voice matched her rumbling. Already he could smell her renewed desire. It was as alluring to him as sustenance.

"Nay, I have a gift for my wife."

"I need nothing. You've been so generous."

Garrick faced away from her. His hardness had begun to ache and wouldn't be eased until he took her again.

"What I give you now is more than a gift." Turning back to her, he presented his offering. "When my father was courting my mother, it was customary for Abcynian males to bestow their mates with a torque or bridal chain. I would very much like for you to wear one, as I will, only mine will not have a stone," he told her.

"How lovely," Aisley said, rising as he displayed his gift.

At first he stilled as her eyes alighted upon the gift. It was made of smooth, tanned leather with intricate silver thread wrapped about the long cord. Garrick prayed that Aisley liked the blue stone hanging at the center. It was a gift from his heart meant to tell the world that she was his wife.

"Garrick, it's beautiful," she uttered. Without hesitation, she lowered her head to permit him to fasten it about her neck.

"This was made for you, little one. As I'd said, I shall wear one and all Abcynians who see it will know we are mated."

"Can I see yours?" she requested.

"Aye," he agreed and reached for his cord. "Will you place it around my neck?"

Aisley took it and knelt before him. In the candlelight, she looked beautiful with her tangled hair and heated flush of her freckled skin. She smelled of him and desire, of pleasure and need. He wanted that scent to forever mark her. She didn't yet know the spices in their sustenance masked her panthera scent from those who'd like to destroy them.

"Did an Abcynian craftsman make these?"

"Aye."

"I would like to meet more of our kind," she admitted. "I'd like to understand more about the Abcynians."

"You will. There's no hurry, Aisley. It's taken me four hundred and fifty years to understand our kind and I'm still learning. I suspect much is to be learned by both of us in the coming years. What you need to know now is that only Abcynians born with the blood of a panther can change form. Those of us that can change are granted the status of Elder upon reaching maturity. Being an Elder is similar to being part of the nobility in England," he explained. "Mayhap in another hundred years or so, what we know will be proven wrong. It's difficult to say. Either way, we'll have plenty of time to find out together."

"That's so odd. To think a simple bite can lengthen my life and give me the traits of a leopard, it's a miracle."

"You're the miracle. I haven't a clue as to what I've done to deserve your love, but I shall endeavor to protect it well."

"Is that your way of promising fidelity?" Aisley's fingers tightened about his neck and tugged.

Garrick's heart skipped a beat. Aisley thought he might look elsewhere for his pleasures and he had only himself to blame for her concern. He'd been honest about his past and his wives, mayhap too honest.

"Never think I would leave you for another woman. I love you. The mistakes I made are best left in the past and I will spend our life together proving my loyalty to you if you need it."

"You misunderstand, my lord," she teased, her hands remaining firm as her lips touched his. "Your word is all I need to believe in your faithfulness."

Garrick shivered. She continued to kiss him. Her mouth was as soft as satin, moist and slightly parted. It would only take a dart of his tongue to possess her completely.

"Besides, I've found the leopard's essence within me has made me very, very territorial," she said, catching his lower lip between her teeth.

"Ah, I like your aggression." Sharp as her teeth were, her play tempted him in a way she didn't understand quite yet.

Wanting to lead, Garrick grabbed her waist and pushed her back enough to catch her eyes. They were warm and narrowed in catlike need. Aisley was beginning to feel her leopard's aggressive sexuality.

"Do you want me again, Aisley?"

"Aye, I do."

"Then kiss me," he commanded.

"With pleasure, my lord," she granted, claiming his mouth.

Upon her permission, their tongues mated. She sucked on his tongue and his shaft pulsed with each pull of her soft, full lips. It wouldn't be long before she'd learn to use her mouth to draw forth his seed. For now, he pulled Aisley onto his lap, her legs on either side of his thighs and he welcomed the feel of her hot, swollen flesh sliding along his shaft.

Breaking their kiss, he cupped her chin and studied her face. "Ah, love, you've so much to give. And the bridal chain looks lovely upon your neck. So much so, I might have to bite you again."

"Is that a threat?" she chuckled.

"A promise," he answered. "You should know the gift serves two purposes."

"I think I know what you're about to say."

"Do you?"

"It symbolizes our marriage and hides the bite mark on my neck."

"Aye, like the mark on your wrist, the one that will form on your neck will be noticeable in certain light. I'm also having a bracelet designed for your wrist."

She lifted her wrist then, displaying the iridescent symbol of the leopard's essence. "I am grateful that you would consider my safety, Garrick."

"I could do nothing less, but I've other things in mind than discussing jewelry."

"That would be my wish too." Aisley wrapped her arms about him. She was like silk and steel, soft to the touch and strong enough to take his full strength. "Can you take me like this, Garrick?"

"Later, I will."

"Shall I lie back? I'd like to face the headboard this time."

"You may." Garrick waited for her to move from his lap and caught her waist. "Not that way." Tightening his fingers, he turned her to her stomach, her head toward the headboard. The sight of her freckled back and thighs invited kisses.

Part of him hesitated, thinking it might be too soon to take her the way he intended. "Aisley, I'm going to take you this way, from behind. Don't be afraid."

"It's all right, Garrick. Nothing we ever do in this bed is wrong, remember?" she whispered into the pillows where she lay. "I trust you to love me well, in any way you choose."

"Have I told you I adore you?"

"With kisses you have."

"Then permit me to adore you some more." He didn't wait for her response. He straddled her thighs instead and massaged her shoulders, bringing forth a mew from her throat as he caressed her spine.

"Hmm, keep doing that and I may fall asleep."

"I promise I'll not let you rest. Not until much later."

"Since you keep your promises, I shall trust you." She shifted, lifting her backside in invitation.

Fighting the urge to claim, he concentrated on stroking her back and hips. When he reached her buttocks, Aisley almost drew back. It took only a caress of his palms to calm her.

"Beautiful," he complimented, enjoying the sight of his hands kneading her flesh. Her skin grew pinker as he stroked. He liked being the source of her pleasure and treasured every nuance of her movements as he gently scratched his nails down the back of her pale thighs.

"Garrick—"

"Hush, let me love you."

They both fell quiet, their breathing filling the chamber. His caresses made her flesh grow warm and flushed. Her feminine needs became more apparent in her scent.

"Have mercy, I need you," she grumbled, her hips shifting in natural, instinctive cadence.

"You shall have me again soon."

"Please," she whispered.

Enticed, he lowered until he nearly lay on top of her. His legs fell to either side of hers, his hardness finding haven in the notch between her inner thighs.

"Do you realize you've done much of the work this night and I've simply taken it?" she asked.

"Don't you know you move with me, love? Every shift and grind of your hips makes me harder. God's teeth, if I don't take you soon, I'm going to spill my seed all over the bed instead of inside of you."

Beneath him, she stilled and clenched her fists. "I'll stop moving."

"If you stop, I'll spank your pretty arse."

"Try and I will get you back," she promised with such feistiness he almost roared with the need to conquer her.

"Forgive me," he said, unremorseful.

Aisley relaxed, her hips shifting with his subtle thrusts. To maintain control, he lifted with his elbows and kissed her neck, pushing the leather chain this way and that to gain better access, then he kissed his way to her hips.

"Oh my...nice," she whimpered.

Sweet little moans spilled from her lips, urging him to kiss and nibble each globe of her backside before nuzzling and rubbing his face into the small of her back. Aisley arched and sighed with pleasure, inviting him to nip at her spine and drag his hair back and forth across her long freckled back.

When he could take the play no longer, he hauled Aisley to her knees.

"Be careful," she whispered.

"There's nothing to fear. I'd never hurt you or demand anything you couldn't accept."

"You're a good man. Do you know that?"

"With you, I've become so."

"You've always been." Trustingly, she pushed up from the bed until her back pressed to his chest. "Hold me."

He grasped her about the waist and held her for as long as she needed. While he ached for surcease, his desire to reassure her was stronger. Never before had he thought to restrain himself in such a simple way.

Wanting to tempt her, he moved his hands from her waist to her breasts. A gentle squeeze had her arching. A pull on the hardened nipples made her keen aloud. Her hips ground back against his and he coaxed her forward.

Slowly, he dotted her back and shoulders with kisses and soon had her palms flat to the bed. He plucked her nipples with his left hand while his right slid to her damp folds. His thumb stroked the sensitive bit of flesh near her entrance and he parted her with two fingers, pleasuring her with quick, short thrusts of his longer third finger.

Aisley's arse swayed and countered his movements, seeking to take his finger deep and hard. Her sweet moans made him smile. The gyrations of her hips beckoned him to take her the way he wanted.

Rising behind her, he withdrew his hand and embraced her, the urge to claim her exceeding anything else he'd known. Instinctively, she pushed against him and he penetrated her until he was buried to the hilt. Her inner silken muscles surrounded him, clenching, tempting him to take her hard and fast, but he wanted to enjoy the feel of being joined as much as he wanted to enter her again and again.

"Oh!" Aisley gasped, arching back to take his long, deliberate thrusts. He wanted her to feel him deep, to take everything he could give.

Breathing harder with every stroke, he moved his hand back to her folds, encouraging her hips to rock and grind against his hand. She roared with the fierce passion of a panthera pardus female and something within him broke. Gone was the patient lover he'd meant to be this night. In its place was a panthera Abcynian male claiming his mate.

Aisley was his! No other man would ever know her scent or the sound of her needful cries. She was snug and hot and perfectly made for him.

Her inner muscles clenched around him, massaging his rock hard staff and he roared. Knowing what to do to urge her to completion, he nudged her tangled red hair away from her neck and bit. Finding purchase as he thrust, he pushed her to her elbows and held her still.

Feel me, love, feel me deep and follow me. Sharing his essence with her, he knew it would catapult to the core of her need.

She bucked, drawing him impossibly deeper. "Garrick, I think...I fear I shall swoon. I cannot take much more."

You will take all that I have and more. Bracing both of them, he surged. Her body trembled from the merging of essence and passion and his seed rushed forth. His shout joined her cries, their bodies cresting as one.

Feeling heavy and spent, Garrick eased down on top of her, their bodies still joined. Burying his head further into the crook of her neck, he lapped at the small panther's face emerging on her skin.

Proud to know he'd marked her, he nudged her bridal chain back into place and turned her until she lay within his arms.

Comfortable and content, he listened to Aisley's quiet, contented rumble.

* * * * *

"I cannot believe you let her go," Sedgewick admonished. "John, are you paying attention? Edwina and I are talking to you."

"I heard you." John lifted his eyes from the table where they had gathered for their midday repast. He didn't bother to look at the woman beside him and Sedgewick wondered why John married her. "The two of you have been grumbling about the healer for days. Haven't you realized she is small prey compared to the Earl of Danford?"

"You intend for the three of us to go against him?" Sedgewick asked. "How would you propose we begin?"

"We use his countess," John replied with a shrug. "After all, you believe she's a witch."

"She must be," Sedgewick said. "If she weren't, she never would have convinced you to free her and now you want to recapture her. Mayhap you've gone mad."

John glared, his wrath causing a layer of ice to form on his goblet. Sedgewick drew back as far as the booth would allow, but he shivered anyway. Never had he thought someone's temper would make him cold.

"I did not free her without reason," John stated. "I'd hoped the Earl of Danford would find her and she'd become the distraction we need to bring him to his knees. I've known him for ages. The evil he practices is worse than the healer's."

"How could he be worse? Over the last three sennights, we learned he has commanded legions of men. If Lord Danford had taken his regiment into Castillon, the English would have retained Aquitaine."

"So common folk say," John said. "What do they know of war? I say to you, the Earl of Danford believes he can change from man to beast."

Sedgewick gulped. "He couldn't be a werewolf. I'd have known."

"Like you knew the child to be the offspring of one? I must disappoint you in that regard. The babe is an innocent, nothing more. Danford believes he can become a leopard."

Sedgewick scowled at that. He didn't know what a leopard was. "Are there such creatures in England?"

"Does it matter?" Sedgewick asked. "We must expose him for his beliefs and mayhap a confession will save his soul. The charge of heresy will send him to hell if he doesn't."

"I do not understand why we should bother with Lord Danford. It is the healer who needs to pay."

"The healer may have stolen the child from you, but it was the Earl who would have sent you to poverty if I'd not saved you."

"You're right. Yet it is unwise to provoke a man who holds the protection of the King. I don't know about you, John, but I like my head where it is."

"You'll not lose your head if you listen to my plan. If we do nothing about the Earl, we'll never get Aisley from him. Take his mate and Garrick Forrester will know what it means to suffer."

"Darling, won't you include me in your plans? You're discussing the ones who are holding my niece captive. I want to know she'll be returned to us," Edwina said to her husband.

"Unfortunately, the healer does not trust you, my dear," John replied. "We must find another way to regain guardianship of the child."

"I hope so. I want a second chance to raise her right and proper."

Sedgewick watched Edwina silently. He'd known her to have a harsh tongue in his past dealings with her and now she spoke well. He couldn't say for certain that Edwina and John had actually married, but the two had disappeared for a short time after they'd met and claimed to have visited a priest. How John managed to avoid having his banns read, Sedgewick couldn't say. Edwina was convinced that she was John's wife and that was all that seemed to matter to her.

"I was wrong to let her go when I did," Edwina confessed. "I had no means to fend for a child and Sedgewick offered to care for her. I'd little choice."

"You'll not condemn me for that, Edwina," Sedgewick said. "You sold your niece to me for two marks. Never forget the truth of that."

John slammed a fist against the table. "Enough, to succeed we must work together. I can do nothing without your support, Sedgewick. And you, my dear wife, are always needed," he said, drawing Edwina closer. "I propose we find a way to lure Danford from his manor. We may need to use one of the Earl's family members to succeed. Once he's distracted, Aisley will become vulnerable and the child will be ours."

"Tell us more," Edwina invited.

Sedgewick couldn't help it, he wanted to listen. He'd lost all that he had because of Danford and a witch, both should answer for their doings.

"I shall in time," John said, smiling. "Edwina, tell me what you know about Welford. Who profits from the land? Is it a knight, a baron or an earl? Tell me and I'll show you how the three of us can defeat the Earl of Danford and his pretty healer."

Edwina grabbed John's goblet and drank some mead. Wiping her mouth with her fingers, she bowed her head. "There's a baron, Baron Welford. He's rarely seen by anyone of the town and has little to do with commoners. Nor does our land prosper as well as the barony to the north of us. I'm not sure how that can help, John."

"We'll need to learn more about the other barony before we can form a plan," he answered. "Sedgewick, are you willing to help? This is your chance to have your due against that pretty healer."

Sedgewick grinned and nodded. "I am willing to do what I must." Paying little attention to Edwina, he listened to the plan John Brewster devised.

Chapter Twenty-One

"Garrick!" Aisley cried out in her sleep, fighting Garrick's attempt to hold her still. She'd become much stronger since her conversion and he had to use all his strength to keep her from hurting herself as she thrashed.

She settled briefly, then started tossing her head back and forth upon her pillow.

"Easy, Aisley, I'm here." Stroking her hair, he tried to wake her.

She grumbled, "Nay, Garrick, I won't let them harm you!"

Unable to let her dream continue, Garrick shook her in earnest. "Aisley, awaken now."

"Garrick?" she mumbled, opening her eyes. "What is amiss?"

"You were having a troubled dream."

"Forgive me for disturbing you."

"You did nothing wrong. Come, look at me. Tell me about your dream."

Aisley rose and faced him. Her eyes still shimmered with lingering fear.

"Well, I cannot explain it precisely. The dream was vague, as if something was threatening you, but I couldn't ascertain what it was." She lifted her chin as she revealed her dream, regaining her composure. "Garrick, I think my dreams were disturbed by something troubling you. I know you haven't yet been asleep. We mated three times before settling down to sleep. You should be as tired as I. Again I ask, what is amiss?"

Though it was dark Garrick could see her clearly and knew she could see him likewise. Her instincts had grown over their first month and a half of marriage and he was proud to be mated to Aisley. It wasn't unusual for her to find him anywhere in the manor house or his land and tenant farms and question him about something he'd been dealing with.

He didn't like worrying her and wished he didn't have to admit that something felt wrong. But as usual, she was right. He'd not been able to sleep. Each time he closed his eyes, he saw trouble for his brother. Colton was the youngest and was still learning to use his panthera's skills.

"Garrick, you're keeping something from me," Aisley said. He felt her keen brown eyes on his face. "Wait, is it Colton?"

"I cannot be certain."

"You're worried about him. Please tell me how I can help you." Proving she'd listened to his thoughts, she grasped his shoulders. "Can you speak with Colton as you do with me?"

"Only mates can speak mind-to-mind. Other Abcynians can sense when a blood relative is in danger or troubled."

"Then you must go to him!"

"It was my intention come first light," Garrick admitted.

"Mayhap you should leave right away," she said.

"I'd like to, but it's unwise." Garrick would not make a move until he met with Brandon and planned.

"Am I to assume you'll not rest through the night if you were to remain here until morn?" His wife smoothed her hands to his waist. Anchoring her arms about him, she rested her head on his shoulder.

"Sleep will elude me until I know Colton is safe."

"Then we mustn't wait 'til morning to make a plan."

"We, my love?"

"Aye, as your wife, I will not let you worry for your brother alone." Rubbing her head against his shoulder, she attempted to comfort him.

Unbidden tears welled in his eyes and he swallowed hard. "You've no idea how much that means to me, Aisley."

She made an attempt to lift her head and he snagged a lock of her hair to keep her still. "Your brothers are important to you, as they are to me, Garrick. How can I ignore Colton's plight and be a good wife to you at the same time?"

Garrick gently turned her face so that he could see her better. "You are a good wife to me at all times. Do not rebuke yourself because I am worried."

"And I am worried about you and Colton," she said.

He smiled then and bowed close enough to kiss her forehead. She was so soft and pretty that he didn't want to let her go or be separated from her. Drawing in her scent, he wished he could press her back against the pillows and bury himself within her warm, welcoming sheath. Unfortunately, he knew he couldn't, at least not until he spoke with Brandon.

"Garrick, allow me to aid you. Don't you trust me to do what is right?"

"I trust you, love. If you're willing to be patient, I'll ask that you wait here in our chamber while I awaken Sir Brandon Mathews. You were right. I shouldn't wait until dawn to strategize."

"How can waiting here assist?"

"If I know you are in our chambers while strategizing with Sir Brandon, I won't worry about you."

"I can go nowhere that you're unaware of," she reminded.

"I'll ask you to wait regardless."

"As you wish," she agreed, hugging him tight. "I shall pack a few things for you."

Garrick didn't want to let her go, but he had to. Not even trouble could keep him from wanting his wife.

"Go, I'll summon Elethea and have her bring a bottle of wine. You'll need sustenance before departing."

"That would be good," he agreed.

Distracted by his concerns for Colton, he climbed out of bed and marched to the far side of the room. Instead of summoning his chamberlain, he pulled hose, a gypon and boots from a chest and started to dress on his own.

Behind him, he heard movement and glanced over to see his wife climbing out of bed and heading to an armoire. "Here, you'll need this," she insisted, grabbing a dark blue cote-hardie and bringing it to him.

"Thank you," he said, ready to take it from her. She shook her head once, then helped him finish dressing. Lifting to her toes, she nodded her approval and kissed his cheek.

"I love you, Aisley," he murmured.

"As I love you," she said in kind. "Now off you go, my lord. Return when you're able so that I may know what you've decided."

Wrapping his arms around her waist, he lifted her closes and kissed her soft lips, lightly rubbing his mouth back and forth across them. "I'll come back to you soon," he promised when he eased her back to her feet.

Aisley nodded, letting him know it was all right to leave. Reluctant to leave her at all, Garrick brushed her hair from her face before retreating to the door and walking into the hallway. He looked back once and smiled, still tempted to stay and knowing that when he returned to their chamber, he wouldn't walk away without bedding her one more time.

* * * * *

The moment her husband closed the door, Aisley turned and rushed across the room to her clothing chest. Worried for Garrick and Colton, she selected a long chemise and tugged it over her head.

A bell and pulley had been rigged through a crevice in the wall and she yanked on the cord leading to Elethea's chamber. Since the small room resided just above the master chambers, it wouldn't take long for her lady's maid to come.

A few moments later, she heard Elethea in the hallway. "Milady, are you unwell? You never beckon me during the night."

Aisley opened the door and saw the maid rushing toward her. "I'm fine, Elethea. I need you to rush to the kitchens and fetch a pitcher of the Earl's favorite wine."

"The one that smells of cinnamon?" the maid asked.

"Aye," Aisley replied.

Elethea inclined her head and rushed off to retrieve the wine.

Aisley tried to stop pacing while she was alone, but her leopard's senses urged her to track her mate. She'd become very protective of Garrick since they'd wed, knew when something was amiss and sought to rectify any trouble before it grew worse. By fortune, nothing other than the difficult decisions required of an earl had disturbed him.

Upon waking from a horrible dream, she feared their troubles were about to worsen. If Garrick was worried about Colton, he'd never be able to remain passively in Danford. Being his wife, Aisley would support him. If further trouble occurred, she'd handle it the best way she could.

Hearing Elethea's soft footsteps a good distance from the chamber, Aisley knew the maid was returning. Refusing to look nervous, she drew to a halt and waited for Elethea to come into sight.

"I went as fast as I could, milady," the maid insisted.

"Calm yourself," Aisley soothed.

"Forgive me."

"There's nothing to forgive. Come in," she invited when the maid reached the doorway. "You may place the pitcher on the table beside the bed."

Elethea complied. "Would you need anything else?" she asked upon finishing the task.

"Nay, I'll summon you if I need you again," Aisley said.

Elethea murmured something in reply, dashing back to the servants entrance and disappearing.

Garrick's boots echoed from the corridor leading to the master chamber. He was returning in a hurry, she thought. He was allowing himself to be heard and Aisley hadn't had the chance to prepare what he'd need for travel.

"Did you speak with Brandon?" she asked the moment Garrick closed the door.

"Aye, he's to choose our guards and meet me in the courtyard."

"What will happen then?"

"We'll each take a dozen men and ride out as soon as we can gather our forces. I'm to go to Wolcott and Sir Brandon will go to Somerton. I'll also send a messenger to Henry to see if he's heard anything regarding Wolcott, Somerton or Danford."

Aisley headed for his table and poured a chalice of sustenance.

"Here, drink some of this, Garrick," she urged, her heartbeat sluggish with worry. Garrick came to her and accepted the wine. "Will you and Brandon separate?"

"We will. I'd send more riders to Lucien, but I don't think they could reach him in time, nor do I wish to deplete Danford's guards. You and Angelica need protection and I won't be able to leave if I think there aren't enough men guarding the two of you."

Aisley knew Lucien would come if he could. She'd long since learned that Lucien and Catarina did not normally reside in the estate he managed near the Welsh border. Instead, they favored Africa, the Dark Continent.

"Lucien is a good man. He would aid you if you sent for him. I assume you'll take Valiant."

"Nay, I want him to stay here. He's a full-blooded Abcynian. I need him to watch over you."

"Garrick, do you think there's to be a fight?"

"Until I reach Colton, I will proceed as I would in battle."

"I'd hoped you'd say differently." Truly nervous, she grabbed for the pitcher and a chalice.

"We cannot let ourselves think about anything beyond reaching Colton," Garrick said. He'd placed his chalice aside and did the same with hers.

"Garrick...I wanted that."

"You may drink it soon. I don't mean to worry you so, Aisley," he said, drawing her into arms. It was the one place Aisley knew all was well.

"Nay, it is I who should be strong at the moment. Your bravery and willingness to go into battle for your brother is admirable. I want to prove I can be just as brave."

"There's nothing wrong with worrying. Although I am wondering why you're wearing this chemise," he commented. "You know I like having you naked when we're alone."

Startled, Aisley pushed back as far as Garrick would allow. "Garrick! How can you think of such a thing when trouble is afoot?"

"Nothing can keep me from wanting you, Aisley. I was tempted to lay you down upon the bed before I left to speak with Brandon. I decided to wait so that I could be with you now," he confessed.

Aisley heard his words, seeing the lines marring his face. She was certain Garrick wanted to do more than mate. He wanted to forget his troubles, albeit for a few moments, and he wanted to do so with her. That he would want to be with her even when he was concerned for his brother made her love him all the more.

"Aye, my love, you've sensed what I need," he said.

"Wait, you must go to the courtyard. We haven't the time."

"Brandon will need time to select the right men. We can be together."

"Are you certain?"

Garrick's hand tucked beneath her chin and steadied her sudden trembling. "I cannot leave without having you one more time this night. I want to taste you, to feel you, to be buried so deep inside you that nothing else matters but the feel of your hot, tight sheath gripping me, urging me to completion. Be with me now, Aisley. Let me love you."

How could she deny him? She wanted what he did, denying him meant disappointing them both.

"All right, I'll remove—" Garrick silenced her when he grasped her chemise and tugged. The linen proved little barrier to his strong grip. "I guess we should hurry."

"Forgive me. I need you now."

"You're still dressed."

"Kiss me and let me worry about my clothes," he invited instead of undressing.

"Gar—" With his name muffled behind the urgency of his kiss, Aisley wrapped herself about him and returned his passion.

Ever the warrior, he claimed her lips, sparking her Abcynian instincts. By means unbeknownst to her, Garrick tossed his cote-hardie behind him, loosened his hose from his gypon and shoved his hose to his knees. Dragging her closer to him, he aligned their bodies, his fully erect manhood poking her hipbone.

"God's teeth, woman, you feel so good," he praised, shuddered against her. Loving him more and more, she shifted her hips and a wave of heat sliced through her womb. Wanting him with the ferocity of a panthera pardus female, she climbed his great height and wrapped her legs about his waist.

"Hold on a moment. I need to—"

"Hush, Garrick, I know what you need."

Since their wedding night, Garrick had been the aggressor when they'd joined. Tonight she wanted to take him, to give him pleasure and take away his worries for just a little while. Lifting as much as possible, she fit his shaft between her thighs and plummeted, taking him all the way to the hilt with a triumphant gasp.

"Aisley, if you stop now, I'll go mad!" Garrick shouted. When he shifted to assist, she stilled his hands at her waist and arched backward.

"Worry not, my lord. This is for you." Refusing to grant him quarter, she lifted and plunged, taking him with leopard-like skill. Instinctively, she rocked her hips, grinding and rubbing her body against him with all her strength. It was so wonderful to love him in such a way, and she knew she was giving him all that he needed and more.

Garrick's sawing roar met her cries of joy. She wanted to revel in her right to be his lover, but she couldn't control her building release. With each downward plunge, she took him so deeply it felt as though he touched her heart.

"Garrick, I'm not going to last much longer."

"Find your pleasure, my love. I'm with you," he murmured. Bending his head to her shoulder, he bit hard, holding her still as he thrust.

Together they crested, their cries echoing mind-to-mind as Aisley found purchase with a deep-seated bite and poured her essence into him.

Still impaled, Aisley returned to her senses. A shuffle beyond their chamber brought her head away from Garrick's chest. "Someone's coming."

"I hear them," Garrick replied, carefully lifting her from him. "You are a generous lover, Aisley Forrester. I shall carry this memory with me as I go."

Lowered to the floor, Aisley scowled and grasped Garrick's chin. "Do not speak as if this is our last memory."

"That was not my intention," he assured. "I will always come back to you, little one, never doubt that. For now, you must get dressed." He kissed her quick and let her go.

Aisley selected a new chemise and a simple houppelande. Before she was properly dressed, Garrick had fastened his hose and breeches, straightened his gypon and donned his cote-hardie. In his big hand he held a cloak suitable for traveling at night. The weather had become chillier and he would need the warmth.

A knock sounded the servant's arrival. "Milord, Sir Brandon Mathews bids you to come to the courtyard."

"I'll be there momentarily," Garrick called out.

Halfway across the room, Aisley turned to her mate. "Do not delay further, Garrick. Go to Brandon. I shall pack a small bag for you and join you outside."

Garrick's harsh expression softened. "You needn't follow, little one. Give the bag to a servant."

Incensed, Aisley snarled, punching her fists against her waist. "I'll not remain here. Pray do not ask me. I must know what is to happen next."

"Come when you're ready."

"I shall," she said as he turned away.

* * * * *

Garrick hated knowing he'd have to leave his mate, but he had little choice. The longer he remained in Danford, the stronger his concern for Colton became.

Approaching the courtyard, he was relieved to find it alive with activity. The garrison had been alerted. Some were preparing for the task of securing Danford. Others were mounting their palfreys for journey. Likewise, Valiant had brought Garrick's favored destrier and weapons. Several hackneys were reined nearby, each pulling wagons filled with armor and supplies.

If there was to be a battle, Garrick and his men were ready. For the first time in his four hundred and fifty years, he wished he could talk with his brothers as he could with Aisley. Even if he could, the distance between Danford and Wolcott would interfere and knowing it would take several days to reach Colton seemed a daunting task.

"Milord, come quick," Sir Brandon Mathews summoned from behind him, bringing Garrick back to the matter at hand.

He quickened his steps and approached Brandon and the messenger he thought had already left Danford.

"What is the meaning of your delay, Hayden?" Garrick demanded of his messenger. "You should have been heading for London by now."

"I was, milord," Hayden said. The young man's subtle shift toward Brandon reminded Garrick to hold his temper. "I have not defied you. My small troop had reached the forest when I spotted another man riding toward us. He is a messenger from the King, milord, and I thought it best to await your reply."

"Where is this man?"

"Right over here," Brandon replied, pointing to a short, well-dressed man.

"Come," Garrick urged the King's servant and waited for him to approach. "What is your name?"

"Wadsworth."

"You came alone?" Garrick asked.

"Only for a short distance, milord," Wadsworth said. "It was important that I reach you as quickly as I could. The others should arrive by morn."

"Give me your message," Garrick said.

As he accepted Henry's missive, it occurred to him that he'd become more patient since wedding Aisley. He hadn't snarled at the King's messenger and he hadn't frightened a servant since they'd come out of seclusion. Feeling a bit calmer while thinking of his wife, he broke the King's seal and read.

"Bloody hell," he cursed.

Aisley's scent drew his head about and he saw her in the courtyard. She'd been walking, but she suddenly tossed a small bag to a servant and ran toward him.

"Garrick, what's happened?" she asked.

"Remain calm," Garrick soothed.

"Tell me," she demanded, clenching her fists.

"I've received a message from Henry saying that a group of women claiming to be from Wolcott were found in the woods between Colton's estate and the village of Welford."

Garrick watched Aisley brace her spine. "What were they doing there?" she asked.

He stifled a roar with a sigh. "They have confessed to crafting a spell to ward off a pack of wolves hunting in the woods. A few people in Wolcott have been bitten and they claimed my brother was worried enough to have them chased from his land. Soon after, several of Baron Welford's hounds were killed and Colton felt responsible, so he later sent the women to craft a spell of protection over Welford. Unfortunately, long before this incident with the wolves and witches, Welford and Wolcott have been adversaries and it seems that this is all a ruse created by Baron Welford. I find that strange. Baron Welford has little interaction with his people or land. He's a recluse."

"Oh, nay, tell me neither Colton nor Jillian have been accused of such ugliness!"

Needing to calm her, Garrick brought Aisley to him. "I wish I could tell you all is right in Wolcott, little one. I cannot. Upon a priest's insistence, Wolcott's abbot went to speak privately with Colton regarding the matter. The abbot grew alarmed and called for the Church to conduct an investigation of Baron and Baroness Wolcott."

Not wishing to speak the rest aloud, he turned his face toward Aisley's ear. *The abbot found Colton and Jillian together, biting as we would be when mating.*

What does that mean?

My brother and his mate are being accused of giving witchcraft and wolves free reign in Wolcott because they are evil. It is believed that they are responsible for summoning the wolves by behaving like animals. I am needed in London, where they have been taken for trial. They could be tried for heresy.

Aloud, Aisley gasped. "What should we do, Garrick? Let me come with you to London."

"You will remain in Danford while I see to my brother."

"What if the message is in error? Or if this is some ruse Zotikos created to seek his revenge against us?"

"Whether it's a ruse or not, I must act upon the missive. Henry would not summon me without merit," Garrick answered, wishing the message was false. He recognized the King's seal as authentic.

"This is terrible," Aisley breathed out and he tried to comfort her by squeezing her shoulders. "I'm so frightened for them."

"As am I, little one. Let us not increase our worries more than necessary."

"Is there anything else I should know?"

"Nay," he said.

"Why do you lie to me, Garrick?"

Wishing to protect her, he snagged a lock of her red hair. Fascinated, he watched as the red, tawny and brown hues sifted through his fingers. "I love you, Aisley. I'm trying to ease your worry."

"Then tell me everything. If you don't, I vow I shall follow after you and learn of it on my own."

"You'll do nothing of the kind!" Garrick saw her wince and realized he'd pulled her hair. Loosening his grip, he shook his head. "I'm sorry, my love. I cannot leave if I think you might be so foolish as to follow. Remain here where I know you are safe."

"I shall if you tell me what else was in the missive."

With his free hand, he smoothed his chin. Again, fearing others might misconstrue his answer, he looked into Aisley's eyes. *Abbot Billings was not alone when he came upon Colton and Jillian. Wolcott's new physician went with him. It was Jerold who found them biting and mating like animals and he's been summoned to London as well.*

"Do you think Jerold is still angry with us?" Aisley asked.

"I think his pride was wounded when I insisted he consult with you daily and apologize to Andrew and his wife for his reaction to her pregnancy."

"His ill feelings toward us could affect your brother," Aisley said. "If that's true, then I'm responsible. I should have remained silent about my concerns and dealt with Jerold privately."

"Do not think that way." Garrick touched his hand to her jaw and smoothed his thumb across her freckled cheek. "You were right to speak to me of your misgivings."

"I never meant for Jerold to leave Danford."

"Jerold made the decision to join Colton in Wolcott. It is my hope he will speak on behalf of my brother, not against him."

"It shall be mine as well," she said, falling silent for a moment.

When she looked ready to speak, he tightened his fingers on her jaw a fraction and silenced her. "Aisley, do not think or ask if you can come with me. I want you in Danford where I know you're safe."

"Can't I do something to assist? I already feel helpless."

"Watching over the manor in my absence is of great importance."

"The staff can tend the manor without me for awhile. I could, hmm—" Unconcerned with being watched, Garrick silenced his mate with a kiss.

As they parted, he whispered, "You are the keeper of my heart, Aisley Forrester, I have faith in your ability to watch over Angelica and keep Danford working as it should."

"Then I shall do all I can to help you." Her agreement given, Garrick hugged her tight.

"Lord Danford, I do not wish to disturb you." Brandon spoke from their left. "The men are assembled. We should leave at once."

Including Aisley in the conversation, Garrick said, "Have you selected the guards you wish to take with you to Somerton?"

"Aye, they are ready."

"Very good, Sir Brandon, you may take your men and depart," Garrick instructed. Sir Brandon bowed, acknowledging Aisley as he did so, and marched toward his palfrey.

"Promise that you will tell Jillian and Colton my prayers will be with them?"

Aware that she visited the chapel regularly, Garrick held her for as long as he dared. "Your prayers will be welcomed, as will mine. Regardless of what Jerold and an abbot may believe, we know Colton and his wife are dutiful to the Church. The truth of that will be told."

"I shall go to the chapel and pray for all of you," Aisley insisted, attempting a smile, which lightened Garrick's heart. "Please be careful, Garrick."

"I have much to return for, little one. I shall do what I must and come to you as soon as I can," he said.

Aisley lifted to the tips of her toes and kissed him quick. "Go, before I beg you to stay."

With one last deep, thorough kiss, Garrick drew in his mate's taste and savored it for as long as he dared before a horse whinnied, reminding him that he needed to leave.

"I love you," he said.

She whispered the same. Hesitant as he turned away, he caught sight of Valiant holding the reins of his horse.

Garrick walked toward them and a resulting chill had him fastening his cloak more securely. He didn't want to leave Aisley, but he could not let his brother face a trial or the machinations of Zotikos. Each footstep toward the destrier warned his worry was justified.

"Are you certain I shouldn't join you, milord?" Valiant asked. "I've learned much since my arrival."

"You have, Valiant. It is my wish that you protect my wife and daughter. I trust you to guard them well."

"I will," the boy promised, pulling back.

Garrick climbed into the saddle, reining the destrier about to face Aisley. Bravery and love shone from her big brown eyes. "I will miss you, Lady Danford, stay safe," he said, loud enough that any could hear and know his sincerity.

"You, as well," she returned, holding herself tall and proud as he spurred his horse toward the dozen men who would accompany him to London.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Aisley watched Garrick until he was out of sight. As much she wished he'd return, she knew his brother needed him. She had to trust that her husband would take care of Colton and return when he was able. In the meantime there was work to be done before she could retire for the rest of the evening.

"Aisley, is there anything you need?" Valiant asked.

"Nay, Valiant. I'll be all right." Straightening her shoulders, she faced the squire. "Do you know what the King's summons was about?"

"A bit of it," he said.

"So you know Colton and Jillian have been accused of allowing witchcraft in Wolcott and summoning wolves to prey upon Welford? The missive claims that wolves have been attacking people in the town neighboring Wolcott."

"Bloody hell, I knew of the witchcraft, not the rest."

"Now is not the time to curse. We must be vigilant and pray that the Lord will protect them."

"It is the Church leaders who will make Lord Danford's brother and sister-by-the-law stand trial. If I could speak on their behalf or send for my father, I would."

"Is it possible to send word to Sir Lucien?"

"Nay, it is not." Valiant's shoulders lowered, an unusual gesture for such a strong young man. "My father and mother left sennights ago. It is likely they've just arrived at home."

"They live that far from England?" she asked.

Valiant nodded, frowning as he said, "It is a shame that Englishmen seek to explain death and war by blaming wolves and ancient practices that they don't understand. That is why they fear witchcraft and tales of werewolves."

"They fear wolves because they can kill a man if they want to. I was attacked by a pack of them, Valiant. They'd have killed me if Garrick and your father hadn't come."

"For that, I'm grateful. You've been nothing but kind to me since I arrived and I will honor Lord Danford by guarding you. Whatever you ask, I will do."

"It is my intention to fight evil with prayer. I'll go to the chapel. While I'm there, send the staff back to their duties or beds. It is long before sunrise. I suspect the morrow will prove difficult."

"As you bid, milady," Valiant agreed.

Aisley watched momentarily as the squire walked away. Taking courage in her decision to seek the manor's chapel, she hustled to find solace. As she walked, she

heard Valiant issuing orders and was relieved that no one questioned them. Danford would remain safe, regardless of Garrick's absence, and that gave Aisley some peace of mind.

At times it seemed incredible to know that not very long ago few really knew the Earl of Danford or believed him to be an honorable man. Much had changed since they'd wed. He had promised his tenants that he would remain in Danford for longer periods of time, leaving only when required by the King or to aid his friends and family. He overcame the fears and doubts of the villagers by permitting Aisley to continue her healing, often aiding her in collecting herbs and making potions. He'd even delivered cough medicine to the Jones' whenever it was necessary. Aye, he was no longer feared. He was seen as a fair and just lord.

Lost in memory, Aisley ducked inside the arched doorway of the chapel and felt a sense of calm. This was where she'd married Garrick. Where she'd found her place and purpose, which was to love and support the Earl of Danford and protect the secrets of Abcynian kind.

It was quiet as she walked down the aisle, she realized, looking anxiously about. The priest was either sleeping or tending other duties, so she made her way to the front and knelt to the floor.

As her prayers lifted heavenward, she thought she heard shouts in the distance. Since her conversion, her hearing had grown more sensitive, and on a clear day, she could hear the villagers and farmers working their trades. At first, it had been difficult to decipher the muffled voices and drown out the tillers, hammers and the sounds of everyday life in a village, but right now she believed the shouts spoke of trouble for the villagers.

Feeling a sense of urgency, she stood and ran from the chapel. Outside, the manor had returned to normalcy. Valiant was speaking to a guardsman and she hurried toward him.

"You may go," Aisley told the guard. The man inclined his head and moved away. "Valiant, I hear shouts from the village."

Valiant instinctively turned his face toward the village and scented the air. "We should take some men and check on the village."

"That is what I'd hoped you'd say."

Together, she and Valiant called for assistance. As it was customary for the lady of the manor to defend her husband's estate during his absence, three guards rushed to follow her commands. Soon, palfreys were saddled for her and Valiant and the guards flanked them as they headed for the village.

At the common, Aisley wasn't surprised to find many villagers rushing from their dwellings. Andrew knelt on the ground, holding a stranger in his arms.

"Andrew, what happened?" Aisley called out, vaulting from her horse's back and rushing to her longtime friend.

"This man came from the woods not long ago and cried for help. His head is bleeding."

Aisley dropped to her knees beside Andrew and inspected the stranger's condition. His head was covered in dried and crusted blood, some still damp as it rained down his face. The man's eyes were open, but the uneven size of his pupils alarmed her. His mouth opened and closed, as if he was trying to speak.

"How did you know to come, milady?" Andrew asked before Aisley could touch the stranger's head. "I was about to send someone for you."

"It matters not. Valiant, will you help us?"

Valiant was there in an instant and lifted the man into his arms, unassisted.

"Isn't he heavy?" Andrew questioned as Valiant strolled away. "He's wearing plate armor."

"Not so much, he's missing his helm," Valiant responded. "Armor is not as heavy as you'd think."

"The man is rather large."

"Andrew, Valiant is strong enough. Worry not."

Quickly, Aisley led the way to her cottage and opened the door for Valiant. He'd lowered the man into a cot and straightened. Before proceeding to the cot, she had the forethought to locate two candles and lit each, placing them near the bed.

"What can I do?" Valiant asked.

"You can assist in washing his face. Cool water might help."

"I'm at your service, milady."

"You're gracious, Valiant, but you needn't speak to me so. The same for you, Andrew," she bid, knowing he had entered the cottage. "While I prepare what I need, remove his armor."

Andrew and Valiant moved to do as she asked, leaving Aisley time to rummage through her supplies. Before trying any specific treatment, she wanted to check the man's injury and see what should be done. On that thought, she set pieces of cloth aside and found a bucket.

"I'll return with some water shortly," she told the men and headed outside.

The common remained crowded with villagers, but she did not slow to speak to any in particular. Howard Jones stepped forward from the crowd and assisted her once she reached the well. He'd offered to carry the bucket for her, but she declined and thanked him for his aid.

When she'd returned to the cottage, Valiant and Andrew had removed most of the knight's armor. As she neared the cot with supplies in hand, she found one of the men had covered the stranger to his elbows.

"How is he?" she asked, studying the knight's face. She'd little doubt as to the man's rank. His armor suggested a man of some stature and significance. Her inclination was to think that the man was a knight-errant.

"He's trying to speak, milady. He may respond to the sound of your voice."

"Lord Danford," the stranger uttered.

Aisley soothed his brow with one hand, motioning for Valiant to wet the strips of cloth with the other. "Aye, you're in Danford. Can you tell us your name?"

"Witlock...James...Witlock."

"Good, you can understand us," Aisley praised, trying to encourage James to remain alert. "Are you knighted?" she asked while pressing a cloth to his brow and wiping away the blood and sweat.

"Aye," he said. "I serve His Majesty."

Aisley frowned and soothed his brow. "Sir James, I am Lady Danford, what happened to you?"

"I was to deliver a message to Lord Danford, but was waylaid by bandits and taken to Fernley."

"You've come from Fernley?"

James nodded ever so gingerly. "I was there for five days. I left as soon as I was able."

Aisley had washed away most of the blood and was relieved to see the cut near his temples would heal with proper tending. "How did you come by this wound?"

"My doing," James said. "I had to reach Danford."

"You injured yourself?" Valiant interrupted.

"Fell off my horse, hit a rock."

"You've been through much, Sir James," Aisley said. "It was brave of you to come as far as you did unaided. Can you tell me why you needed to speak with Lord Danford?"

"The bandits stole my pouch. A missive from the King was taken, along with my coin and weapons. I had to tell the Earl what was in the letter."

Violent tremors racked Aisley's spine at the possible ramifications of James' need to reach Garrick. Instead of giving into them, she reached for a clean cloth.

"Forgive me, Sir James, I fail to understand how you came to be at Fernley when His Majesty is in London. We received a message from him earlier tonight. My husband has already taken his retainers and gone upon the King's summons."

"Nay, nay," James cried out, trying to sit up. Both Valiant and Andrew held the knight steady and urged him to lie back. "I think he's heading for trouble."

"What makes you think so?"

James closed his eyes, seeming to ward away the ache in his temples. "I'd taken my men to Wolcott ten days past," he said, his eyes remaining closed. "Upon learning more

of the situation, I was ordered to report to Lord Danford with the King's missive advising that Baron and Baroness Wolcott were to be taken to London to stand trial for practicing witchcraft. I should have arrived days ago with the message. I cannot say how another man came by the King's missive unless it was the one stolen."

"Then what was in the message was real," Aisley said.

"It was. I left for Danford as the Baron and his wife were taken away from Wolcott. It is my shame that I'd failed to arrive before now." Finally, James opened his eyes. "My men were killed in our effort to reach Lord Danford."

"I am sorry for the loss of your men, Sir James. Your gallantry will be remembered long after this night. Can you tell me when you would have arrived in Danford if bandits hadn't ambushed you and your men?"

"Five days ago."

"How long does it take to reach London from Wolcott?"

"Three days, if the weather remains calm and you don't stop to rest."

Silently, Aisley counted the days. Jillian and Colton had been waiting in London for two days.

"Do you know when the trial was to be held?"

"I do not."

"Is it possible it has already happened?"

"His Majesty favors the Earl of Danford. He'd give him time to reach London before allowing the trial. But the roads to London can be hazardous and the Church may not wait for Lord Danford to arrive."

The knight's reply increased Aisley's concerns. She attempted to quiet them by wiping some of the blood from his hair and temples. As she'd already surmised, his head wound would heal if properly stitched. She would have gone to prepare the needle right away, but tears blurred her vision and her hands shook.

Something was terribly wrong and she could think of little else but finding out if Garrick was truly in danger. Her instinct was to follow after him and demand that he come back.

"Let me do it," Valiant urged, touching his hand to her shoulder. "I can stitch a wound."

"I don't know what to do, Valiant, what to think." She lifted her head, comforted by Valiant's presence, but she wanted Garrick.

"We can only hope the King has the power to stay the trial until Garrick arrives," Aisley said. "Unfortunately, I believe the Church can usurp His Majesty's power."

"Your troubles are my fault to bear," James murmured.

"You did all that you could to arrive here as ordered, Sir James. You are not to blame for the actions of bandits," Aisley consoled.

James snorted in disgust. "Bandits from Welford, I'm almost certain."

"What makes you claim such a thing?"

"The town is a day and a half's journey from Wolcott. Many of the townsmen in Welford envy Baron Wolcott's success and the opportunity to cast a stone at the Baron was granted to them. Considering that, I believe the bandits had been sent by Baron Welford."

"You should report—ouch. Valiant, you're hurting me," she scolded when Valiant grabbed her hand and squeezed it harshly.

"Forgive me," he said, loosening his fingers. "Talk of Welford reminded me of the woman who came to Danford looking for Angelica."

"Why?" she asked.

Valiant stood tall and stared at James and Andrew, likely deciding what to say. "She was from Welford," he answered.

Alarmed, Aisley rose beside him. "How do you know this?"

"She told me."

"Valiant, do you know who sent her?"

"Aye."

"Zotikos and Haywood are behind this trouble, I know it!"

"Who do you speak of, milady?" James interrupted.

"Enemies of my husband's," she said.

"Forgive the intrusion, Aisley, mayhap I shouldn't hear any of this," Andrew said.

"Andrew, you've every right to listen. My husband thinks he's riding to rescue his brother. It seems as though he's heading for danger instead and I know not what to do."

"I can summon the men of the village to assist in whatever you require," Andrew suggested.

Aisley reluctantly inclined her head, knowing what she would have to do. "I shall accept, Andrew. Go and gather men that you trust."

Andrew bowed and left shortly after, giving Aisley and Valiant time alone with James.

"You needn't worry with me, milady. If you must go, I'll be fine."

"I can stitch your wound, Sir James. As I do, might you know if Baron Somerton has been alerted to the situation in Wolcott?"

"Men were sent to Somerton. If you've not heard anything from Sir Grayson Forrester, Baron Somerton, before now, it is likely he doesn't know about his brother."

Aisley bowed her head and wondered what to do next. Uncertain, she thought it best to finish tending to James' wound and discuss her options with Valiant and the knight. The three of them might come up with an effective plan.

* * * * *

He'd been caught and caged! A bloody trick had been used and Garrick stumbled into it like an untried page!

Had he taken a moment to question Henry's messenger more thoroughly, he'd have realized the man was not dressed like a servant to the King. He'd already been anxious to assist Colton. Believing the message was indeed real, he couldn't have ignored riding to his brother's aid. But instead of helping his brother, he and his men were caught in the middle of an open field.

"You'll not hold me for long, Zotikos," Garrick shouted from his gold encrusted cage.

A short distance away, his men were lying about the ground, slaughtered or left to die by the army Zotikos had managed to summon. Some were Englishmen, others young Saturians. Some of the men were forced to control the destriers and palfreys, which had sensed his leopard half and shied away.

Zotikos took his time watching the foray, laughing softly at the men's handling of the horses. "Keep the horses well away from the cage," he said. "They can sense the Earl of Danford's evil."

Garrick bared his teeth, wanting to sink them into his enemy's throat. "If you're not careful, I'll send the horses into flight," he warned.

Zotikos turned back. "You could try," he said, grabbing the gilded bars. "Both of us know you can do nothing when touching gold. It is all around you, Danford. Had your forebears not been so greedy for gold, you'd have broken me in pieces by now. As it is, you cannot even order me to go. I do wonder how this may affect your pretty little healer. Do you think she is as weak as you, vulnerable? I would hope so. I've plans for her, you know."

"Speak not of my wife, Zotikos," Garrick warned, secretly concerned for Aisley. After the attack on him and his guards, he'd been relieved to know his mate remained in Danford where she was safe. Mention of her now increased his worry. "I vow it to you. I'll soon be free of this cage and I will tear you apart."

Zotikos snickered, a sound that had Garrick reaching for his favored weapon and finding it gone. "Not before we reach Welford, where you will be tried and burned."

Hating to touch the cage, Garrick wrapped his fingers around the bars and pulled. Weakness invaded his body, leaving him barely able to support his own weight.

"An innocent man cannot be burned," he claimed.

"Your brother was tried the day after his arrival in London. Messengers had been sent to tell you of his pending trial. It is most unfortunate that they reached me instead. More were sent upon the conclusion of the trial and my men intercepted them as well. Baron Walcott was to be burned this eve if you failed to come to London and convince him to confess, just as his pretty little baroness did. Confession saved his wife. I can only imagine how it felt when he learned the Earl of Danford, his eldest brother, could not bother to come to his aid."

Garrick jerked the bars with little gain. "Each word you speak is a lie. You'll not fool me. Not even you can know such things," he argued.

"I know your brother is dead."

"Henry would await my arrival before consenting to a trial."

Clicking his tongue, Zotikos shook his head. "You believe you've earned the King's support. Mayhap you have when it comes to leading men to war. Do remember that I have spies everywhere, especially within the Church. My priest alerted them of the sorcery your brother practices. It's said that his wife is a witch, much like yours."

"Dastard, no one practices sorcery or witchcraft in Wolcott or Danford."

"It isn't just witchcraft that frightens Englishmen and the Church. The trial revealed that your brother and his wife were responsible for sending wolves to Welford. Some men were bitten. A hunter was killed, leaving a widow to fend for herself and her three children. Wolfhounds were eaten and mangled. The Baron and Baroness themselves believe they can become such beasts. They are considered evil."

Zotikos leaned against the cage. Garrick was tempted to reach for his enemy's throat. Instead he clenched his fists.

"Evil stands before me in the form of a well-dressed man," Garrick sneered. "Every word you utter is a lie. The army you've mounted from Welford and infiltrated with Saturians may have followed your orders, but they'll soon see you for what you are."

"None will see me for what I am if you are dead." Zotikos frowned, his gray eyes darkening until they were flat and black. A chill lifted the hairs at the back of Garrick's neck. "Did I fail to mention your wife and daughter shall be mine as soon as you're gone? Aisley will burn if she doesn't kneel to me and I will raise the girl."

Rage forced a violent roar from Garrick's throat, warming him in an instant. "You touch my family and I will send you to Hell!" Soldiers from Welford drew back from pilfering weapons from the dying guards.

"A place I'm familiar with. To your misfortune, you'll find yourself there long before I return."

"John, why do you provoke the prisoner?" Sedgewick Haywood questioned, strolling toward them with a stolen sword in hand. "Let us move on before anyone from Danford pursues us."

"My wife and staff believe I am heading for London. Why would you worry over anyone coming after us?" Garrick held himself still and ignored his need to roar. His leopard half wanted to spring, but it was hindered by the cage.

"I have the feeling your lovely new countess is coming to aid you as we speak." Zotikos laughed aloud, nearly sending Garrick to his knees. "Haywood, after Sir James Witlock's retainers were killed, you were to take the King's messenger to Fernley for care. Did you do as I'd instructed?"

"I did, milord." Haywood kept himself distant from the cage. An ell separated him from Garrick. "I helped him recover and watched him head for Danford as soon as he

was able. Was a terrible shame he'd lost his helm and fell from his horse. I'm getting quite good with rocks."

"You've done well. The countess is likely on her way. Let us proceed."

"Dare do whatever you want to me, but you'll not threaten what's mine," Garrick said.

"Such chivalry probably had Aisley falling at your feet," Zotikos said, turning to scan the soldiers he'd amassed. "Tell me, have the two of you mated in the way of beasts, Lord Danford? Do you bite your countess? Do you favor the taste of Lady Danford's blood on your lips? Does she bite you?"

"Werewolves," a soldier shouted, causing more of the men to echo the words.

"The Earl and Countess of Danford are as evil as Baron Wolcott and his wife," another man rebuked, sending a wave of accusations and fear through the heavily armed men. "They must come to Welford and answer to the devastation Wolcott's wolves have caused. Mayhap the Countess will confess to her sins and turn to me for guidance, who can say. Let us hope it is not too late to save her soul."

Helpless to stop the leopard's means of defense when he was caged, Garrick slammed into the gilded bars and roared with all the force of a panthera trying to protect his mate, causing the men to take up their weapons.

"My friends, the Earl of Danford has turned to the beast," Zotikos pronounced. "Let us take him to Welford and remind him he is but a man!"

Incited by Zotikos' machinations, the soldiers surrounded the gilded cage with a shout.

Chapter Twenty-Three

"Aisley, are you certain I cannot dissuade you against this?" Valiant asked, standing beside her as she waited for a destrier to be brought to her.

"Nay, my young friend, my mind is set."

"Might I remind you what Garrick Forrester is? He isn't a man to be fooled so easily. For all we know, he could have avoided getting caught and is on his way to London."

"I want nothing more than to hear Garrick shout at me for leaving Danford."

Aisley felt more and more certain that Garrick needed help. He'd never call for her because he was too proud, but like he'd sensed Colton's troubles earlier, she was beginning to sense Garrick's.

"Please, milady, allow me to go after Garrick alone." Valiant insisted.

Aisley stared up at the giant young man, admiring him for his willingness to guard her. "You are gallant, but I must do this. We've sent men after Sir Brandon and can only hope he will know what to do from there. Meanwhile, I shall take two men and attempt to reach Garrick. We cannot risk taking too many guards and leaving Danford vulnerable. I've already posted sentinels in the village and soldiers at any entrance to Danford land. No one will be welcomed here until Garrick and I return."

Seeming much older, Valiant crossed his arms at his chest and leaned forward.

"What happens if you get caught?" he demanded.

"We've discussed that. Follow us at a distance. Stay out of sight until it is right for you to show yourself."

"Very well, I will do as you ask," Valiant decided. "I should warn you that my instincts are young."

Aisley nodded, understanding Valiant's limitations. "As are mine. I have gained much strength since being converted. I must believe we can do something other than pace about the manor waiting to hear word of Garrick's fate."

Purposefully, she did not reveal the sudden weakness invading her body, making it difficult to stand straight and tall. She didn't know why this happened, but sensed that it was linked to Garrick. Whenever he'd changed in the past, she'd felt it. Mayhap she was feeling his weakness too.

Valiant shook his head. "At times like this, wisdom is more important than strength."

"Then be wise, Valiant. Remain hidden and track us through the forest."

"I pray I do not fail you or Garrick."

"You won't." Placing her hand on his forearm, she squeezed, offering her support. "Now go and ready yourself to leave."

"Will you need me to look in on Angelica first?"

Thoughts of Angelica lightened her heart. "Nay, I've already visited with her. Two men from the garrison have been posted by Angelica's chamber and Judith will watch over her while we're gone."

"Have you thought of how hard it will be for Angelica if something happens to you or Garrick?"

"I have. I want her to be raised by your father and mother. Both were kind to her and I trust them to protect her from Zotikos in the future."

"Is there nothing I can say to keep you from going after Garrick?"

"There's nothing. I'd almost ruined my relationship with Garrick by attempting to leave and doubting his word when we'd first met. I'll never flee again. He is my mate. I must help him."

"Then so must I," Valiant said, pushing away when a guard arrived with the destrier.

"I beg forgiveness for our delay, milady," the man requested, bowing as he handed the reins to Valiant. At first, the horse shied away. It took a simple soothing word from the squire to calm him. "We could not find a lady's saddle that would properly fit a destrier."

"It matters not, William," Aisley said. Taking the reins, she soothed the horse when his ears flattened. "I can ride like a man. I'm dressed for it," she added, gesturing toward the male breeches, tunic and cloak she'd borrowed from Andrew White.

"May we offer our service to you, Lady Danford?" Andrew offered, approaching steadily.

"Andrew, your willingness to accompany Valiant and I back to the manor will suffice."

"I speak not only for myself, but another," Andrew insisted, stepping aside.

A vaguely familiar man stepped to the fore. Older than Andrew by a number of years, the man held himself proud. "You may not remember me, milady. I am Daniel Burkett, originally from Fernley."

"You owned the tavern," she recalled, his face becoming more familiar.

"Aye," Burkett said. "I mean not to delay your journey, but I'd like to offer myself as one of your guards. I can ride better than most men and served in His Majesty's army for many years. I can handle a sword."

"I'm certain you can. Why would you offer yourself for me?" she asked.

Daniel Burkett moved closer and inclined his head in reverence. "Lord Danford saved my daughter's life. I offer my sword to protect his countess in return."

Aisley liked the man and decided to accept. "Very well, Daniel Burkett, join me. William, find this man a suitable horse and appropriate weaponry."

"Will you let me aid you, milady?" Andrew offered, standing firm.

"Your wife is with child. She needs you more than I."

"Nelda insisted I join you. She's tending to Sir James and knows what is happening. Allow me to do what I ought, Aisley, please."

"William, Andrew will need a horse, as well," Aisley said to the guard. "As soon as the horses are ready, we'll go. I'll ask you to watch over Danford while I'm gone."

"As you wish, milady," William accepted, rushing off to do her bidding.

By the time William and some servants fetched the horses and weapons, Aisley's weakness had grown more prevalent. Still near, Valiant watched her closely. She wondered if he suspected her weakness. To hide, she lifted herself unaided into the saddle of her destrier and urged the horse toward Andrew and Daniel.

"Are we ready?" Aisley asked the men, relieved when they nodded in unison. "Let us go. It's dark. Do your best to remain alert to any danger that may be ahead." She wished the moon was full and prayed the crescent moon would offer enough light for the men to see. Because she could see well in the darkness, she rode between them and silently offered herself as their guide.

"Be safe, Aisley," Valiant bid as she passed.

"The same to you, my young friend," she said.

Several soldiers called for her to allow them to go in her place. Refusing, she urged the warhorse into a faster gait, sighing as she and her guardians left the courtyard.

Strong and surefooted, the horses flew across the field toward the forest. It wasn't until they reached the forest that they slowed.

Aisley was glad she had the destrier's strength beneath her. Her strength continued to wane. She didn't think it would return until Garrick was found. Concentrating on remaining astride, Aisley tightened her legs as much as she could and stared straight ahead.

Two furlongs into the forest, she allowed herself to relax. She was chilled and knew her companions were cold as well, but she couldn't see or smell any presence other than night creatures, so she felt safe to continue forward.

Just after they'd left the cover of trees for open countryside, she led the destrier into a fast walk and heard the men follow close behind. A fathom later, they were charging ahead. All the while, she'd grown weaker, but more determined to reach Garrick. Something was wrong and she feared the consequences if she did not reach him soon. The field ahead of them smelled of the taint of recently spilt blood. The grasses were matted flat as if a battle had already taken place. There were no bodies to be seen and she tried to find Garrick's scent, though she couldn't over the blood and stench of death.

Afraid to linger, they urged their horses on, pushing them hard. After what felt like an eternity, Aisley's panthera senses detected that her horse was breathing too heavy, sweat coated his chest. They needed to give the horses some rest.

"Aisley, we can't push the horses too fast, too far."

"I know," she said, permitting her older destrier to slow and patting his sweat-slicked neck in apology.

Daniel remained silent as he led his horse next to hers. Andrew bent to brush his hand along his palfrey's graceful neck. A movement to the right caught Aisley's attention, bringing her head around to verify what she'd heard. A small, gray mouse dashed past the destrier. The horse side-stepped, but she was able to rein him to a halt just as the smell of horses and the sweat of soldiers reached her, competing with the bloodstained field a short distance away.

A breath later, the ground began to tremble.

"Go back to Danford!" she ordered, fear and weakness making it difficult to control her horse.

"Follow us!" Andrew was already kneeling his mount into flight as the first soldiers crested the hill before them.

Uncertain how long she would be able to hold her seat, Aisley tried to follow after her men. "Keep going," she commanded when she started to topple backward and collided with the hard, cold ground.

Aisley ignored the pain of her fall and pushed herself up, only to find herself surrounded. Andrew and Daniel were kept at bay by four soldiers holding swords close to their hearts.

"Do not hurt them," she pled.

The dozen soldiers parted as a lone rider approached. "I was right," Zotikos said to his men. "The Countess of Danford came after her husband. It would be our pleasure to escort you safely to Lord Danford, milady," he offered, smiling as he drew to a halt close to where she knelt.

"If you've hurt him, Zotikos, I will send word to the King about what you've done this night!"

"Who does she speak of?" a soldier questioned aloud.

Zotikos lifted one shoulder. "I know not. Mayhap she casts a spell." His response had the heavily armored men drawing back several feet. "My dear lady, my name is John Brewster, Baron Welford. I suggest you remember it as we take you to the Earl. Once you're reunited, we'll ride to Welford. A trial should seal your fates."

"What sort of trial? I'm guilty of nothing," she insisted.

"You will learn," Zotikos said. "Shall we go or should we execute your men first?"

Aisley shook her head, hoping to save her friends. "Nay, do not. They have families and do not deserve to be wrongly judged."

"All the more reason they should witness your burning," Zotikos decided, vaulting off his horse. Looking about at his soldiers, he seemed to be looking for someone in particular. "George, be so good as to bind the healer with these shackles."

Zotikos had turned while he spoke, so Aisley could not see what was given to the soldier. George, a large, fully armored guard, ventured near with hesitancy in every stride. He was scared of her, she discovered.

"Do I frighten you, George? Have I tried to fight?" she asked.

"Silence, wench, I know what you are and what you believe in. Give me your hands," he ordered, revealing a set of manacles that shined in the darkness.

"What are those?"

"It matters not. Give the man your hands or your men will die," Zotikos said.

Unwilling for Andrew or Daniel to suffer, Aisley lifted her arms to the soldier. Two bands of what felt like iron circled her wrists, causing her to fall forward.

"Why is this happening?" Aisley murmured. She couldn't push herself to her knees. "I should be able to stand."

Zotikos neared. Sickened by an overabundance of ambergris, Aisley shrank as far away from him as she could. A strong hand caught her plaited hair and tugged until she stood hunched before him.

"Let me go, I've done nothing to you," she pled.

"That is where you are wrong," Zotikos said, his voice quiet, but frighteningly intent. "You refused to heed me, healer, and you shall suffer for it. Before your trial concludes, you will seek my forgiveness, but alas, you'll have to beg for it."

"I'll never beg!" She was about to draw breath to tell him to go. He stared her into silence, his gaze suddenly growing so dark she couldn't see the whites of his eyes.

"Try to repel me and you will find yourself powerless," he warned in a voice that sounded far away and brittle, as if it weren't his own. "Tell anyone else to send me away and your guards will die. George, place her on my horse."

Aisley blinked, uncertain what to do or say. He would do it, she thought. Zotikos would kill Andrew and Daniel if she revealed his secret to his men. She would have to wait until her men were safe. Once they were, she would say whatever she needed to say to send Zotikos away.

"Milord, what if the horse shies from her as ours did with Danford?" George asked.

"I'll control the horse, just do as I say."

"Aye, milord," George said obediently.

"You're not a lord," Aisley hissed. "You're a fool."

Zotikos laughed, shaking with his mirth. "A fool who holds your life in his hands," he whispered so only she would hear.

Aisley stood as firm as she could. Hiding a shiver, she whispered, "I do not permit you near, Zotikos, go from me now." But her words lacked faith, just as her weakness became more apparent, more frightening.

"You failed to heed my warning. The shackles render you as helpless as your husband. You're already feeling his weakness, aren't you?"

"What have you done to him?" she demanded.

"I placed him in a gilded cage. He will not be able to save you this time, healer."

"You've bound him with gold?" Looking down, Aisley realized her shackles had been tainted with gold as well.

Zotikos laughed, the sound grating Aisley's ears. "Aye, when last I saw the Earl of Danford, he couldn't stand."

Sickened, Aisley breathed inward. Garrick was helpless and she'd been feeling weak since leaving Danford. That could only mean he was near enough for her to sense him, that the gold had not diminished all of their abilities. Momentarily gratified to know that she would soon see her husband, she kept silent and prayed for another miracle. Mayhap together, she and Garrick could defeat Zotikos and his men.

"Milord, we should continue on. As it is, we'll not reach Welford for at least two days hence," George said.

Zotikos agreed with barely a nod.

With that, George lifted Aisley into his arms and carried her toward Zotikos' destrier. The small army circled them, keeping Andrew and Daniel in their grasps.

* * * * *

Imprisoned by gold, Garrick lifted his head when he smelled almonds. Aisley was approaching. Judging from the heaviness of ambergris, sweat, fear and horses that accompanied the scent that belonged to his wife, he knew she was not coming of her own accord.

"I believe your lady will arrive soon," Sedgewick said, strolling back and forth in front of Garrick's cage.

"Let me go now, Haywood. I might have mercy on you when I'm free," Garrick offered. He'd like nothing more than to end the dastard's life, but he'd honor his promise if granted freedom.

Haywood rounded on him, faster than a man of his ilk should allow. "Why would I obey the word of a werewolf? To think I'd been fooled into believing the loss of a misfortunate child was the worse that could happen to my life. Now I've got you and you'll die for the evil you inflict on others."

"I cannot become a wolf."

"Then why are you weakened so?" Sedgewick tested. "John Brewster told us of your weakness when near gold."

Garrick remained steady. "I know nothing about the myth of werewolves. In truth, Sedgewick, the man you allow to control your every move is the one who is evil."

"He controls less than it seems," Haywood said.

"If that's so, free me," Garrick urged.

"Silence, prisoner, I'll hear no more from you." Sedgewick turned and stalked toward the safety of soldiers. "Dutton, guard this man."

As a guard came to stand near the cage, Garrick waited for Aisley. He spotted her the moment she and her captors came into sight. Astride a destrier with Zotikos holding her, she held her head high, but Garrick knew she was very weak. While she was still at a distance, he spied the shackles on her wrists. They were gold, making her as helpless as he.

A rumble filled the back of Garrick's throat at the thought of Zotikos touching Aisley. By pure will, he swallowed the leopard's roar. He'd already frightened the soldiers with his fury earlier. He wouldn't jeopardize his mate's life by furthering their fears.

"Aisley! Have you been hurt?" Garrick shouted. He felt her try to speak in the way of true mates. The gold made it impossible to hear anything other than a indistinct murmur, for their Abcynian gifts were hindered.

By fortune, the panthera within each of them could sense the other's weakness. As much as he hated being caged, feeling his mate gave him courage. Not all their strengths were diminished. They would be able to defeat their enemy. Mayhap if he turned his own men against him, Zotikos would be seen as the evil creature he was.

"I'm all right, Garrick," Aisley assured when she was close enough.

"Let her go, she's innocent," Garrick insisted.

Dutton slapped Garrick's cage with the point of his sword. "Remain quiet!"

"You realize you're dealing with the Earl of Danford," Garrick warned Dutton. "You can do nothing when we reach Welford without the King's knowledge."

"We've earned His Majesty's consent," Dutton answered.

"By what means?" Garrick demanded.

"John Brewster, Baron Welford, persuaded the King."

"Baron Welford, you say? You haven't met the Baron before he needed your sword, have you, Dutton?" Garrick asked.

"All of Welford knows he fought the French for years and became a recluse as a result," Dutton replied. "After the wolves came to Welford and killed his wolfhounds, he summoned his garrison. I agreed to aid him when I heard he needed a man tested in battle. I am ready to serve him."

"Interesting," Garrick said. Pressing further, he leaned against the gold bars holding him. Touching the cage made his skin feel as though it was being burned, but he didn't give away his pain. "Baron Welford was trampled during a battle and lost the

use of his lower limbs. He sought solace in prayer by becoming a recluse. The man you believe to be the Baron is able to walk."

"You know nothing," Dutton declared.

"Ask John Brewster about his injuries, Dutton."

"Be silent!" the soldier ordered, stepping further away.

Garrick drew back. Zotikos' soldiers had arrived. With strength in numbers, the Saturian leader leapt off the back of his horse, taking Aisley with him.

"See, healer, I've brought you to your husband as promised."

"Free him." Aisley struggled, trying to break free of Zotikos' hold. Unsuccessful, she gave up, her weakness as severe as Garrick's. He wished he could comfort her, give her the gift of his essence and replenish her body, but knew Zotikos would deny him the right to take care of his mate. He would have to bide his time until he could and vowed to find a way.

"You will not get away with this treachery, I vow it," Aisley said to her captor.

"Do you plan to place a spell upon me?" Zotikos questioned.

"I know nothing of spells," she said, trying in vain to kick at her captor's shins.

"Aisley, save your strength," Garrick urged, wanting her to rest while she could.

Aisley half turned toward him. "I'm sorry, Garrick. I failed you."

"You have not, my lady." Proud of her effort to remain standing, Garrick grasped the bars of the cage and tugged, attempting to stand. "Put her in here with me."

Sedgewick drew near to Aisley and Zotikos, holding his sword before him. "I think not."

"The lady rides with me. I simply wanted the Earl to know I've got his witch." Lowering his voice, Zotikos continued to provoke Garrick. "Tell anyone how to be rid of me and I'll cut your wife's throat as I go." Aloud he said, "Hold your tongue, Danford, and your wife will be granted the right to confess to her sins to the Church and live off the generosity of Baron Welford if she is truly contrite."

"Baron Welford is an aged, crippled man," Garrick said.

Zotikos laughed outright, causing his followers to turn toward him. "He speaks true. My uncle died not long ago. He was widowed and childless and I inherited the title. Can anyone trust the Earl of Danford's word over mine? His brother has already been tried and burned. The Forrester family embraces evil. Dare trust them and you'll meet your doom. Let us ride! We've far to go before reaching Welford."

"Onward," a soldier shouted.

"Aye, aye, milord, let us ride!" another agreed.

Zotikos lifted Aisley into his arms, the smile of the victor crossing his evil face.

"Bring her to me, Zotikos, before it's too late for your men to live beyond this night," Garrick demanded.

"Garrick, save your breath," Aisley warned.

"Sir Sedgewick, bring me a cloth to bind the healer's mouth. I do not want her conversing with her husband while we're moving."

"As you wish, milord," Sedgewick agreed, rushing to do Zotikos' bidding.

By pure will, Garrick remained standing as four men came to the cage and lifted it by poles fitted too far for his reach.

"Might as well sit, Danford, it'll be a long journey to Welford," Dutton advised from the safety of horseback.

Dutton made the mistake of drawing too near to the cage. The palfrey began to prance. Garrick was tempted to let the leopard roar, but he had to think of Aisley. If he frightened the horse further, he'd only incite Dutton's hatred.

Unwilling to give in to his captor's orders, Garrick held on to the cage. Tremors invaded his spine as his muscles burned in protest, yet he stood firm. He'd not let them see how weak he was.

Separated from Aisley by a furlong, Garrick watched over her as they traveled onward. He could feel her thoughts knocking at his temples, making his head ache as he grew more worried for his mate. He understood her fear and frustration in being unable to speak with him and wanted nothing more than to assure her that he was there and he loved her.

"I'm here, Aisley. I will free you, believe in me," he whispered to none save her.

Pressure eased within his temples. He'd calmed her fears and kept vigil for an opportunity to spring.

The men carrying Garrick's cage braced their backs as they marched a slight distance behind the rest of the soldiers. The weight of the gold tainted cage was burden enough. Garrick's weight made it worse. Purposefully, he tried to shift side to side, forcing the men to change their strides.

"Dutton, he grows heavy, we need to rest for the night," one of the foot soldiers called out.

"Another league and we'll be able to rest," Dutton responded.

"Someone else needs to carry him," another bearer said. "My shoulder aches."

"Do I hear complaints?" Sedgewick shouted from a slight distance.

"Nay, Sir Sedgewick," a foot soldier said.

"You address him as a knight?" Garrick asked the man who'd spoken.

"He is a banneret," the soldier answered.

Garrick laughed. Zotikos had granted Sedgewick the means to exact vengeance by teasing him with power and position. The simpkin likely believed he'd been knighted and became a banneret as a result.

"Sedgewick Haywood is not knighted," Garrick stated. "He's a master at trickery who preys on unsuspecting townships and villages for coin."

One of the men carrying the cage scoffed and shifted his shoulder. "How can you speak of a man who'd nearly died at Castillon?" he demanded.

"I wonder how many lies you'll hear before listening to the truth," Garrick said.

Far ahead, Zotikos signaled his followers to halt. "Continue to address my men or your wife, Danford, and I will make you regret it."

"How strange," a guard murmured to the one closest.

"What's strange?" another asked.

"The prisoner spoke quietly. How did the Baron hear?"

Garrick stayed silent. He'd sown the seeds of doubt, now he'd wait for them to grow.

Concerned for Aisley, Garrick nearly missed the distant thunder of horses. A rider alerted the line a moment later. "Riders come from the east."

"Riders come from Welford," someone said.

"Bloody hell!" Zotikos cursed. "What does she think she's doing?"

Garrick scented a lady's perfume, myrrh. Zotikos' wife approached.

Shortly, a woman came toward them on a palfrey. Two guards rode on either side of her. He'd never seen the woman before, but he remembered her scent from the day he'd gone after Aisley.

"Halt," Zotikos ordered. "We will rest here."

"You are gracious, milord," an unknown soldier exclaimed.

Finally, Garrick's cage was lowered. The carriers, large men all, rolled their shoulders in relief.

"You're heavy," one man told Garrick.

"Dutton, George, set guards to watch Danford and his wife," Zotikos said.

Willing to take time for much needed rest, Garrick lowered to the cage floor. His chance for escape was near.

Still at a slight distance, Zotikos handed Aisley down to one of the guards and vaulted from his mount. Edwina and her guardians had slowed, she in the fore.

"Edwina, what brings you from Welford?"

"I had to come, m'lord. I had to know if you caught the one responsible for stealing our child."

"You knew I wouldn't fail."

"Without you near, I grew worried," Edwina revealed, her voice trembling as the guards assisted her from the palfrey. "John, why were you holding the witch so close?"

"Are you questioning me?" Zotikos demanded.

"I question your affection for a witch!" Without warning, Edwina lunged toward Aisley.

"Aisley!" Garrick shouted.

Zotikos stepped in Edwina's path. "Mind your place, wife," he rebuked, backhanding her with a resounding thwack.

From the ground, Edwina cried. "You promised you'd never strike me."

"You provoked my hand!"

"Forgive me, m'lord," she now begged, cowering away.

"Stand up, woman. We'll speak of this in private." Zotikos dragged Edwina to her feet and pulled her away from the masses.

Ignoring the skirmish, Haywood walked toward a small cluster of trees and brush.

George and Dutton kept Aisley in their grips. "Hmmp," she murmured through her gag.

"Sit, healer. I'll find something for you to drink," Dutton offered, pushing her to her knees and removing her gag.

"Mayhap we should bind her more thoroughly?" George suggested.

"It won't be needed. The Countess is as helpless in her shackles as Danford is in his cage."

"Do you not find it strange that they have an aversion to gold?"

"Nay, it is the price they pay for their sins," Dutton remarked.

"Then I will call someone to watch over the witch," George decided, straightening. "I need to relieve myself."

"Johnson, come and watch the woman," Dutton instructed, walking off.

Immediately, a foot soldier headed toward Aisley. Passing George, Johnson bowed in respect to the much taller, larger soldier. Given George's heavier armor and helm, he was a man of high rank in Baron Welford's guard.

Unable to stay silent, Garrick spoke softly to his wife. "Aisley, if you can hear me speak quietly."

"I hear you, Garrick. Are you all right?" she whispered.

"Aye, little one, but my men were killed. There will be much sadness in Danford when we return."

"I'm so sorry. I feared something like that had happened." Aisley spoke as Garrick directed, but wisely kept her gaze averted and her head down. Johnson stood at a slight distance from her, yet he didn't seem to hear. "I didn't mean to get caught, Garrick. I wanted to aid you."

"When we're safe, we will address your decision to come," Garrick said. "Now tell me how weak you are."

"As weak as you," she admitted.

"Had you felt so before leaving Danford?"

"Aye, I didn't let anyone know. The guards would have stopped me. As a result, I am to blame for Andrew and Burkett's capture."

Surprised because he'd not thought to look for anyone from Danford, Garrick fought back a grumble. "Do not blame yourself. We'll get them back to Danford."

"I believe we will. You should know that I chose to bring the villagers with me because I didn't want to leave Angelica or the manor vulnerable to attack. I also ordered guards to find Brandon."

Proud, Garrick buried a smile. "You did well, my lady."

"There's more," she said, too loudly, for Johnson faced her.

"Who do you speak to, witch?"

"No one," she answered.

"Then keep your mouth closed or I will replace the gag."

"Johnson, speak not to the prisoner. She might place a curse on you," a soldier warned.

"I cannot place curses," Aisley insisted, receiving a slap for her effort.

"I will kill you for that, Johnson," Garrick promised. No one had the right to touch her, causing her pain was unforgivable.

"George, finish your business and return to your station," Dutton bellowed. He'd returned from his errand with a leather flask and offered it to Aisley. "Here, it's mead." Wearily, she sniffed at the contents and took a small sip.

Shortly after being called, George strolled around the bushes, securing laces beneath the mail covering his waist and still wearing his armor and helm. Something in the soldier's stride had changed. At first glance, Garrick could not be certain what it was.

A scent nearly as familiar as almonds caught Garrick unawares. Nay, it wasn't possible. Due to Lucien's liking of incense, his son, Valiant, had taken up the habit of burning the sweet-smelling substance in his quarters.

Garrick watched as George walked by his fellow guards and stopped before Aisley. "Go," the man ordered Johnson.

"Aye, milord," Johnson agreed and moved away.

Johnson rejoined the men responsible for guarding the cage. "Always strutting about in his armor and helm," he said. "George is beginning to think he's as important to the Baron as Haywood and Dutton's swords."

"Haywood claims to be good with a sword?" Garrick inquired.

"I wasn't speaking to you," Johnson sneered.

Garrick shrugged indifferently. "Ah, Dutton is the knight you admire."

"He's brilliant in battle. I watched him behead many Frenchmen."

"Success in war is not always marked by the numbers you kill."

"Save your speech. You'll need it for the trial." Johnson turned and took a seat with his fellow foot soldiers.

Garrick returned to his vigil over Aisley. Dutton had gone off, leaving Aisley alone with George. Once again, incense caught his attention. But beneath it was something else, something detectable only by another panthera Abcynian. It was the scent of a lion. Aisley was conversing with a young male lion.

Garrick hid his relief when Valiant, disguised as George, mumbled something unintelligible and patted the hilt of his sword, causing Aisley to turn away, as if in fear.

Dutton returned, eating a hunk of white bread. "George, you should have some of this bread. Since opening the kitchens to us, the Baron supplies only the finest foods. No more dark bread for us."

"He might get white bread. We're still getting dark bread and porridge," Johnson complained.

"At least you're fed. My wife was offered a sip of mead, but we're both weak. Can't we have something to eat?" Garrick asked.

"The condemned don't need to eat."

"Aye, food will be wasted," another man said.

"Welford is two days away. Surely you wouldn't be so cruel as to starve us?"

"You're a werewolf. You've likely hunted for your meal before leaving Danford."

Feigning frustration, Garrick grumbled aloud. "I am not a werewolf!"

"Your freckled wife is witch," Johnson accused. "We know she lured you into marriage and cursed you into becoming a beast."

"Ah, I see. The Baron has fed you too many lies. You believe us to be practicing all manner of evil, yet we've done nothing to harm anyone."

"The Baroness claims you stole her child."

"Lady Danford and I rescued an unfortunate girl from a cage much like this one. Haywood was using her misfortune to earn coin, painting her as the child of a werewolf. I tell you, if the Baroness was so worried about her child, why did she sell her to Sedgewick Haywood?" Continuing to feed the soldiers' doubts, Garrick spied his efforts taking root. "Edwina couldn't be the girl's mother. I doubt she remembers her name."

"Edwina?" one man repeated. "There was an Edwina working in the local tavern. She was a kitchen maid, I think."

"Couldn't be her," Johnson insisted.

"You men, cease talking to the prisoner," Sedgewick warned, having returned to the makeshift encampment. "He'll feed you lies."

"Sedgewick, with all the men scurrying about to relieve themselves, I am in need myself," Aisley said.

"George, escort her to the trees," Haywood granted.

Aisley offered her elbow to her guard. "I can barely stand, George. Can you remove these shackles temporarily?"

"Nay, she'll flee if she has the chance," Dutton answered for Haywood.

"You have my word, I'll never leave my husband while he's caged like that," Aisley promised.

"All right," Sedgewick granted. "George, here are the keys." Tossing them to the armored man, he turned away.

Aisley's wrists were freed. Garrick knew her weakness remained.

"George, lift her if you must."

"Aye, George, carry her to the trees. Remind her of what a man can do," Johnson provoked.

Instinctively, Garrick roared, not caring if he was heard. Johnson was fast becoming prey.

"The beast is angry," a foot soldier warned.

"Silence!" Sedgewick ordered.

Momentarily, the men quieted as Aisley was carried out of sight.

Far enough from camp, she spoke in a tone only his leopard's ears could hear. "Garrick, your instincts are right. My escort is who you think."

Garrick answered in the same tone. "I know."

"How is it I can use the senses of the leopard, but feel so weak?"

"The gold hinders our Abcynian gifts and renders us weak. It has little effect on the panthera. That is why you became weak before the shackles were placed on your wrists. Your leopard's senses enabled you to feel what was happening to me."

"I see," Aisley said. "As much as I hate being weak, at least I know we're in this thing together. When I return, I'll create a distraction. Mayhap I should scare the horses?"

"Haywood and Zotikos know the trick. They're prepared," he said.

"Then I'll think of something else."

"You should quit talking, milady, even softly," he heard Valiant warn.

Aisley fell silent, rightly obeying the squire's warning.

Garrick stayed calm as he waited for Valiant and Aisley to return. When they reappeared, Aisley was being carried once again. Closer to the campsite, Valiant lowered her to the ground and aided her to walk.

A feminine plea pulled the soldiers eyes from Aisley. "I vow I shall never question you again, m'lord."

"You'd better not, wife, or you'll answer to my hand."

Edwina and Zotikos' return lured Garrick's guards away, allowing Valiant to lead Aisley by the cage. The foot soldiers nearby scattered a bit, clearly afraid of her even though she'd done nothing to deserve their fear.

Finding her chance, Aisley kicked out at Valiant and he loosened his grip long enough to make it look as if she'd freed herself. "Garrick, what's to happen to us?" she cried out, letting her weakened body fall toward the cage.

"Get her away from him," Sedgewick commanded.

"It's all right, Aisley. All will be fine," Garrick soothed so all could hear, shifting to catch her hands when she grasped the cage. A sword blocked his chance to touch her, coming close to nicking his hand.

"Nay, do not harm him," Aisley begged of Valiant in disguise. Garrick swallowed a roar when he saw it was his squire who wielded the sword.

"Bring her here," Zotikos directed.

"Sorry, milord," Valiant grumbled, hiding his baritone voice.

A little too roughly, Valiant returned Aisley to the center of the encampment. While she'd been gone, a fire had been built and soldiers were consuming white or dark bread and mead. They were oblivious to the danger that resided right in their midst and Garrick prayed that Valiant would have the patience to wait before revealing his identity.

"Do that again, healer, and I shall order your guards to their death," Zotikos warned. Garrick looked over at two men who'd been gagged and bound, recognizing them as Andrew White and Daniel Burkett.

"I'll behave. Here," she said.

Boldly, she lifted her hands for Valiant to clamp the gold manacles about her wrists and lock them with a key. It took several tries, as Valiant would be as hindered by the gold bindings as Aisley, but Garrick was pleased by Valiant's tenacity in performing the task without drawing further attention to himself.

"Won't you grant my men something to eat or drink, please?" Aisley requested.

"For aiding a witch, I think not," Haywood denied.

"Do not mistreat them. They have done nothing but act as my escort."

"Bring the Countess' guards to the circle and give them some dark bread," Zotikos agreed, surprising all.

The four foot soldiers hurried to do their master's bidding. No one noticed Garrick reaching for the remaining keys lying next to the cage.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Aisley knew the moment Garrick found the key ring.

Praying she could continue to distract the men, she played on Zotikos' willingness to care for Andrew and Daniel. Looking at her nemesis, she inclined her head.

"It was good of you to see to my men," she said, silently pleased that the foot soldiers seemed more concerned with her than Garrick's cage.

"Don't expect too many liberties. At the moment, I'm willing to promise your guards will be returned to Danford upon the conclusion of your trial."

"Only because you want them to relay what's happened to the Earl and Countess," Sedgewick supplied.

"You speak rightly, Sir Sedgewick."

"Sir Sedgewick?" Aisley repeated, staring at him.

Aye, he'd donned mail, sword and braes, but his lack of a true knight's armor went unnoticed. Most of the trained or higher ranking soldiers donned full body armor. Only the foot soldiers wore the basics of defense.

"A banneret," Sedgewick said.

"Do you not have a coat of arms?" she questioned.

The soldier she knew as Johnson stalked toward her. "Is your sight impaired? He wears achievements granted to him by Baron Welford."

"He does?" She looked again. As she did, Zotikos murmured something in Sedgewick's direction. "I see nothing but mail and braes."

Zotikos scoffed aloud. "Dear lady, look again. Can you not see the verde background and sable chevron on his coat?"

Puzzled, Aisley stared at Sedgewick, seeing nothing of the kind, yet the soldiers believed he was armed.

Before long, however, most of the higher ranking guards had removed their armor and sported only tunics, mail and braes. Valiant remained covered. She worried over how long it would take for the men to question him and prayed he would continue the ruse long enough for Garrick to do what he needed to do to save them all.

"I suppose I have much to learn about knighthood," Aisley admitted, looking over at Edwina.

Silent since returning, Edwina sat facing away from the men. She was hunched over, trembling and afraid.

"Lady Welford, I'm hungry. Bring me some bread and mead," her husband directed.

"Aye, m'lord," Edwina said, standing.

As Edwina walked, Aisley ignored her own weakness and studied the other woman. Edwina moved with a slight limp. She'd turned to the fire and the light reflected the nasty swelling upon her cheek.

Edwina returned with bread and mead, handed it to Zotikos and cowered away. None of the men noticed her fear and Aisley felt a twinge of pity.

"Edwina, take some to the healer," Zotikos further ordered.

"Must I? You know I dislike her."

"Do my ears deceive me? Did you question me?"

"Nay," Aisley said. "Leave her be."

"Be very careful, woman. You shouldn't meddle in matters that do not concern you. You've much to worry about as it is," Zotikos warned.

Aisley lowered her head. "Forgive me for interfering."

Zotikos glared at Edwina. "Do as I say, wife."

"As you wish, m'lord," Edwina bid.

Edwina was trembling by the time she brought Aisley a hunk of dark bread.

"Are you hurt, Edwina?" Aisley asked.

"You needn't worry, witch."

"Are you certain? I see the mark he has left on your face. I saw you limp. You are hurt and your husband is responsible. A man so cruel is not a true husband."

"I provoked him," Edwina said. "I'll not speak against him."

Aisley shook her head, wanting to help the other woman. "I can help you if you let me."

Edwina tossed the bread in Aisley's lap. "I am now Lady Welford, I need nothing from you. You've been raising my niece to become a witch. Soon, all will know what you've done."

"I thought Angelica was your daughter."

"I meant my daughter," Edwina corrected. "Being near you confounds me."

"Is it I that discomfits you, or your husband?"

"I warn you, witch, if you continue to say such things, I shall have him beat you!"

With shaking hands, Aisley bit into the dark bread. Finding it dry, she swallowed and wished for some wine or mead to wash it down.

"Thank you for the food. I know it was difficult for you to bring it to me."

"You know nothing."

"I do know one thing," Aisley prodded, lowering her voice. "If you tell your husband to leave you, he must go. If you don't believe me, test him. Tell him you want him to leave you...see what happens. Be strong Edwina. Don't let him hurt you again."

Edwina glared at Aisley, then straightened and walked away, limping as she went.

"You did very well," Zotikos praised Edwina.

"I mean only to please you, m'lord," his wife replied.

"Won't you come and sit beside me? We can share my meal." Zotikos patted the ground next to him.

Edwina suddenly halted. "I wish to remain here."

"Edwina, this is not the behavior of a baroness," he rebuked. "I'm ordering you to come here!"

Edwina trembled. "Treat me in such a way and I'll—"

"I know what the healer told you," he interrupted. "It would be unwise of you to try."

"What would happen if I did?" she asked, her hand to her cheek. "You promised never to strike me and you did. I can never trust you again."

"You really don't want to know what will happen if you disobey me. It would ruin everything you've come to enjoy as my wife."

Lowering her hand, she lifted her chin. Where she found the courage to face her husband, Aisley couldn't say, but the whole encampment stayed silent as the Baroness finally spoke. "I don't want you as my husband. I want you to leave."

Zotikos shrank back the moment 'leave' left Edwina's lips. He looked frightened, as if those simple words had taken his courage.

"Edwina, what do you mean by this?" he demanded.

"Sss...sorry...mm...m'lord," she stuttered. Hearing herself, her hands flew to her ears. "Na...! What...aping t'me?"

"It's her!" Zotikos blasted, pointing at Aisley. "You cast a spell upon my wife. Lady Welford cannot speak."

"The healer needs disciplining!" Sedgewick Haywood shouted.

"Edwina, tell him again," Aisley urged.

Edwina managed to mutter, "Go, go..."

"Nay!" Again, Zotikos drew back, fury aging his face.

"Look at him," Johnson mumbled, pointing.

"Bloody hell, Welford ages as we look upon him," Dutton grimaced.

"She's cursed the Baron!" Sedgewick pronounced.

"Nay, I didn't, Sedgewick. If you tell Zotikos to go, he must leave," Aisley said.

"Sedgewick, help me. I've given you everything. Do not forget what I've taught you about Danford and the healer. Find her mark. Check her neck if you must."

"Aye, milord." Sedgewick stormed toward Aisley. "Stand, healer!"

Aisley tried to do as ordered, but weakness held her fast to the ground. Just as Sedgewick grasped her shoulders, pain sliced down her spine, rushing outward from her rib cage to her limbs. Helpless to fight the pain, she let Sedgewick lift her to her feet.

"Take back your words or I'll reveal your marks," he threatened.

Aisley refused. She had to continue the fight, for she knew Garrick was changing into his leopard form. As difficult as the pain was, it was also a miracle. She could feel his change, his weakness had abated and she could feel waves of reassurance and confidence coming from him. He didn't speak to her, but she knew he was reaching out to her.

When she found her voice, she demanded, "What marks do you speak of?"

"The ones that prove your penchant for evil," Sedgewick said, using one arm to hold her still and the other to rip her gypon at the neck.

"Sir Sedgewick, do not harm the healer," a soldier insisted. "She might cast a spell upon you.

"I'm revealing proof of her wickedness," he replied and grabbed Aisley's bridal gift.

Without strength, Aisley lost the fight. Her precious chain, the symbol of her marriage to Garrick, was torn from her throat and thrown to the ground. "Nay, nay, that's my bridal gift."

"I need a torch," Haywood ordered, crushing the blue opal with his booted foot as Aisley's pain wavered, her bones aching for Garrick. "George, go fetch me a torch," he commanded of Valiant, still donned in George's armor.

A soldier shouted from a distance. "Milord, George is dead! George is dead!"

"You're mistaken. The man's standing before me," Sedgewick shouted back.

The guard stomped into the camp, his face pale. "I saw him myself. His throat was cut."

Dutton closed in from behind, sword drawn. "Remove your helm!" he demanded of Valiant.

Bravely, Valiant complied. It took him but a moment to unfasten the helm and lift it from his head. His long, tangled tawny hair fell about his face and shoulders.

Musk and cinnamon pulled Aisley's gaze from Valiant. By a group of trees, she spotted a familiar dark figure creeping toward the camp. Slow, methodical and silent, Sir Knight revealed nothing of his presence to the others.

"God help us, he's gone!" Johnson alerted, waving toward the gilded cage. "Danford's gone."

"Fools, the healer bewitched you while her lover snuck away. Find him," Sedgewick ordered.

"I'm not going after a man who can turn into a wolf!" Johnson refused.

Back, back, back he went, heading right into Sir Knight's path.

"Lord Danford, if you near us, the Countess dies!" Zotikos warned, looking about, but seemingly unable to see anything.

"I'll do it now, unless the healer wishes to confess." Sedgewick snickered, dragging Aisley closer.

Bound and weak, Aisley allowed her body to fall forward, causing Sedgewick to drop her flat to the ground. "I confess to nothing!"

"Then why does your neck glow with the mark of a beast?" Sedgewick questioned.

A sawing roar split the air, saving her from answering. The men scattered and Edwina screeched. The gnarling rumble continued and a man's terrified scream echoed into nothingness.

Dutton drew forth his sword. "Johnson!"

"He's dead," a soldier cried.

"There's a beast out there! God's teeth, it's huge and it ain't a wolf," another soldier stated.

"It's Danford, defend yourselves, defend me," Zotikos commanded well away from the others.

Looking to and fro, Sedgewick's sword wavered. "Why does John stand so far away? He knows Danford's weaknesses."

From the ground, Aisley answered. "He doesn't want you to see his face."

"You've cursed him. I'll not wait 'til trial to burn you. My sword through your heart will do." Lifting it high above his head, he began to plunge.

A tawny-haired figure in armor rammed Sedgewick from behind, sending him tumbling to the ground. Valiant didn't wait for Sedgewick to aright himself before drawing his weapon and holding the dastard still with the point of his sword.

"Stay where you lay!" Valiant commanded in a deep, resonate voice, sounding much like his father.

"The beast is charging," Dutton alerted.

Soldiers began to cry in opposite directions. Sir Knight's sawing roar intensified. Another roar joined the repetitive sawing. Surprised he could make two sounds at once, Aisley tried to see what was happening.

Hindered by the gold manacles, she attempted to push to her knees, failing to see anything other than the dark figure charging by. A soldier fell, then another.

"Kill it," Zotikos grumbled, sounding very distant.

Frightened, Aisley began to pray. Rolling to her side, she pressed her ear to the ground, feeling the earth shake. Because she could do nothing but rely on her leopard's instinct, she listened closer. The thunderous sound of armored men and horses was nearing fast!

"Baron Welford, riders are approaching," someone warned.

"Nonsense, the witch wouldn't have ordered more guards to come. Danford Manor and Village would be left defenseless."

"Men, draw your weapons," Sedgewick cried from his place on the ground. "Defend yourselves."

Zotikos' followers disobeyed, scurrying away like frightened rabbits. Soldiers withdrew, some having the mind to draw swords or knives, but many horses approached.

"It's Sir Lucien Hunter!" Andrew White declared.

Aisley gave everything she had to turn her head. Riders charged toward them, a tawny-haired giant in the fore. Sir Brandon Mathews rode slightly behind and to Lucien's left.

She was equally surprised when a dozen mailed soldiers trembled and fled, their fear of hearing Lucien's name making her think they were Saturian. Zotikos must have added Saturians to the number of soldiers he'd gathered from Welford.

"Come back, defend us," Sedgewick pled.

"Quiet, or my hand might slip," Valiant forewarned, inching his sword point closer to Sedgewick's heart.

The riders came upon them in a blur, some stampeding after those who'd fled.

"Aisley," Valiant said. Once he caught her eyes, he tossed her the keys he'd still managed to have without anyone's notice.

Aisley caught them by will alone and stuck them between her teeth. With her mouth, she fiddled with the locks of her manacles, concentrating on the task. All around her men were shouting, screaming, some terrified and some victorious. She knew not what was taking place until she found freedom.

Still weak, Aisley managed to push herself to her knees. As she did, she found Sir Knight. Dear Goodness, she'd missed him! She hadn't seen Garrick's leopard half since they had wed.

At the moment, he was stalking an immobile Edwina. Whatever her faults, Edwina could not defend herself against a giant leopard.

Thinking it best to speak to the panthera within Garrick, Aisley prayed he would hear her. *Nay, Sir Knight, she cannot defend herself against you.*

Sir Knight halted, glanced her way and roared. Loving that familiar sawing, Aisley nodded, wishing she had the strength to smile. But a dark figure lunged and knocked her flat, sending her breath from her lungs.

"Milord!" Valiant called out.

"I'll kill you now, healer," Zotikos threatened.

"John, your face has melted," Sedgewick muttered in horror.

Unable to look away, Aisley screamed, "Agh." Zotikos was no longer the man of wealth and privilege he'd pretended to be. His face had aged centuries. Skin wilted from his chin, nose and cheekbones. His eyes were sunken and black, as though his face had become a skull. His body had become rank with sweat and decay, his flaxen hair sparse and frail.

"Get off me," Aisley shouted.

Failing to understand why he looked this way, she grimaced as he hissed like a serpent, revealing long, jagged teeth suitable for tearing flesh. Revolted by his fetid breath, she nearly vomited.

Aisley, close your eyes. Garrick whispered in her mind, soothing her sudden fear. Believing in him, she obeyed.

"You cannot kill me," Zotikos moaned even as Sir Knight ripped him from her body and she was free.

She didn't have to watch to know what would happen to the Saturian. The sounds of crunching bones and tearing of flesh spoke loud enough. A terrified scream echoed about the clearing. The gurgle of life spewed from Zotikos' throat, and then he was silent.

By the time more saviors arrived and captured the remaining soldiers, a muffled rumble filled her ear, warming her heart. Hope returned as Aisley opened her eyes to find Sir Knight staring down at her.

As he'd done in the stream, he started to lean in to tickle her chin with his whiskers, but halted. Shaking his head, he must have known his face bore the evidence of his kill, though to her, he was her hero.

Boldly, Aisley lifted her hand and tickled his ear, knowing he favored it when she did. "My dear Sir Knight, I have missed you."

Rumbling louder, Sir Knight plopped to the ground beside her, keeping guard while Lucien led the charge against Zotikos' remaining men. Valiant kept hold of his prisoner as Sir Brandon locked the gold manacles about Sedgewick's wrists.

When the melee ended, a silvery dawn edged the horizon. Aisley watched and felt comforted knowing that Garrick witnessed it too. He'd told her once that silver represented justice. They'd found justice during the night and a new day was about to begin.

"Father, it was good of you to come," Valiant said.

Aisley lifted her eyes to Lucien.

"It is my understanding that it was you who freed Garrick," Lucien said. "You did well, my son."

"Aisley suggested that I follow after her at a distance," Valiant remarked.

"Valiant, you are to be praised for following. You did what I asked," Aisley insisted.

"You are gracious, milady," Valiant said, bowing low.

"Unchain me. I've had enough of these shackles." Bound and kneeling, Sedgewick complained.

"Sir Brandon, come and put Haywood in the cage. Let him get used to it. He'll not see freedom before he's tried and executed," Lucien directed.

Sir Brandon moved to obey Lucien's command, but Sedgewick struggled. "Valiant, I may need your help," Brandon said.

"Aye, Sir Brandon." Valiant lifted Sedgewick over his shoulder and stalked away with Sir Brandon's sword lifting Sedgewick's gold-shackled wrists away from Valiant's broad back.

Once they'd gone, Aisley looked around and spied Edwina sitting on the ground, shamed. "Lucien, Edwina needs care. Zotikos beat her. Might I attend her?"

Sir Knight answered with a roar. A large, black paw landed on Aisley's knee, keeping her in place.

"It's all right, my friend. Go, I will watch over Aisley. You have my word, I'll not let anyone harm her while you're gone," Lucien said.

Sir Knight looked from his friend to Aisley. Finally, he stood on all fours, nudging her face as he went.

The leopard quickly crossed the field, heading for the copse of trees. To her dismay, another leopard joined him. Not quite as large as Sir Knight, but bulkier, the leopard walked slightly behind, protective and respectful.

"Lucien, is that..." Aisley said, gesturing with her chin toward the disappearing leopards.

"It's Grayson," Lucien whispered.

"How can you be here? How can any of you be here?" she asked.

"I was on my way home and felt it necessary to turn back. I'd reached Grayson's estate a sennight ago. Grayson sensed that something had happened to Colton and we thought we would need Garrick's help, so we made for Danford right away. It was a miracle that we met Brandon in Fernley when we did."

Aisley inclined her head, wondering what had happened to Lucien's wife. "And what of Lady Hunter, did she remain in Somerton?"

"I sent her on with a dozen of Grayson's guards," he said.

"Whatever it was that made you come, I know it was a miracle, Lucien," Aisley commented, pleased that his Abcynian gifts had brought him back to England in time to lend his aid.

"Aye, it was," Lucien agreed. "Might we assist Edwina now?"

With one last look at the departing pantheras, Aisley caught sight of their dark tails entering the copse. Relieved to know they were safe, yet worried for Colton and Jillian's fate, she began to stand, strength returning as she did.

As she made toward Edwina, Aisley stumbled over the remnants of her torque. Saddened by the loss, she stooped to retrieve it as pain tore down her spine. By will and her panthera's strength, she bore it. Garrick would be returning the moment the pain ebbed. It took a moment to gather what remained of the torque, but when she stood tall, she no longer felt her mate's change.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Aisley was talking with Valiant, Brandon and Lucien when the Danford and Somerton soldiers chanted in unison. Drawn to the sound, the trio turned to see the Earl of Danford and Baron Somerton advancing.

Mildly alarmed by their rumpled, filthy clothing, Aisley braced herself for the questions bound to be asked by the men. Surely they'd witnessed the leopards amongst the chaos.

"Lord Danford, Sir Grayson, are you both well?" a soldier from Danford said as they neared him.

"You can see we are. We went to cage the leopards." Garrick looked at two soldiers standing off in a distance. Aisley didn't recognize them as soldiers from Danford. "Go and see they are taken to Danford." The men did as they were told.

Lucien stepped close to Aisley. "They protect Grayson's secret," he confided for her understanding.

"The leopards saved us again," another cried in triumph. "They always come when we need them."

"Aye, a better weapon than a wolfhound," Sir Brandon contended.

Unified shouts praised the leopards, fear nonexistent. The soldiers obviously knew their purpose. Relieved, Aisley breathed inward, truly grateful for being able to breathe without the fear of being accused of evil. Evil resided within the body of the man that called himself John Brewster. Somehow he'd stolen a barony from an old man in the fortnights since she and Garrick married, and she was pleased that the true Baron Welford had been avenged by the death of the man who had taken his identity.

Needing to be with her husband, Aisley broke into a hobbled gait, gaining momentum as she moved. Garrick strode fast, catching her about the waist and lifting her into his strong arms.

"Your clothing is ruined, yet your face is still perfect," she beamed, framing his jaw with her fingers.

"The rest of me as well, I assure you," he teased. "I should punish you for putting yourself in danger, but I shall have to think of something appropriate another time. Instead you may kiss me."

"How dare you suggest a kiss after threatening me?" she lightheartedly rebuked.

"You know I'd never lift a hand against you, little one." Garrick's expression softened as he lowered her to her feet, leaving Aisley feeling dizzy staring up at him. "All that matters is that we're safe."

"Praise God," she said.

"Aye, much praise indeed. Now will you kiss me?"

"It would be my pleasure, my lord." Aisley lifted to her toes and pressed her lips to his. Alternating between sweet and devouring, they kissed as long as they dared, ignoring the shouts and whistles from their allies.

It was Lucien who reminded them where they were. "Lord Danford, we need to continue on to London."

Breaking free, Garrick hugged her as though he couldn't bear to free her. "Ah, my love, I am sorry to say that I must go. Colton is still in London."

"Won't you take me with you? I need to know what's happened to your brother and Jillian."

Sadness marred Garrick's features. Gently, he brushed a hand through her tangled hair, cupping her nape to draw her into the crook of his arm. "It is my wish for you to return to Danford and watch over Angelica. I cannot face what may have happened in London if I'm worrying about both of you."

"You think Colton is in danger?" she asked.

Garrick scowled, a deep sorrowful rumble emerging from his throat. "I think our victory over Zotikos came at a price too difficult to contemplate just yet."

"Garrick, you don't believe..." Aisley couldn't let herself think Garrick's youngest brother had died, although she sensed the possibility deep in her heart. She sensed it because her husband knew and it was making him very sad during a time when they should be pleased. They'd defeated Zotikos and Sedgewick, yet the victory came with a great sacrifice. Many had died, she realized, suddenly wanting to cry at the unfairness. "Then you were justified in ridding England of Zotikos! I've never known such a vile, cruel man. Sedgewick obeyed him and the men from Welford saw him as a wealthy baron."

"Have you not learned, Aisley? Zotikos can appear to be anyone he chooses. To the men of Welford and younger Saturians, he is a man of wealth, standing and position. They see a charming gentleman. You saw what Abcynians see when he is near."

"He was decaying before my very eyes. He looked like a living corpse."

"That is what he is. His soul possessed another man's body and the host rots from the inside out. Once Zotikos is rendered powerless, his body decomposes quickly. We have you to thank for having the fortitude to prompt Edwina to send him away. By doing so, you broke his spell over the men and his wife."

"While I'd tended to her scrapes and bruises, I learned that she could barely put two words together."

"Zotikos controlled her speech."

"I feared as much. She will need to be tended to and given a place to live now that her husband is gone." She wasn't certain Edwina would want to live in Danford, but Aisley would see to it that Edwina was not left alone now that she knew the truth about her former husband.

"In spite of all that's happened, you have remained kind, Aisley. For that I am proud of you," he complimented.

"Garrick, I must know something before you leave." Staring up at Garrick, she gave him her thoughts. *Can Zotikos return in another's body?*

He nodded. "He can return. It'll take him a long time to find another person willing to house his soul. When he does, you will always know him for what he is."

"Then we shall be vigilant and together we will continue to defend Englishmen and Abcynians from the likes of Zotikos and his followers."

"Aye, we will." Leaning close, he kissed her soundly, reluctantly drawing away. "Sir Brandon, Valiant, you may escort the Countess of Danford back to the manor. You will also see that my brother's men take care of the leopards," he added.

"What of the villagers?" Sir Brandon asked.

"For their willingness to place themselves as Lady Danford's guards, they shall be knighted. White, Burkett, before returning to Danford, I ask that you accompany Edwina back to Welford or take her to Fernley, whichever she wishes. See that she is given a job and has a place to live," Garrick commanded.

"As you wish, milord," Burkett said.

"Once you are done, return to Danford and inform Aisley as to Edwina's circumstances and I shall see that compensation is made to her landlord."

"We are your servants, milord," White responded, bowing in respect. Neither man said anything about the leopards.

With that, Garrick caressed Aisley's jaw and smiled. "I'll return soon, little one, do not worry for me while I'm gone."

"I shall not," Aisley promised. Believing he would be safe, she caught his hand and held it firm, her palm flat to his knuckles. "I love you, Garrick, remember that when you reach London."

"I will always remember, my lady." Interlacing their fingers, Garrick kissed her knuckles and lowered their hands.

Reluctant to watch him go, Aisley held herself erect when he finally walked away. Surrounded by his most trusted men, Garrick was given proper clothing and took a destrier's reins. Soon the men rode off, a cloud of dirt and grass left in their wake.

Chapter Twenty-Six

"I've summoned all of you here to announce the Earl's return on the morrow," Aisley told the servants gathered in the great hall. "It's been more than a fortnight since he's been gone. I want to be certain all is in readiness."

"You needn't worry, milady," the steward said. "We'll not disappoint you upon his lordship's return."

Softening, Aisley drew to a halt. "You've all been loyal to him, despite your previous fears."

"If I might say so, it was you and little Angelica that eased them." Elethea stepped forward.

"He's become a husband and a father," Byron, Garrick's chamberlain said, receiving murmurs of agreement. Aisley was relieved and pleased to know Danford Manor's staff had come to trust and respect Garrick.

"Go on, I shall see you all in the morn," she released them, turning about to find Judith and Elethea standing near. "Elethea, I'll not need you until dawn. Judith, will you follow me?"

"Aye, milady," Judith accepted. "Might I take a moment and thank you for convincing the Earl to allow me to keep my bracelet?"

"You've done so by honoring your word to wear it only when Lord Danford or I are not near."

"It seems a bit strange that you have developed his aversion to gold," Judith commented. "It matters not. My concern should be for Angelica, whom I believe is aware of her father's expected return and has become more playful."

"Mayhap she knows. I'd guess part of her playfulness comes as a result of Rachel Burkett's frequent visits. With her father becoming part of the Earl's guard, she'll continue to do so."

"Angelica does prosper when Rachel is near," Judith said, causing Aisley's womb to throb with thought of having Garrick's child.

"I believe Daniel Burkett's daughter should become a lady's maid when she's older."

"She's not highborn."

Aisley shrugged as they walked, unconcerned. "Neither was I before I married Lord Danford. I shall speak to him about the matter once he's settled. Do not forget that my husband has said he would have Daniel Burkett and Andrew White knighted for their bravery the night they came to our aid and fought with the Earl's men."

"Then I am certain Rachel will make a fine maid for Angelica," Judith replied. "Mayhap someday I shall have a babe to befriend your daughter as well."

Aisley would like that as well, for she knew that Sir Brandon Mathews had been trying to woo Judith since his return to Danford.

Angelica's sweet giggle reached the hallway, distracting Aisley from the conversation. "Angelica's laughing. She must be enjoying Rachel's company."

Judith halted. "You can hear the child from here?"

"A mother's gift, I suppose," Aisley said.

Judith accepted the reply and continued on. In the room, they found Angelica playing a game with Rachel.

"Good eve to you, Lady Angelica, and to you, Rachel," Aisley greeted, rushing to her daughter's side.

Garrick would be amazed at how much Angelica had grown since he'd been gone. With Rachel's assistance, Angelica learned to speak better, as she often repeated Rachel's words.

"Good eve, milady," Rachel said. The girl clutched a very old, slightly scorched doll in her hands.

"Rachel, what happened to your doll?" Aisley asked.

"She was burnt in the fire," Rachel answered. "The big cat saved her for me."

Swallowing, Aisley stared at the girl. "You saw a big cat?"

Rachel nodded and grinned. "It was black. I was scared at first, but it didn't hurt me or Penelope," she confessed, looking at her doll.

"Rachel, cats cannot rescue little girls from fires," Judith said.

"This one did," Rachel stated. "I overheard Papa tell my Mama about two black cats fighting the men who tried to hurt Lady Danford and the Earl. He believes the cats are better than a hunting dog."

"Rachel, you do realize they will never hurt you or any child in Danford?" Aisley asked.

"If Papa likes them, I do too." Still clutching her doll, Rachel smiled up at Aisley and Judith.

"Good," Aisley returned, grinning. "Now, I simply wanted to check upon the two of you before I go to my room. I trust you'll both respect Judith?"

"Aye, Mama," Angelica answered, so easily it seemed she'd spoken all along. "Be good," she added, pointing in a very adult manner.

"I shall, angel, I shall!" Aisley gathered her daughter into her arms and kissed her silken cheek. "Night for now," she murmured. Angelica looked up at her, her sweet brown eyes shining with love.

Straightening, Aisley nudged Angelica closer to Rachel. "I'll see you in the morn, Judith," she bid, heading for the door.

In the hallway, Aisley was taken with the need to hurry to the master chambers. Trusting her leopard's instinct, she caught her gown at the hips and ran.

She soon reached the tower and made for the chamber. Cinnamon tickled her nose as she opened the door. Dark as the room was, she instinctively looked at the bed. The curtains had been parted earlier by a maid, exposing the mattress from all sides. Sir Knight was curled upon the bed, looking very much the giant housecat.

"Garrick," Aisley cried out, so relieved to see him tears started to fall. "You've come home!"

Aye, I am here, little one. Come close for a moment, Garrick requested with his mind.

Hurriedly, she sat upon the bed and wrapped her arms about the big leopard's neck, her fingers grabbing the chain that symbolized their pairing. It pleased her to know he hadn't removed it before he changed form. "Oh, how I missed you. Dare not stay away so long again, Garrick. Promise me you won't," she said aloud, adoring the feel of the leopard's plush, sable fur on her fingertips.

I'll not.

Feeling Garrick's need for comfort, Aisley continued to hold him close. For awhile, they sat upon the bed, she holding the leopard, he roaring deeply, his whole body trembling.

"I am sorry." Trying her best to console him, she stroked his feline face. "I know only a little of what happened to Colton, won't you confide in me?"

You deserve to know everything. I should have returned before now, but I had to... Garrick's voice faded, his roar alternating with his familiar rumble. *I cannot speak to you like this, Aisley. Turn away and I'll change.*

"Nay, I want to watch."

The leopard rose, disengaging her hold. Scooting back on the bed, Aisley gave him room to leap to the floor and amble to the center of the chamber. Almost immediately, pain coursed down her spine, warning of what was to happen, but she used her leopard's strength to endure it.

The change began with the leopard's dark fur retracting beneath Garrick's skin, and his four legs became the limbs of a well-formed man. His face soon blurred into a muddle of contortions, seeming the most painful to bear. Unable to watch further, she closed her eyes. Then, finally, the gnawing pain in her bones eased. When next she looked, Garrick stood before her, naked save the cord around his neck.

"Oh, Garrick, it is wonderful to see you!" Aisley leapt from the bed, regardless of her aching limbs.

Garrick met her halfway, wrapping her close to his sweating, naked body. Her husband had returned, and though he was safe and sound, he trembled with remorse.

"You're trembling," she said.

"I always do right after changing."

Aisley held him closer, not at all offended by the leopard's lingering musk. "My love, don't you know I can feel your pain? Again, I tell you how sorry I am about Colton. I'd only begun to know him. It may help to ease your pain if you talk about it."

"How do I accept failing to save him?" Garrick rebuked himself, shaking in earnest now. "Had I sensed something was wrong earlier, I might have changed what happened in London."

"Garrick Forrester, I'll not hear such words from you. Love never fails. Colton has gone to heaven. He knows you love him. You did all you could to reach him. Have faith that he knows that too. Won't you tell me what happened? You wrote that there wasn't a trial. I know little else."

Garrick drew back enough to tuck his hand beneath her chin. "Forgive me for being elusive in my missives. I hadn't much time and I didn't trust the missives to arrive unopened."

"I understand. Tell me, Garrick."

"The message we received was real. It arrived late, as we'd known," he began.

"We know who's responsible for that."

"It is fortunate Haywood is awaiting trial in London. Otherwise, I'd plunge my sword through his heart for helping Zotikos orchestrate my brother's death. All because he could no longer use Angelica to earn his coin, but who can say what will make a man seek vengeance?"

"Justice will be dealt to that man. We've Lucien to thank for making certain of that. Why weren't Jillian and Colton tried? Was the Church or the King sympathetic?"

"Henry wasn't in London at the time of their arrival. He'd been advised of the situation in Wolcott and sent men to investigate. Once he knew, missives were sent to me and Grayson, along with word to the Church. They were to hold Colton and Jillian in London until he or I arrived." Garrick stalled, clenching his jaw. "Colton gave his..."

"I'm listening, Garrick," she assured, pressing herself against him and resting her head against his massive chest. His arms encircled her and she felt him tremble with remorse.

"He was helping Jillian escape when he was killed by prison guards. He gave his life for her. As a result, the Church heard Jerold's plea for Jillian's innocence and set her free."

"Thank goodness he was willing to help. But I don't know what to say to comfort you. Just know that I love you and that I am here for you."

"You don't need to speak. Just hold me, Aisley. Don't let go for awhile," he whispered.

"I'll hold you for as long as you need." Aisley gathered him to her, clinging as tightly as she could, offering all her love.

A long time later, she pulled back and spied tears edging the corner of his eyes. "Let them fall," she urged, reaching to caress his cheek. "You told me I was the keeper of

your heart. Let me keep your tears." Using her thumb, she caught his first tear. As soon as she did, more began to flow. Before now, he likely hadn't felt safe showing how deeply Colton's death affected him. Knowing he trusted her enough to cry, Aisley caught each and every tear upon her finger tips, hoping she gave him comfort.

Hours could have gone by and she'd not have moved. Only when his tears dried could he speak again. "We'll need to go to Wolcott in a few days. There's much to handle regarding Colton's estate."

"We'll discuss it on the morrow. Come and lie with me," she invited, gently pushing him toward the bed.

To her surprise, he laughed. "I should call my chamberlain and bathe before we lay down."

"Nay, I'll prepare a bath for you in a little while."

"Are you certain? I've no wish to offend my lady."

Using her increased strength, Aisley grasped him by the shoulders and held him at her mercy. "Garrick Forrester, I'll not stand for such wavering from you. Get into bed, now!"

Pleased to see him smile, she turned him about and nudged him forward. Aisley meant to push him further, but Garrick caught her unaware, dragging her against him.

"I warn you now, Aisley. I offered to bathe because once we're in bed, I don't intend to let you go for a very long time, mayhap not until morn. I need you to make me whole again."

"Then kiss me, my lord, and prove your word," she dared, loving the return of her nobleman.

Swept into his arms, Aisley offered her mouth to her mate. They kissed long, hard and deep, refusing to draw air for favor of drinking in their combined tastes. Cinnamon, almond, musk and, aye, even sweat became a heady enticement to her senses. Breaking the kiss momentarily, she roared, the first time she'd ever done so, the sound soon swallowed by Garrick's lips.

A long time later, Garrick pulled back. Aisley's heart soared as she was lowered to the mattress. Briefly tangled in the bed covers, Garrick ripped them from the bed and resumed their kiss upon finding purchase.

Soon after, Garrick levered himself away long enough to tear her gown to shreds. Naked and pressed breasts to chest with her husband, she didn't bother trying to worry about her ruined clothes.

"You'll not need clothes until midday," Garrick promised, nibbling his way to her ear. "Worry about nothing until then."

"With you, I won't need to." Aisley caressed her hands over the plentiful muscles along his back and shoulders, then smoothed her fingers through his hair. "Take me, my lord, now."

Lifting to his elbows, Garrick scowled. "I don't want to hurt you, Aisley. Let me prepare you a little longer."

"Nay, Garrick. I need you inside of me, please."

"Your wish is my command," Garrick said, moving to lie between her legs.

Continuing to kiss him with all her passion, Aisley felt his sorrow ease and his tremors still. In their place, he became a man joining his wife, proclaiming his love with his thrusts, his groans and praise. He loved her, as she loved him, and Aisley rejoiced as their sadness gave way to pleasure.

* * * * *

Morning light from the chamber window drew Garrick awake. Breathing in his wife's fragrance, he tightened his arms about her. Spooned at her back, her supple backside cushioned his hardened shaft.

"Umm, Garrick, you cannot possibly want to mate again," Aisley murmured into her pillow.

Tempting her by flexing his hips, Garrick touched his mouth to her ear. "Awaken and let me love you."

"You already did, three times during the night and once not long ago. I need to rest." She may have refused, but she'd compensated his enticement with her own movements.

"If you don't awaken, I shall have to punish you."

Aisley laughed. "Your means of punishment is hardly a burden. I've never felt so fulfilled or pleased."

"Remember that the next time you decide to ride into danger," he warned. "Bloody hell, woman, had you been hurt when you came after me, I—"

"I'd feel the same if something happened to you."

Snuggling closer, he grinned. She was right. "Aisley, I've commissioned a new bridal cord to replace the one that had been crushed. Along with your bracelet, it should arrive in a fortnight or two."

Fully awake now, Aisley sat straight up. "Garrick, you are a wonderful man. I'd worried that you'd be angry and tried to repair the stone, but I couldn't."

"I'm not angry," he soothed.

"I should have been more careful."

"You were not at fault for Sedgewick's actions."

Frowning, Aisley shifted uncomfortably. "Do you think we can avoid speaking of him when we're in bed?"

"Forgive me. I should have been more sensitive," he said.

"Now there's a word Lucien would love to use against you."

"Let's not tell him. He's been marching around and telling all who will listen of Valiant's bravery."

"As he should," she said. "Without Valiant, who knows what might have happened?"

"Didn't we say we wouldn't talk of such things in bed?"

"We never mentioned Valiant."

"I'd rather think about the two of us when we're in bed," Garrick said.

"As would I, my lord," she agreed.

Falling silent for a time, Garrick enjoyed looking at his mate. Seductively beautiful with a morning blush, her freckles grew prominent, luring him to favor them with kisses.

But his intended seduction was waylaid by the approach of a maid and a knock at the serving entrance. "Go away," he ordered, unwilling to stop kissing his wife.

"Milady, pardon my intrusion," Judith said from the opposite side of the door. "The servants have been told Lord Danford has returned and Angelica has learned of it. Might he see her for a moment?"

"At once," Garrick answered back. Covering himself with a bed sheet, he hurried to receive his daughter.

"Want Papa," he heard Angelica say.

"Angelica?" Surprised to hear his daughter's voice, he opened the door to find her looking up at him. "Sweetheart, it is good to see you again, look how much you've grown since I've been gone."

"Don't go. Don't go again," she said.

Stunned, Garrick looked back at Aisley, where she reclined in bed with the covers protecting her from view. "When did she begin speaking so well?"

"Very recently," Aisley answered. "She's taken to Rachel Burkett. I believe the girl to be good for her."

"Then we shall encourage their friendship," Garrick decided, bending to scoop Angelica into his arms.

She giggled and wrapped her little arms about his neck, smelling of innocence. For a moment he drew her in.

"Garrick, let her stay. We can break our fast together."

"As you wish," he agreed. "Judith, have a tray brought to us with simple fare and our favored wine."

"Aye, milord," Judith said as the door closed.

Smiling, Aisley made room for them on the bed.

"Good morn, my fair Lady Angelica," she addressed in the manner she'd begun long ago.

"Good morn, Mama. Papa, don't go again."

Garrick carried Angelica and carefully placed her next to Aisley. "Not without you," he said. "Soon, we'll take a trip and visit your Aunt Jillian. Would you like that?"

"Aye," Angelica said.

Recalling what little she was able to do the night he brought her to the manor, Garrick hugged his wife and child, silently praising the advances Angelica had made.

If Angelica prospered by the influence of a friend, she'd flourish under the guidance of brothers and sisters. It struck him then that he was ready to have children.

"Garrick, you know I want children too," Aisley said, reading his thoughts so easily she ceased questioning her ability to do so.

"Lady Danford, I believe you're beginning to like knowing what I'm thinking."

"I'd have to say I do," she confessed, flushing as she smoothed her hands through Angelica's fine hair. "Might I be the one to point out that the moon shall be full in a few days?"

Garrick was well aware of the moon's pull and its cycle.

To his liking, Aisley brushed her fingers through his hair, tucking several strands behind his ear, where she tickled him as she did the leopard.

"Then you don't wish to wait a month or so?" he tested. "If you're hesitant, mayhap I could persuade otherwise?"

"I love you, Garrick. After we take Angelica back to her chamber, might we return to our bed and talk about how many children we should have?" Smiling softly, she stared at him.

"We'll talk, after a time," Garrick vowed. *I want to be with you again, love. Afterward we can talk until the sun goes down, if you'd like.*

How can I resist you, my husband? I am looking forward to feeling your babe growing inside of me. Let us hope our children are as brave as their father and beautiful as Angelica.

Full of grace, Aisley continued to stroke his hair and kissed Angelica's forehead. At that moment, he fell in love with his wife again. "You are the keeper of my heart, Aisley. Will you keep my children?"

"With honor, my lord," she vowed, grinning with love.

About the Author

My love for storytelling began in kindergarten when I created my first fictional characters. Though I'd given them simple nicknames, I'd convinced my family that Red Henry and Green Henry were identical twin brothers in my elementary school. They were mischievous, rarely did their homework, had trouble with math and spelling, and experienced heartbreaking losses, and yes, they even had girlfriends! It wasn't until years later, and the Henry twins mysteriously moved to a different state, that my family realized they were entirely fictitious.

A few years later, I began to write, completing my first manuscript at age thirteen. I confess the heroine was a cross between Nancy Drew and a contemporary Laura Ingalls Wilder, who happened to be dating one of the Hardy Boys. But when I'd written "the end" on the very last page, I'd known I had more stories to tell. Of course life intervened, but whether I was in high school, becoming part of a local theater and dance company, working as a Veterinary Technician, earning a degree in History and Secondary Education, or teaching, I was always reading and writing romances.

I met and married the love of my life and moved from Maryland to Massachusetts in 2001. Shortly after, I proudly joined RWA and the New England Chapter, and I've been writing faithfully ever since. So now I invite you to come and explore my writing, where I combine my love of history, animals, and sensual paranormal romance and let my imagination soar.

The author welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.cerridwenpress.com.

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