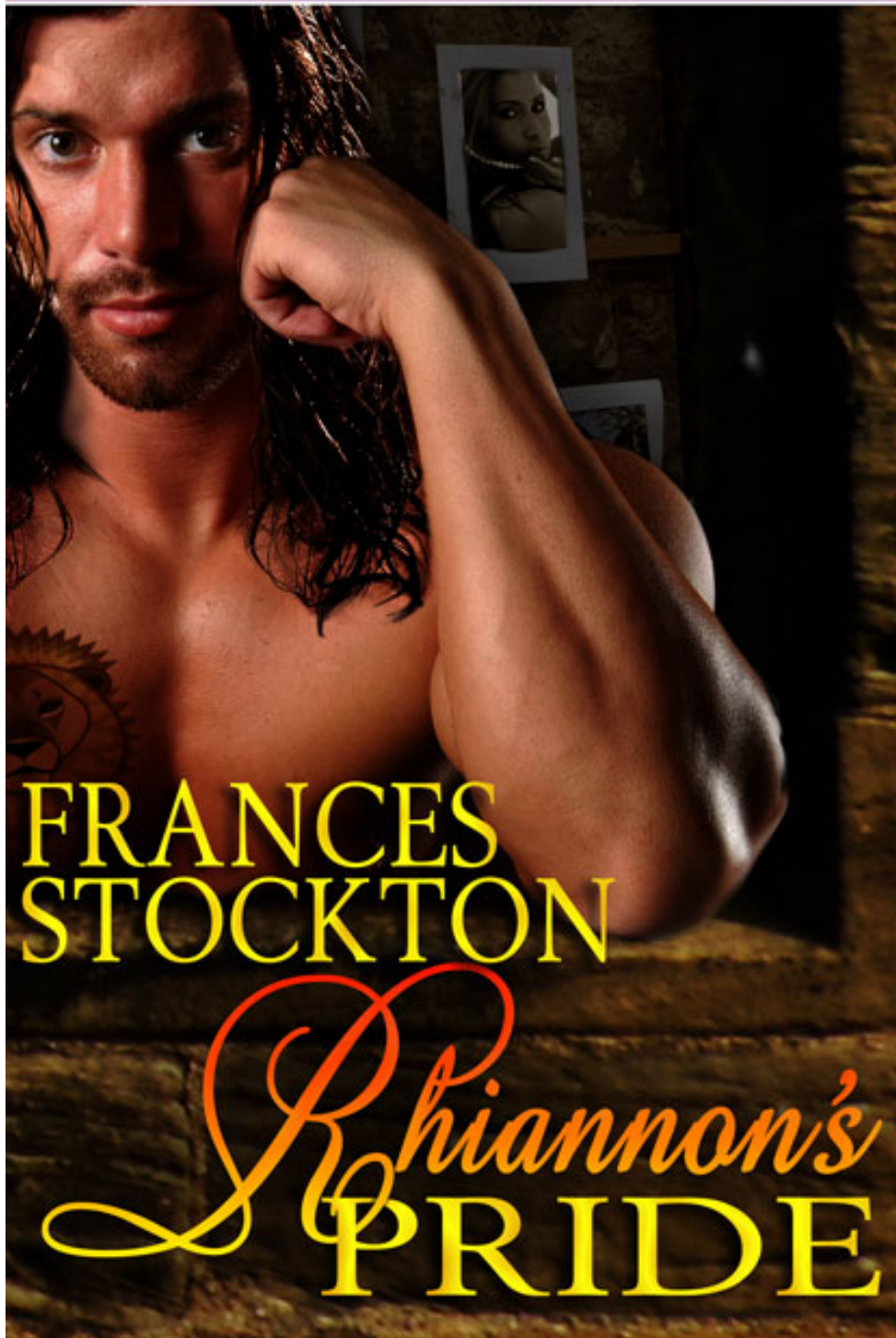


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FRANCES
STOCKTON

Rhannon's
PRIDE

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Rhiannon's Pride

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RHIANNON'S PRIDE

Frances Stockton

Chapter One

Linwood Castle, England, 20 February, 1555

Cloaked in the darkness of the unknown, Rhiannon stood upon a parapet looking out at the rough, brown land surrounding the decaying castle. Warding off a chill, she tugged at the cape draped about her shoulders and reached deep into her mind, trying to remember one aspect about her past that would tell her more than her name.

Lifting her chin toward the sky, she breathed in. The scent of baking bread and a roasting pig from the kitchen reached her nostrils. Her mouth watered. The bare earth smelled of the melting veil of ice that dusted the land during the winter season. How odd it seemed that she could smell such simple things and know their origin and yet she could not remember her surname.

"Who am I?" Rhiannon asked aloud, closing her eyes, but balking when her temples began to pound. Her last bout of headaches had kept her abed for three days. She did not relish spending another day in seclusion.

"Pray tell me the answer," she demanded of the heavens. "Why have I forgotten? Why have I been forgotten?"

Her only answer was always the same. Whenever she dreamt of the past, images of men and women changing into beasts loomed in her mind, causing frightful headaches. She feared she shared a past with the beasts in her imagination, making her wonder if she'd been involved in some sort of sorcery before her memory had gone.

But it never felt right to think she was wicked. She attended Mass whenever she could, felt welcomed by the parish priest. If he could not detect wickedness within her spirit, she must be wrong. The frightening images of men and women interchanging with leopards and lions were nothing more than dreams.

"Rhiannon, you shouldn't be outside," Mary Baker, Rhiannon's maid, said from the doorway leading to the parapets. "Come back inside, the Baron has summoned you to the salon and we dare not keep him waiting too long."

"Aye, Mary, I am coming." Rhiannon turned away from a potential headache and headed toward Mary. With each step her feet felt heavy, her body as weak as if she'd trudged fathoms before taking the maid's hand.

"Are you still weak, dear?" Mary asked, catching Rhiannon's elbow and aiding her inside. "You shouldn't have ventured far from bed if you weren't feeling well."

"I'm well enough," Rhiannon insisted. Out of habit, she shifted the golden bracelet adorning her left wrist. The delicate gold chain always felt so heavy. But she'd been schooled to wear it and thought it must be for the best. "Soon I pray I will rid myself of my wretched weakness and frequent headaches. I am tired of feeling helpless."

"Mayhap you should consider removing that bracelet? My husband, God rest his soul, once had an aversion to fish. Whenever he ate it, he became ill."

Rhiannon allowed Mary to lead her to an ornate wooden chair. "Are you suggesting I have an aversion to gold? I cannot fathom such a thing. Wearing a simple bracelet should not be the cause of my headaches."

"Milady, you wear more than the bracelet. I know of the necklace that adorns your throat. I've never seen it gone. Likewise, your ankles are so adorned."

"Uncle Garfield insists that a noblewoman should wear fine jewelry," Rhiannon said, staring at the bracelet on her wrist. "I shall ask him if I may remove the jewelry for short amounts of time. Mayhap we can ascertain if the gold is the cause of my ailments."

"I shall pray that he will agree." Mary patted Rhiannon's hand in the way an aunt or mother would, only Rhiannon always felt older than her lady's maid. "Allow me to look at you. You are to meet the Earl of Cliffton this eve. You'll want to look your very best."

Stunned, Rhiannon stiffened and drew away. "What mean you, Mary? Why am I to meet him?"

"He's the man you're expected to marry."

Rhiannon felt ill. She couldn't marry someone when she had no memory. "How can this be?"

"Oh, my dear, I thought you knew," Mary crooned. "Since your arrival in Linwood twenty years ago, the Baron has been preparing you to become the Earl of Cliffton's wife. Haven't you realized why you've received a ladies' education? You can read, write, converse like a noblewoman and you know how to run a nobleman's estate. Lord Cliffton is favored by Queen Mary. You're likely to be taken to court before you marry. He would expect you to behave according to your station."

"I never thought about why he provided such an education. It doesn't matter. I have no wish to marry."

"Hush, do not be foolish. For years I have watched and worried about you, but the Baron would not allow me to do more than attend you," Mary said. Her kindness was the one true bright spot in Rhiannon's haze of confusion and melancholy. "Back then, you were so sad and ill that my purpose here at Linwood was to watch over you the best that I could. Others here, they were afraid of you. Nonsense, I told them. Look at you, you are lovely, dear. The Earl will favor you kindly, I'm sure."

Rhiannon glanced down. She wore a green damask gown with long sleeves, a narrow waist, split skirt and a gold brocade underskirt. As Mary hummed and brushed her small hands down along the skirt, Rhiannon took notice of her maid's hands. They seemed less agile than they'd once been. Light brown age spots had begun to form on Mary's fingers. Her once dark brown hair was peppered with gray.

Frowning, Rhiannon lifted her left hand. Her fingers were long and tapered to clean, trimmed nails. Her palms were unburdened by time or calluses. They were the

hands of a young woman. For as long as she remembered, her almost white blonde hair had never darkened or shown strands of gray. Mayhap she was cursed with a face so hideous that the rest of her body refused to age along with it.

"Mary, might I ask you something?"

"You may."

"How long have you served at Linwood? You've been my only friend here and I never once thought to ask. My days tend to merge into sennights and fortnights in bed. But that is not an excuse to keep you at arm's length."

"Never you mind about the time, dear. I've been in Linwood for two and twenty years. While I've never been fond of the Baron, I stayed to look after you. There is something different about you, Rhiannon. Some might be frightened of it. I'm not. I have prayed for years to learn who you are. Whatever the answer, I believe you are a good woman. That is why I have stayed this long."

"I suppose it is safe to admit that I'm trying to guess my age. When I first came to Linwood I was young. Yet I always feel old."

"Well, when you first arrived you were believed to be ten and eight."

"How old do I look now?" Rhiannon asked.

"Do you not know what you look like?"

"Nay, the maids that come to assist with my ablutions and dressing rush me from the chamber to my lessons."

"Had I not been so busy keeping Baron Linwood's household, I'd have realized it sooner. His lordship needs a wife, not a lady's maid. I should be doing right by you. Forgive me."

"There's nothing to forgive. I don't want to look at myself anyway."

"Why wouldn't you?"

"The servants stare at me when you're not around to shoo them off. The Baron rarely allows me to venture beyond Linwood Castle unless we are to attend church. Twice we traveled to Warwickshire and many people stared. I must be hideous."

"Did they now? Men stared at you?"

"Aye," Rhiannon said. "Baron Linwood is ashamed of me. Now he is planning to marry me off to some poor, misguided man."

"Dear, the Earl of Cliffton isn't misguided. He knows what you look like," Mary said, rushing across the room searching through clothing trunks and an armoire. When she didn't find what she was looking for she left.

Confused, Rhiannon waited. How had she not realized she'd been denied the use of a mirror until now? She felt like a fool for not asking. Mayhap that was all the maids needed to hear.

Mary returned with a looking glass in her hand. "Look at yourself, Rhiannon. Do not be afraid."

"Please, Mary, I thought you were my friend. Why would you ask me to do this?"

Mary held the looking glass up higher, daring Rhiannon to see her reflection. "I am your friend. I will speak with the servants and Baron Linwood about the absence of a looking glass in your chambers. For now, look. You've nothing to be ashamed of."

With Mary's encouragement, Rhiannon met her own eyes for the first time in twenty years. "Merciful heavens!" she exclaimed, slapping her hands to her cheeks.

"You are lovely. This is why men stare and servants look upon you with envy. Unlike many pale English beauties your skin is like burnished gold. Your eyes are as beautiful as amber. Your nose is so elegant it almost reminds one of a cat's."

Mary was right. She was pretty. But when she looked in the mirror she saw not a cat. She saw a...lion. Her head pounded, warning her away from the thought. This time she refused to let the pain consume her. Could there be any truth to the shadowy images of lions and leopards she'd seen in the past? Why had they figured so prominently in her mind when her surname continued to elude her?

"Pray take it away, I've seen enough."

"If it is your wish," Mary said and lowered the mirror. "We mustn't delay much longer. It's important to make a favorable impression upon the Earl of Clifton. It is my hope that he is sincere in his intentions toward you. If he is, you'll be able to live your life again. You deserve happiness, Rhiannon. You'll never find it in Linwood."

"I fear you may be disappointed," Rhiannon said. "I've no intention of marrying any man until I regain my memory. Mercy, I may have been married."

"You were not. The Baron made certain a midwife examined you when you came here. You've never lain with a man."

"Pray do not mention such things." Rhiannon gasped, feeling embarrassed to know such intimacies had been gained from her person.

"Forgive me if I offended you."

From the hallway, Rhiannon heard the pitter patter of a maid's feet coming toward them. "Harriet comes," she said, nodding at the door.

Mary frowned and faced the doorway. "How do you know..." Unable to finish her question, Mary fell silent when Harriet opened the door and entered.

"Baron Linwood requests your presence in the solar, milady," the maid said.

Aware that there was little choice, Rhiannon nodded to Harriet and allowed Mary to guide her from the room.

* * * * *

Rhiannon walked beside Mary, feeling thankful for the assistance with each step. As they progressed toward the great hall, the narrow walls and aged stone seemed to press inward, slowing their strides. For the first time since she'd come to Linwood

Castle she realized she'd been kept a prisoner within the walls of this dilapidated monstrosity.

But after emerging from a fortnight long battle of headaches and vomiting, something within her had changed. She could no longer hide. She had to find her past and move on to a future. It was that or she feared she would die a slow, morbid death along with the decaying castle.

Just before they reached the solar, Rhiannon paused when voices reached them. "Do you hear them, Mary?"

Mary frowned. "I hear nothing amiss."

"I hear them," Rhiannon said. "Stay silent. I'll listen."

An unfamiliar male voice reached her first. She concluded that it was the Earl of Clifton. While his voice was pleasant, she became uncomfortable by what he was saying. "Do my ears deceive me, Linwood? Are you questioning my methods of taming an Abcynian monster?"

Rhiannon drew back in surprise, her heart clenching at his mention of monsters.

"I understand your plans, Clifton, yet wonder what your plans are for the girl."

"I want to teach Rhiannon how to be my wife. It is fortunate that your little ward is quite fetching. Mayhap I'll bed her many times, have an heir and a score of children to complete my family. Wouldn't that be a blow to Lucien and his kind?"

"You will teach me nothing," Rhiannon vowed, lifting her chin in immediate defiance.

"What of the headaches, will you give her the means she needs to overcome them?" Baron Linwood asked. "You instructed me to give sustenance to her only when she emerged from a bout of headaches and could participate in her studies. The remedy will cure them if she takes it daily. For that matter, what about gold? Will you demand she wear it as I have?"

"I will see that she is not burdened by too much pain," Clifton said. "After all, I shall need her to fulfill her duty as a wife. However I intend to give her a new bridal necklace and jewels. I wouldn't want the beast in her to clamor for supremacy in our marriage."

"That shouldn't be necessary. She's been taught to be your wife. She should please you in all aspects as your countess."

"Good. Given that her panthera sense of hearing cannot be diminished by gold, we should cease talking and prepare ourselves for Rhiannon's entrance."

Rhiannon felt certain her presence had been known to the Earl already. He had wanted her to hear their conversation. Quickly, she told Mary what she'd overheard.

"Milady, Rhiannon, you cannot go in there alone," Mary implored.

"Do not interfere. I must go," Rhiannon said. "They know of my past and I want to know more. I'll be all right."

"If you need me, I will join you. I know it isn't a servant's place—"

"You've been more than a maid to me. I'm glad you are here. But I must face them now." Lifting her shoulders and moving with more authority than she felt, Rhiannon walked toward the solar.

Upon reaching the archway, she pushed open the doors. "Baron Linwood, pray forgive me for being delayed. But what can one expect from a monster?"

"Well, well, the beauty has a bit of a temper. Come, Rhiannon of Linwood, and allow us to be introduced," the Earl of Cliffton demanded as she entered the room.

A manservant came from the hall and slammed the heavy, arched doors closed. Rhiannon winced, realizing Mary was left outside. "I believe it best to remain here. Good afternoon, Baron Linwood, I come upon your summons," she said to the Baron, scanning his groomed beard and mustache and short brown hair. His clothes, a russet tunic buttoned from the neck to the hem, padded breeches and leather shoes marked him as a noble.

"Rhiannon, it is not for you to disobey," Baron Linwood warned.

"Do not rebuke the girl," the Earl said. "Remain where you'd like for the moment. I shall introduce myself. I am Edgar Wynthrop, Earl of Cliffton. I offer myself as your humble servant."

Rhiannon believed a greater lie had never been told.

To her guardian she said, "Forgive me, Baron Linwood, I fear my head is starting to ache. Might I trouble you for some of the remedy Lord Cliffton mentioned?"

"Were you listening outside the door?" her odious guardian said.

"Allow her to have sustenance, Linwood," the Earl of Cliffton granted in her favor, bringing her gaze to where he sat on a raised dais.

Surprised to find a man adorned in colors very similar to her gown, Rhiannon studied him. He had a pleasant face, one that could draw the eye. But she didn't trust what she saw in his fine, youthful countenance.

She decided then and there that the apostle Paul had the right of it when he warned the Corinthians to beware of false beauty. She'd read the verse shortly before her recent sickness. "Such are false apostles, deceitful workers... And no marvel, for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light."

"Are you certain we should permit it?" Linwood questioned. "It seems my niece has found her tongue since I saw her last. I wouldn't want her to say or do anything to offend you."

"I'm not offended by Rhiannon's request. The girl need not be in pain," the Earl said.

"Then mayhap I am wrong to conclude that you ordered Baron Linwood to refuse a cure for my headaches," she dared ask.

Rather than becoming angry, Cliffton smiled, shaking his head. "I daresay I like this girl and her sharp tongue. I shall have her as my countess."

Leaving the safety of the doorway, Rhiannon refused to cave in to weakness and neared the men. "Dare I say I'd rather not marry you?"

"Your wishes mean nothing," Baron Linwood said, though he obeyed Lord Cliffton and poured her a chalice of spicy wine mixed with some sort of mint herb. Rhiannon sipped it, surprised at how much stronger she felt after half was gone.

"Baron Linwood, you've acted as my uncle long enough," she said, almost gnashing her teeth when she handed back the chalice. "Since we are not related, I am capable of deciding whether I should marry. Knowing I can remove my jewelry and drink a potion whenever I have a headache, I think I should leave Linwood Castle."

The Baron laughed, looking as if she'd grown two heads. "You have nothing and no one to aid you, Rhiannon. Do not be difficult. Not now. I've dedicated twenty years to your upbringing and education. The least you owe me is a decent marriage."

Rhiannon's next words knotted her tongue, forcing her to swallow and think. Aye, it was true. Baron Linwood had seen to her care and provided an education for which she was grateful. Without it she'd never have discovered her true desire to learn more about the arts. Regardless of having little contact with those who resided beyond Linwood Castle, the Baron had provided her with tomes and music. He'd also adorned his favored salon with several paintings he'd bought from Florence. Even his chalices were works of art, testament to the glasswork made in Venice.

She lifted her eyes, first to glare at her guardian then to the Earl. "I am sorry, milord, I shouldn't speak so boldly. But I must say nay to marriage," she said. "As my guardian has already pointed out, I have spent years under his watch and have enjoyed the education he has provided. Mayhap I should seek a trade and find my family. I've spent too long here."

"That's not possible, my dear. You must listen to us," Lord Cliffton said. He started nearer, moving like a predator.

"How can I listen when I have just learned I am a monster—a monster burdened by pain and gold according to you?"

"The gold protects you from the monsters of your past," he revealed. "Baron Linwood has told me of your nightmares. They forewarn you of what you would become without the jewelry. I can protect you from your dreams, if you would but have me."

"Protect me from what?" she demanded, hating talk of monsters.

"I pray this does not frighten you," he said, coming forward with a suddenness she didn't expect and catching her about the waist. With more force than she felt necessary, he shepherded her across the room.

Accustomed to the paintings Baron Linwood collected over the years, Rhiannon noted her guardian's position in the room. His gaze was trained on the wall and a covered frame. He'd garnered a new painting.

"You wish for me to see this painting?" Rhiannon asked.

"Not just any painting." Cliffton propelled her closer to the Baron. "Linwood's collection consists of biblical figures and mythological gods, revealing his fascination with the rebirth of classical ideals coming from artists and leaders in Florence. Like many men of his interests, he has longed to gain a painting by Dante Luciano," he continued, flailing his hand. "Now he has one that had been commissioned by Cosimo de' Medici for his sister. Alas the painting never reached the man who'd commissioned it."

Incensed by the revelation, Rhiannon drew away from Lord Cliffton and ran to Baron Linwood. "Uncle Garfield, you must know possession of the painting is wrong."

"Why is it wrong, Rhiannon?" her guardian asked. "Minutes ago you wanted to deny my guardianship. Now you wish to call me uncle?"

"Don't you see? I'm not important here. The artist painted something of great importance to him and to the man who commissioned it. I am not a very good artist. However I know how much work goes into the creation of any painting. This represents the artist's livelihood. You've stolen it," she accused, pointing at the painting.

"Calm your temper, Rhiannon," the Earl of Cliffton commanded close behind her. "Linwood's desire to possess a work by Luciano is founded by the loss of his nephew to the very man depicted in the painting."

Plagued by curiosity, Rhiannon watched Cliffton remove the white cloth, revealing not a man but lions!

"Mercy," she whimpered, her hand flying to her mouth.

"Look, Rhiannon. What do you see?"

Rhiannon heard the Earl's question, his voice seeming to echo from fathoms away. Confused, she removed her hand from her mouth and tugged on her earlobe.

"I don't understand," she whispered, stepping closer. "It's a painting of two lions."

Before her was a portrait of a male and female lion standing together amidst a patch of tall grasses, rich green foliage and a short, broad olive tree. The male stood a head taller than the lioness, his face epitomizing strength, courage and pride. A thick, golden mane with periodic patches of brown fur surrounded his massive head, haloing his honey brown fur and framing his fierce golden eyes. A crown of jewels could not have made the lion look more majestic. He was superb in musculature, form and presence. And he was so real and achingly familiar that Rhiannon sensed she had touched his face before.

The lioness was not familiar, but looked equal in strength and prowess. If the lion represented a king, the female was a queen. Her coloring was similar to her mate's, her eyes reflecting centuries of knowledge. Surprisingly, the lioness's belly was distended, leaving Rhiannon the impression that she was carrying the male's cub. In the background, various animals perched on branches of the tree, the ground and splendid rolling hills. Each animal gazed at the lions, seeming to be awaiting the birth of the lioness' cub, giving homage to the king and the heir apparent.

"Now do you see, Rhiannon?" he asked, leaning near enough to bring her attention to him.

"I see two lions and a host of forest creatures, Lord Cliffton. It is a lovely painting. I understand nothing."

"Dante Luciano had been commissioned by a de Medici to paint a portrait of a lion and lioness. Florence boasts the lion as its symbol of power. The animals you see are displaying their respect for the lions. Not only had the artist conformed to the patron's wish, he used the images of the man and woman considered king and queen of Abcynian kind."

Rhiannon blinked twice, staring at the painting for a moment. "Milord, you talk of a man and woman. I see lions."

"They are one and the same. The lions are Lucien and Catarina Hunter, both can change form from lion to man. Your mother and father were converted by Lucien and his eldest son, thus making you a descendant of the king of all Abcynian beasts. The lion depicted in that painting." Cliffton spoke as though Abcynians were beasts.

Inwardly, Rhiannon shook. "I'll not believe you. I'll not. Those are lions, nothing more, nothing less."

"You'd like to believe that, wouldn't you?" Cliffton leaned so close she could smell pork and wine on his breath, as well as his fondness for sandalwood incense.

Offended, she sidestepped him, only to be pressed against the wall with her face close to Dante Luciano's painting. The scent of oils used to bind the paint reached her nostrils, bringing to mind the hours the artist had taken to mix and grind the colors needed to form the lion and lioness' lifelike fur. Inhaling to rid herself of Cliffton's smell she found a sense of calm.

"That is who you are related to...to a certain extent. I'll not permit you to hide from it any longer. The sooner you accept your past, the sooner we can travel to London for our betrothal ceremony."

"If I am related to the Abcynians, a race of people capable of becoming lions, I cannot marry. I must learn more about them so that I can avoid being one too."

Mercy, would such a thing provoke heresy charges, trials, burning at the stake? She'd no logical idea and was too afraid to contemplate it.

"You are different from those like Lucien and his pride. I cannot say whether you will ever change form. However you possess a lioness' strengths and abilities. Because of that it is imperative that you wear your jewelry until I can assess the danger you could pose to others."

How Rhiannon detested this man! The Earl of Cliffton could interweave tales with truth and lies, making it difficult to discern which was which. "I am not dangerous. Mercy, I've been confined to Linwood Castle for twenty years. Not once have I harmed a soul."

"I'm sorry this is difficult for you, Rhiannon," Baron Linwood said. "You must hear Lord Cliffton's advice. I've witnessed the destruction Abcynians can cause and watched my son die because of them. My nephew lost his life while defending a Saturian baron many years ago. Lucien Hunter, the man we believe you descend from, saw that my nephew was decapitated. Bloody hell, Cliffton, mayhap we should tell her of her parents? She might accept what we've said as truth."

"Mayhap," the Earl said. Sighing as though troubled by what he was to say, he looked down at Rhiannon, who still leaned against the wall.

Odd as it seemed, she took comfort in the painting, finding courage by running her hand along the male lion's massive paw. It wasn't the lion that drew her touch. It was the artist that painted it.

"Do you want to hear, Rhiannon? It may be difficult."

"You might as well tell me everything," Rhiannon said, knowing the Earl intended to regardless of her wishes.

"You are part Abcynian. You age slower than most humans and have abilities that may attract some and frighten others."

"Aye, you've told me. I have the abilities of a lioness."

"Your father had once been a baron. His land was fertile, prosperous," Cliffton said as if she'd not spoken at all. It was a miracle the men let her speak at all for this long. "Fifty years ago he and his mate, your mother, were found guilty of lycanthropy. A small army raided their manor and pillaged the homes of anyone thought to be like them. Many, guilty and innocent, were burned at the stake. You were taken and left for dead in the forest. I found you and healed your injuries. After a long battle, you survived."

Rhiannon's temples throbbed, the pain becoming unbearable until she gripped the painting's edge. Lord Cliffton's words rocked her back to a time long forgotten. Echoes of familiarity and truth mingled, leaving her saddened to know she still could not recall her surname.

"Were my parents killed in that raid?" she heard herself ask, tears welling in her eyes as she spoke around the constriction of her throat.

"Must I say so?" Cliffton replied, failing to give her the answer she sought.

Mayhap, somewhere, somehow, her mother and father had survived such a nightmare. "Nay, can you tell me the name of the barony?"

Puffing his handsome cheeks, he thought over her request. "It is long gone now so withholding it isn't necessary. It was Wolcott. You may verify the loss of the land, the manor house, everything and almost everyone taken. I'm certain documents maintain the truth I've told you."

"Lord Cliffton, I believe you speak half-truths. You claim I am old. How is it that I've lived here twenty years and you speak of fifty? Either you are of a similar race to the Abcynians or you cannot calculate time, milord."

"Many questions," he acknowledged. "You are right, sweeting. I am Saturian, a race similar to your own. I do not possess the abilities of the Abcynians. But I do have *some* gifts, strength, good health, longevity, the ability to heal among them. When I found you in the forest you were a mere girl. Caring for you took thirty, painful years. I saw to it that you would not remember the pain you'd experienced. Knowing you were an adolescent then and figuring in the twenty years you have been here, I believe you are close to one hundred years old."

Rhiannon heard enough. Aye, the Earl of Cliffton had saved her life. She was grateful. However she sensed he'd also instilled a fear and the unwillingness to discover who she was until now.

"That's enough for now," Baron Linwood declared, having taken notice of Rhiannon's slumped posture. "Let her rest in her chambers until we need her next."

"A fine suggestion, Linwood," Cliffton agreed. "Shall I escort you to your chambers, Rhiannon? Or would you like your maid?"

"The maid," she murmured.

"As you wish," he replied.

"You are gracious, milord," she said, watching him stroll to the door.

The Earl slowed before reaching it. "Sweeting, wear your jewelry unless you're given permission to remove it. Should you disobey, you could endanger those you most care about," he warned, gesturing to the door, his brow arched as though daring her to heed his word.

Understanding, she found the strength to lift her chin and met the Lord Cliffton's blue eyes. "I'd never hurt Mary or any of the servants here."

"Let us hope that is true. Your parents were wicked, Rhiannon. Their blood runs in you. Who can tell what you might do if given the chance?" With that, he swung away and marched to the door. "You there, Lady Rhiannon of Linwood is in need of your assistance. Be quick about it!"

Mary dashed into the great hall and took Rhiannon's elbow. "Milady, shall I assist you to your chambers?"

"Aye, thank you." Rhiannon welcomed Mary's guidance.

Once they were free of the solar, she almost collapsed. The weight of the gold pressed on Rhiannon's wrist, neck and ankles, revealing her weakness. Fearful of what might happen if she tested the bonds she walked on, refusing to pose a danger to Mary.

"Do not fret, Rhiannon. After you've rested, we will find a way to protect you from that man," Mary declared. "The Earl of Cliffton's fine face hides a deadly purpose. I've abided by Linwood's demands for far too long as it is. No more, do you hear? I'll not let either one of them harm you."

"You listened by the door?" Rhiannon asked.

"I did. Had I realized what the Baron was doing to you, I might have killed him."

"Hush, do not speak such words," Rhiannon warned, fearful they could be heard. "Wait until I've rested."

Upon reaching the chamber, Mary called for Harriet's assistance and the two aided Rhiannon to undress and crawl beneath the covers of her big, silk-covered bed.

"Are you in pain, milady?" Mary asked while soothing Rhiannon's brow with her palm.

"Nay, I need to be alone for a little while."

"I will see you remain undisturbed," Mary promised. "Harriet, send for me when she awakens."

Rhiannon ignored Harriet's response. Lying in bed she realized something. Through all she'd heard, through all she'd been told in the solar, one thing remained prominent in her mind. Dante Luciano's painting had calmed her fears when she touched it. It had awakened her in a way she hadn't felt for a very long time.

Mayhap she'd been drawn to the male lion's face. There had been something both familiar and human about it. That wasn't right. It wasn't the lion she'd noticed. It was the feeling that the king and queen of the Abcynians were important to the artist. Dante Luciano had painted that portrait with love.

Sighing, Rhiannon longed to know more and promised herself that she would seek another look at that painting after she'd rested. Mayhap the answers to her past could be found there. Mayhap then she would know her future. Whichever, she would not remain in Linwood much longer than it took to find a way to leave.

Chapter Two

Piazza della Signoria, Florence, 22 April, 1555

Dante Luciano searched the crowded *piazza* for Paolo Arrigo's straight brown hair. The boy was small, quick and agile, permitting him to escape notice easily.

Paolo did not realize Dante had already caught his scent and was tracking him through the crowd. He spotted his youngest apprentice hiding near a prosperous English merchant. Worried Paolo would snip the Englishman's salesman's kit, Dante crossed the *piazza* in sure, confident strides.

"Paolo, it is good that I have found you," he greeted, deliberately using English so the man would not misunderstand his intent.

"Master," Paolo grumbled, looking away.

"Why did you run?" Dante asked.

"I spilled ultramarine powder. I did not mean to do it." Paolo rushed on, gesturing and speaking in English.

Dante placed one large hand on Paolo's stooped, slender shoulder and then pulled the boy away from the merchant, who'd taken little notice of their conversation.

"Paolo, I am not angry with you," Dante said. "Accidents occur, next time do your best."

"It was lapis lazuli, not azurite, Master Luciano," Paolo confessed.

"I'm aware of that. You must realize by now that the loss of powder matters less than the loss of an apprentice."

"Are you certain?"

Studying Paolo's frail body, Dante could not let the boy go hungry. "There is a place for you in my workshop. I'd like you to stay..." He meant to say more, but something caught his notice.

Lifting his head, he inhaled a new scent that reached him through the crowd. The *piazza* was filled with *signori*, merchants and travelers seeking a glimpse at the artwork commissioned by Florence's prominent leaders.

At first, Dante thought the scent came from an unfamiliar lion, but it was too subtle. The lions caged in the *piazza* showed little notice of the newcomer to their territory. This scent was spicy, undoubtedly female. There were other women in the square. But this scent was new, more enticing. No other scent touched him like this before.

"Paolo, return to the workshop," Dante ordered with a gentle push. "I will speak with you later."

The boy obeyed, allowing Dante to look about. Trusting his superior sense of smell, he ignored the heavy scents of perfumes and gum arabic Florentine women used in their hair. His woman's scent was appealing to both the man and the panthera leo that he was.

Walking in slow, methodical precision, he acknowledged the men and women who knew he'd gained Cosimo de' Medici's favor. Several of the women he passed had recently lain with their lovers. Others were nearing their fertility cycle, a powerful aphrodisiac to an Abcynian male in his prime who wanted to have children. All the while, honey and cassia reached him over and above the women to whom he usually enjoyed speaking.

As Dante progressed toward the *Palazzo Vecchio*, his keen eyes raked the crowd, alighting upon the back of an Englishwoman. Her scent became stronger, drawing him to a sudden halt. *Si*, she was the one he'd been looking for.

Unlike Florentine women and servants who wore fabrics that conveyed their household's status and wealth, this woman wore a faded brown dress with a linen apron. Her pale blonde hair was confined in a severe knot at the nape. She was at least a head and shoulders taller than most women in the *piazza*, including the older maid hovering nearby. The woman's thinness bothered him, as it hinted she may have recovered from a recent illness or gone hungry too long.

Frowning, Dante moved close enough to pounce should she attempt to run and far enough away to observe her without detection. Her cassia scent tugged at his conscience, warning there was something about her he might miss if he did not take the time to study her.

As he watched he realized why her scent reached him over and above the other women. Cassia shared origins with cinnamon, two spices often used in Abcynian sustenance for flavor. The Englishwoman's fragrance was inherent, not the result of perfume. She moved slowly, with both grace and purpose. He guessed she would be strong, that her movements were made to avoid hurting herself or someone else.

Instinct told him she was only part panthera Abcynian. Had she been fully his kind, he'd have sensed her the moment she stepped into the *piazza*. He assumed that she had either been converted or she was the child of a converted pair.

Drawing in her spicy fragrance, Dante found himself hesitating. This Englishwoman could well be his mate. If he spoke to her and she acknowledged him, he would claim her as his mate by right of Abcynian law. He didn't know if he was ready to be mated, regardless of being an Elder.

Being mated meant sacrifice. Mated meant he could no longer take another lover. *Dio* knew he loved women, too many to count if he were honest. Whether they were young or older, heavy or slight, tall or short, their uniqueness touched his soul and made him long to become as masterful in bed as he was with a paintbrush and chisel. He'd lived two hundred and forty-two years, forty-two of them as an Elder. Was it right to claim one woman and ignore the rest?

With a start, his concerns became inconsequential when she turned. Lifting her chin, she revealed her face, reminding Dante of the first time he'd seen a naked woman. He'd been unable to move then, unable to find his voice or do anything other than stare.

This woman was neither naked nor pleasantly attired. But she was beautiful with her honey colored skin and pale blonde hair. Her face was blessed with the high cheekbones and elegant, straight nose of a female panthera leo, a firm though feminine chin and a lush mouth that made him groan. Her lips were as ripe and plump as berries, begging for a man's kiss. Yet it was her eyes that caught his heart. They were pure, haunting amber, hinting of a woman's vulnerability and a lioness's curiosity.

Unwilling to delay further, Dante spoke to her with his mind. *Bella, per favore viene.*

Waiting in silence, he watched her look over at the older servant. "Mary, I think someone spoke to me," she said. Her voice was huskier than he'd imagined in a woman so beautiful. In an instant he was intrigued and aroused by it.

Smiling when she'd acknowledged hearing his voice within her mind, Dante stalked toward her.

Testing her, he continued to speak in the way of Abcynian mates. *Come si chiama, bella?*

Her pretty scowl sent need pooling low and deep in his groin. Already, he wanted to take her home and consummate their pairing. Surprised at how quickly he responded to her, he recalled Lucien Hunter's advice before he'd come to Florence. "Always remember, my son, it will take a moment for your panthera half to recognize your mate. But it will take a lifetime to love her as she deserves." With his guardian's words echoing in his mind, Dante ignored his aching groin.

Again his mate spoke to the older woman at her side. "Mary, I'm worried. Do you see anyone looking at me?"

Dio! Dante grimaced, looking about. His mate possessed the inherent grace of all Abcynian women, drawing favor from the men and envious glares from the wealthiest women. She seemed not to notice the curious stares.

Dante's instinct to claim her warred with his humanity for dominance, forcing him to swallow hard to keep from roaring. It would not do for him to challenge every man that dared to look upon his mate.

I see I shall have to speak English to gain your attention, cara. In the way of our kind, tell me your name and I shall tell you mine.

"Rhiannon, are you feeling well?" The older maid revealed his mate's name before Rhiannon could answer.

"I'm fine, Mary. I thought I heard a man whisper to me."

Do not ignore me, Rhiannon. This is not a whisper. Your maid should not have been the one to answer your mate.

"Your mate!" Rhiannon shouted, causing several heads to turn in her direction. "Whoever you are, leave me be, sirrah."

Dio, had she insulted him? He knew English. Valiant Montgomery, his friend and adopted brother, was an English marquess. They corresponded in English. He was certain Rhiannon had insulted him by calling him *sirrah*.

Rhiannon, turn your eyes upon me. See who speaks to you mind-to-mind. Refuse and you are denying your chosen mate.

At last, she looked about and Dante willed her to find him amongst the crowd. The moment her amber eyes met his, his heart skipped a beat. She recognized him.

"Mercy," Rhiannon cried, her beautiful eyes widening as he headed straight for her.

Abcynian instinct warned to give her time to accept his approach. The lion within him wanted to establish his dominance. "Mayhap we should begin anew, *mio dolce*?" he suggested when he was near enough to pounce, leaving enough room for her to run if she needed to.

He'd find her again. He possessed her scent.

"I know not who you are, milord," Rhiannon said, staring up at him.

Tall as she was compared to the other women in the *piazza*, her blonde head just reached his shoulders. His height tended to cause stares and comments by those who did not know him. But he found he liked knowing his mate could nestle against him with her head resting upon his shoulder.

"Forgive me, *cara mia*. I should have introduced myself properly," Dante admitted. "I am Dante Luciano. I bid both you and your maid welcome to *Firenze*." Priding himself on being a gentleman, he inclined his head to both women in greeting.

"*Firenze*?" the older, smaller maid asked.

"Florence," he amended in English.

"Pardon, milord, did you say your name was Dante Luciano?"

"*Si*, I am untitled. You need not use milord." Dante lifted his eyes from the maid and found Rhiannon's. *Some address me as Master Luciano or Signore. I'd prefer for you to use my given name, cara mia.* Grinning, he hoped to charm her into a smile. He sensed she had not smiled for quite some time.

Rather than charming her, he realized too late that he'd offended her. In his mind she spoke. *Dear God, this man is speaking in my mind. That is nigh unto impossible.*

"Cease such talk," she rebuked. "I fail to understand why you speak to me as you do. Believe it or not, I came to Florence to find you. Now I fear I've made a mistake."

"You have found me, *cara*. You needn't worry about conversing with me mind-to-mind. It is the way our kind. We are meant to speak in a way no one else can hear," he said. "*E mio futuro.*"

Gritting her teeth, she stomped her foot. "I do not understand your language."

"You shall learn," he promised, reaching out for her hand. "I simply said that you are my future, Rhiannon, as I am yours."

"Why would you think such a thing?" she asked. "We've only just met."

"You are my chosen mate, my future wife." He didn't want to explain matters here. It was too crowded. "You are Abcynian. You know who I am to you."

"Nay, I do not!" she denied, looking fearful and weary. "Pray understand. I made a mistake coming here. I...I only meant to tell you about finding your painting and ask if you had any knowledge of my family or – It matters not anymore. I shall leave Florence right away."

"You will not." Cutting his hand through the air, he snagged her wrist, intending to bring her closer. "You are mine. I forbid you to leave."

Full of fury, Rhiannon used her Abcynian strength to tug her arm free. Startled by her resistance, he was pulled off balance and landed on one knee.

"Dio, woman, why do you resist me?" he demanded, glaring upward and wincing as she turned on her heel and fled into the throng, the older maid trailing behind.

Intending to charge after her, he stood just as his friend Eduardo Fabrizio came up behind him, interrupting his intent to find Rhiannon.

"I never thought I'd see the day when a woman ran away from Dante Luciano. Are you losing your touch?"

"I've frightened her, Eduardo," Dante said, tracing her scent. "Never before have I made a woman afraid. I must go find her and apologize."

"There's time enough for that," Eduardo said. "Cosimo is demanding to meet with you this eve."

"Assure him I'll be there. I am almost finished with his painting. It is the matter of days."

"I will inform him at once." Eduardo was Dante's friend and a favored servant to Cosimo de' Medici. It was a relief to know he had regained the favor of a de' Medici with Eduardo's assistance. "Understand, Dante, he's not pressuring you without cause."

"I know he isn't."

His fourth commissioned piece for the de' Medici had been stolen the day it was to be presented. It was fortunate that Cosimo believed Dante had no knowledge of how the theft had occurred and had commissioned a new masterpiece.

"For now I must go, Eduardo. Give him my assurances, *per favore?*"

"You know I will," Eduardo agreed, pausing. "Who was the Englishwoman that fled, Dante? She was lovely. She could grace a painting."

"She is mine, *mi scusi,*" Dante stated, warning off his friend and rushing away, cassia leading him toward Rhiannon.

* * * * *

Rhiannon pulled Mary through the *piazza* and found a group of travelers circling an enormous statue of a man that graced a place of honor before the main door of the

immense *Palazzo Vecchio*. Awed by both the statue and the stone walls of the *palazzo*, she felt safe hiding amongst the crowd.

"Wait, Rhiannon. I cannot keep up with you," Mary wheezed, her smaller footsteps forcing Rhiannon to notice she'd been dragging her older friend behind her.

"Forgive me, Mary," Rhiannon said, stopping. Scanning the crowd for any sign of the handsome dark-haired Dante Luciano, she remained alert. "I'm trying to elude him."

"Him, the very man we came to Florence to find? What sense is there in hiding?"

"Didn't you hear what he said? He claimed I was his mate."

"I heard him," Mary said. "I do not think he intended to offend you. Have you considered that he recognized you as part Abcynian?"

"Aye, but I have no idea what it means to be Abcynian. Merciful heavens, Mary, I think I hurt him. He was so big and I pulled so hard that he fell. I caused him pain."

Having been startled by the rightness of hearing his voice in her mind, she'd had no idea how to handle him. Her dealings with men were limited. But she'd thought Dante was as fine as a prince with his wavy dark brown locks, golden eyes and neatly trimmed beard and mustache. He was tall and broad-shouldered with a trim waist, looked strong and capable of defending his own. Her head had just reached his shoulders, which had made her feel small and feminine. Normally she towered over the few men and women she'd known.

Then he'd touched her and her heart had slammed within her chest, making breathing near impossible. Her thoughts had scattered. Out of panic, she'd jerked her arm so hard, she'd sent the man crashing to his knee.

Fearing she might cause him further harm, she'd run. Now she hovered near a statue of a magnificent man and prayed she couldn't be found in the crowd. Regardless of her efforts, something invisible kept her looking over her shoulders. Something that felt like a gentleman's touch at her elbow, a touch meant to support, not hurt or control.

She wasn't surprised when the scent of linseed oil tickled her nostrils. Because she'd learned the basics of art at Linwood Castle, she knew linseed oil was used for binding paint. Dante Luciano had found her but she couldn't see him anywhere. She felt him. Felt his nearness, his gaze, his eyes on her back, his hand at her elbow.

Worried, she searched the crowd, seeing Florentine merchants, women and travelers. Still she could feel him prowling closer. On instinct she licked her lips and inhaled a pleasant, musky aroma that caused an almost painful pang behind her navel. The musk was stronger, more alluring than linseed oil.

Dante Luciano was getting closer as she breathed.

"Mary, I need my bracelet," she said, holding out her hand.

"Gold weakens you."

"I know what the bracelet will do." Rhiannon continued to hold out her hand.

Mary retrieved the bracelet she kept hidden in the bag hanging from her shoulder. Frowning, she handed it to Rhiannon. "This could be a mistake."

Upon slipping the bracelet onto her wrist, Rhiannon felt relieved and weakened. She was amazed at how quickly the gold affected her. At how little was needed to hinder her strength.

Soon after the bracelet was secure, she felt a familiar throb within her temples. "Mary, I think a headache is coming. We should leave."

"We will. We must find Hanson first," Mary said, taking hold of Rhiannon's elbow.

"He'd not be pleased if we deserted him," Rhiannon agreed.

"I see him." As soon as Mary's words spilled forth, she guided Rhiannon through the crowd toward their employer.

"Forgive our delay, milord," Mary greeted, nodding at Robert Hanson.

"Forgiven," Hanson said, smiling at them, his gray eyes alighting upon Rhiannon's face. "Are you all right?"

"My head is hurting, milord." Rhiannon returned his smile, although her head began to pound in earnest. "We've traveled for more than a fortnight with little rest. Could we rest?"

"Of course, I should have realized," he said. "Allow me to conclude my business here and we shall be on our way. I'll need a hearty meal after the day's activities. I dare say food will cure your headache."

Mary, who'd been hired as Hanson's traveling cook, stepped forward. "You needn't worry. I shall prepare a meal fit for a king once we are in the guesthouse."

"That would please me." Robert Hanson returned his gaze to Rhiannon, his eyes traveling from her head to her toes. "I worry about you, girl. Mayhap I erred in agreeing to bring you to Florence. You're still tired from our journey. I wouldn't want you to become too ill to return to London."

"I will be fine, sir," Rhiannon said. She would be fine once they left the *piazza* and found safety in Hanson's temporary quarters. There she could remove the bracelet and rest. "You are gracious to have hired me. I'll see to my duties."

Robert Hanson nodded, taking on the look of a man about to conquer Florentine silk merchants. It was amazing to think that just a short time ago Rhiannon had rarely gone beyond the walls of Linwood Castle. Now she stood before the intimidating presence of the *Palazzo Vecchio*, studying a statue that commanded respect and awe. While she felt awkward as a servant for an English merchant, she was relieved to be beyond Clifton's grasp.

"It pleases me to have hired you. My wife, now that's a different matter."

"I'm certain your wife has no reason to be concerned over two meager servants," Mary said.

"One of which is quite pretty," Robert Hanson pronounced, his grin deepening when he turned his eyes back to Rhiannon.

Rhiannon came to understand why Hanson had hired them at all. He'd not hired them out of affection for Mary's older sister, who had worked for him for many years before she died.

"Sir, I know not what your true intentions are toward me," she said. "I joined your household out of the need for work."

"Aye, I know," he sighed. "It is pointless to say anything that will only be taken as offense. I meant none. Let me finish my work and we will be on our way."

"As you wish," Rhiannon said, watching him leave.

"My dear, I believe we were wrong to trust him."

"Nonsense, Mary. He is harmless."

"You are naïve if you believe that, Rhiannon. Mayhap we should seek your Dante Luciano. Mayhap he can assist us in leaving Florence without Hanson."

Rhiannon's heart pounded at the mere mention of Dante Luciano's name. Fighting the effects of the bracelet and pain, she sought to recall his voice, hoping it would soothe her. He'd possessed a voice so deep and masculine it could have belonged to the archangel Gabriel.

How could she have been so foolish as to think coming to Florence would enable her to find her future? Instead she found a man whose face and voice might very well haunt her for the rest of her days.

"Rhiannon, you're unwell," Mary said, pressing her hand to Rhiannon's temple. "Remove the bracelet, it may ease the pain."

Refusing to allow a simple gold bracelet to best her, she shook her head and lifted her eyes to the giant marble statue many had come to see. His eyes called to her, hinting of the mistakes he'd made in his youth, the courage he'd gained as a man.

Longing to understand how the artist chiseled such life into a statue, she concentrated on the artwork rather than her headache. It still pounded. Her body ached for the bracelet's removal. She remained motionless, expecting to be caught any moment.

Just then a shadow drew near, warning Rhiannon that Dante Luciano was close. Linseed oil wafted through the air, tickling her senses, making her aware that she was a woman. Deep within, her womb contracted. Her lungs nearly seized even as her heart pounded in recognition. Part of her wanted to run. The remaining part of her wanted to claim the man who'd stepped around the statue.

Dante Luciano did not hesitate as he strode forward, his eyes on her face, his shoulders confident. He intended to reach her, daring her to flee if she wanted, promising he'd follow.

"Dear lord," Mary muttered. "He is fine looking, Rhiannon."

"Mercy, he is," Rhiannon whispered.

Dressed in an azure doublet slashed to reveal a silver tunic, flesh-colored padded breeches and short leather boots, he exuded a presence that put to mind royalty,

conveying to all that he knew his purpose in life as an artist and was a respectable gentleman. His face was chiseled perfection, more beautiful than that of the lifelike statue looming over all of them. Golden eyes traveled from the top of her head to her toes, leaving her skin feeling scorched in their wake, enabling her to ignore her migraine.

Hair she'd thought to be dark brown at first glance was sable and reddish brown, the unruly waves crowned his head and brushed his jaw. His trimmed beard and mustache shadowed his chin and framed his mouth, defining his masculinity.

At last, Dante stood before her as still as the statue. He was beautiful.

"*Perche' non parli?*" he said. For a moment, she stared as his golden eyes left her to sweep the statue. "Why don't you speak? It has been said that Michelangelo Buonarroti asked David this as he hammered. Just the same, why don't you speak to me in the way of our kind, Rhiannon?"

Confused and nervous, she glanced away. "I do not understand what it means to speak in the way of *our* kind. I am not your kind. I am Rhiannon, a servant to an English merchant."

Dante turned his eyes back to her, his gaze boring into her, studying her as intensely as he'd studied the statue of David. "You were not born a servant. You've the presence of a noblewoman." She watched him glare, his throat working as though he were speaking, causing a strange murmur within her temples that compounded her aching head. "*Dio*, you heard me earlier, why don't you now?"

"Earlier you were playing tricks," Rhiannon admonished. "However I should not have fled like a frightened child. As you've already learned, I am Rhiannon. This is my companion, Mary Baker. We have come to Florence with the hope of finding you, milord. Since we have, I shall deliver my message and leave you in peace."

A grumble emanated deep within his throat, warning that talk of leaving had sparked his temper. "I've only just found you, *cara mia*. Allowing you to leave is not possible." He spoke carefully, revealing English was not his usual tongue. "Come to my home. We've much to discuss."

"I dare not. We can speak here just fine. I'll not keep you long." Determined to stay the course she and Mary had decided upon before they reached Florence, Rhiannon braced her spine. "I saw a painting."

Dante Luciano lifted his left hand, placing a long forefinger beneath her chin. "You saw a painting. That is not uncommon in Florence. There are many. If you wish to see more, I will gain you access to Florentine frescoes, sculptures and paintings. Much can be viewed in this *piazza* alone."

Rhiannon turned her face, hoping to dislodge his finger. Instead he caressed upward from her chin to her earlobe, flicking the lobe and sending butterflies to flight within her womb.

"Cease that," she rebuked. "The painting was yours."

"Mine, *bella*, explain." He smiled, the pure radiance of it feathered down her spine, pooling in her womb. On instinct she lifted her hand to her throat, feeling her frantic pulse. He caught her fingers, his hand sliding to her wrist, encountering her bracelet.

"Rhiannon, why do you wear this?" he demanded, shoving her sleeve aside to reveal the gold encircling her wrist. "Do you not know what gold does to you?"

"It matters not what it does. My bracelet is not your concern, milord."

Frustrated, he dropped her hand as if she'd burned him. "It is my concern if it's imprisoning my mate's wrist."

"Please, Signore, won't you listen to me?" she begged.

"I cannot let you harm yourself."

"Wait, please listen to her," Mary interrupted, stepping forward and pressing close enough to offer protection.

"Are you her Guard?" Dante asked Mary, careful to keep his voice soft.

"I suppose I am."

"Then why do you permit her to wear gold? Abcynian Guards are well aware of the weakness gold causes. Rhiannon is suffering from it."

Wanting to protect Mary from Dante's temper, Rhiannon lifted to her toes in an effort to appear taller than she already was. "Do not admonish my friend. My head hurts. I need to rest. We are waiting upon the man who brought us here. When he returns we shall go to our quarters. Nothing more needs to be said on the matter."

"Rhiannon, you must tell him about your past. Don't you see? This man is Abcynian. He can help you."

The moment Mary spoke of the past, fear gripped Rhiannon's throat until she could hardly breathe. Flattening her feet, she fought the constriction and pain knocking at her temples. In her mind she saw the shadowed faces of a man and a woman, producing unprecedented sorrow and pain when she did not recognize them. Despite the pain, she allowed herself the memory until it vanished.

Rhiannon looked into Dante Luciano's golden eyes, mesmerized by the sincere concern she saw there. "I've nothing to tell you about my past, Signore Luciano. I haven't one."

"How can you—" Rhiannon never heard his question, for the light of day faded to gray and then she felt nothing.

Chapter Three

Rhiannon's head pounded as she opened her eyes, only to blanch and close them when the pain worsened due to the sunlight in the room. Blocking the light with a hand to her eyes, she snuggled further into a soft feather bed and covers that felt like silk.

Comforted by the fabric, she sighed and almost succumbed to the urge to go back to sleep. Somewhere nearby a man was talking. Another voice joined the first, reminding her of an archangel with his deep and mesmeric tones. Through the pounding within her temples, the angel's voice soothed when normally they would hurt.

"Rhiannon, wake for me," she heard Mary say as she patted her shoulder. "We are worried about you, dear."

"We," Rhiannon repeated, failing to understand why the bed felt so soft and inviting, why the musky scent of a man, linseed oil and an archangel's voice calmed her spirits. "Mary, where are we?" she whispered, afraid to speak louder for fear of getting sick.

"In his home," Mary said. "You're recovering in his bedchamber. The other rooms are for his apprentices. There are two maids scrambling to prepare something for you to eat."

Rhiannon heard Mary's explanations, yet she did not understand. "Nay, Mary, we cannot be in Signore Luciano's home. Tell me that's not where we are." Alarmed, she almost bolted upright before pain and dizziness made her drop back to the mattress.

"He insisted upon it," Mary said. "There was little I could do to prevent him from bringing you here, Rhiannon. You fainted into his arms and he scooped you up as though you weighed little more than a feather! I've never seen such a thing. So concerned and full of fury he was. None thought to interfere as he carried you here."

"What of Hanson? If he finds us gone, we will be left behind when he leaves for London in a sennight."

"Worry about Hanson after your headache is gone. Signore Luciano has sent one of his apprentices to prepare his healing wine for you. The Signore calls the potion sustenance. Since we haven't had access to any in a fortnight you must drink it."

"We must leave." Rhiannon hated the very idea of leaving such a warm, safe haven. She'd much rather stay. But what choice did she have?

You'll not leave, cara mia. I'll not permit it knowing you suffer. Dante Luciano's voice eased her pain somewhat. She longed to hear it day and night, so long as her pain continued to wane. *Ease your worry, Rhiannon. You'll hear me for years to come. It is the way of true mates.*

"Merciful heavens, don't say such things!" she shouted, crying out when her voice splintered through her skull.

"You mustn't fret, dear." Mary tucked the covers about Rhiannon's inert form. Moving now proved most impossible, but she'd heard him. She heard him speak in her mind.

"I must speak with her alone, Signora Baker," Dante said. Though Rhiannon did not open her eyes to see him, she knew he stood beside the bed. "Will you join my *l'amico*, my friend, Signore Eduardo Fabrizio downstairs? I shall tend to Rhiannon while he introduces you to my apprentices and maids."

"Signore Luciano, I cannot leave Rhiannon alone with a man, especially not in his bedchamber!"

Rhiannon felt the bed dip and give beneath the tall, heavier frame of a man, even as Mary's slight weight left it. "You needn't worry. I would never harm her. You've my word as a gentleman."

"I should stay," Mary argued.

Wishing they would cease talking altogether so she could sleep, Rhiannon pulled the silk cover over her head, blocking the light that pained her even with her eyelids shut.

"Both of you go," she grumbled. "I need silence."

Mary whispered to Dante. "If you take advantage of my charge, I will see that you suffer."

Quiet footsteps retreated, leaving Rhiannon alone with Dante Luciano.

"You may go now, as well," she bit out, hiding still.

"*Soffre di il mal di testa?*" Dante said.

"Attempting to understand you does not help, milord," she mumbled.

"You needn't address me as a lord. My name is Dante. Let us not argue when all I'd meant to do was ask about your migraine, *bella*," he soothed, his voice softer and...closer. The bed shifted, making her sickness worse even though she longed to know how close he intended to move. Something hard and firm touched her forearm. She soon realized it was his hand.

"Go away."

"I cannot. I've sustenance for you. Drink. After a bit, we shall talk. I mean to help you. Keep your eyes closed until you feel better."

Rhiannon didn't want to talk. Her head ached and she feared she would become sick all over Dante Luciano's silk-covered bed. Regardless of her resistance, Dante lowered the cover and aided her to sit up a bit. Something cool and smooth touched her lips and she found herself opening her mouth, seeking the sweet and spicy sustenance she knew awaited her.

Once the first drop touched her tongue, Rhiannon's desire for more caused her to grasp the chalice and gulp. "Careful, *cara mia*, sip. I shall give you all that you need. Feel

the sustenance nourishing your body in the way Abcynians need daily." He spoke in that mesmeric baritone, calming her pain as the wine quenched her throat. "Soon, I'll teach you the secrets of our wine. You'll be able to prepare it at will. Your maid informed me you'd last had it a fortnight ago. You needn't put yourself through such a thing again." He lifted the chalice, allowing her to swallow.

"How is it that your voice eases my discomfort, when Mary's or my own compounds it?" Her words proved true. Had anyone tried to speak for such a length of time she'd have been repelled.

"Because my voice is the one you should be hearing," he said. "If you wish to speak to me, it may be easier to do so in the way of Abcynian mates."

Rhiannon decided she didn't want to think about what he meant at the moment. She wanted to drink more of the wine. As if he knew what she needed, he leaned forward and tapped the glass against her mouth. When the cup was empty she felt him put it aside.

The bed dipped again, joggling her a bit as Dante lowered her head to the plump pillows and moved closer.

Gasping, she opened her eyes. "What are you doing?"

"Moving closer," he said. "I cannot attend you if I cannot reach you."

"This is improper. You should go." Expecting the pain to worsen as she spoke, she closed her eyes, soon learning her discomfort wasn't as severe.

"No, *cara mia*, I am right where I should be," he said.

"Mayhap I should go elsewhere to rest." Rhiannon started to rise.

"Lay still. You've nothing to fear from me. Keep your eyes closed until the pain eases. It shouldn't be too long now."

With his insistence, Rhiannon obeyed. The pain *was* lessening. So she didn't protest his nearness, not even when he reclined next to her with his long legs positioned alongside hers.

"Signore—" A strong, callused finger rested against her lips, silencing her with the lightest of caresses.

"Hush now. Permit me to heal you." With the touch of a master artist capable of wielding the smallest of paintbrushes, Dante slid his fingertip from her lips to her jaw, sweeping upward until he reached her temple and brow.

Ever so lightly, he caressed, quieting her pain with the sweetness of his touch. "Feels good, *si*?"

"Um hum," she murmured. "You should know why I came here."

"I know enough," he said, stroking. The bed gave again. His breath whisper light at her earlobe and neck. "It will do for now."

"Would...would you talk quietly to me, milord? I like your voice."

"I shall speak as you wish," he said. "But I would like for you to use my name soon."

"We are not acquainted enough for me to use your given name."

A quiet chuckle sweetened the feel of his breath at her ear, tickling some. "Rhiannon, are you going to resist everything I say and do? If so, we shall have an interesting time of it over the years."

"Over the years?" she repeated, frowning. "I shall be leaving in a sennight, assuming Hanson is willing to take Mary and me back to England."

"You needn't concern yourself with him."

Dante pressed inward, his thumb joining his forefinger as he caressed her loosened hair away from her face. She wanted to ask how she'd lost the pins.

"I removed the hairpins the moment I brought you into my home. I cannot fathom why you'd bind your hair in such a severe manner. Wearing it loose will be easier when your head is aching."

Rhiannon opened her eyes again, finding him stretched out upon the big azure and silver bed, looking much like a prince amongst colors that would have seemed effeminate for a different man. But this was Dante Luciano, who left her in little doubt that he was a man.

Maintaining his rhythmic combing, he looked down at her from the perch of his hand beneath his chin, his elbow braced on the mattress. Golden eyes stared into hers, the heat she witnessed there startling and exciting, tempting her to follow wherever he led. His defined mouth curved into a smile. She found herself wondering what it would be like to be kissed by him.

"*Attento, bella*, you are unwell. It would not do for me to kiss you until your pain eases and we've talked of what brought you to me."

"Tell me you aren't aware of all my thoughts?" she begged, feeling her cheeks flood with heat.

He shook his head. "I can hear the thoughts you want me to know. Conversing mind-to-mind is intimate, intended for Abcynian mates. You and I are mates," he maintained, watching her as he spoke.

A little breathless, Rhiannon attempted to shimmy away from him. Ever observant, Dante scowled. His narrowed eyes and deep-throated growl warned against moving again. Were anyone to come upon them at that moment, they'd think he was at ease. But that growl was menacing.

"You shouldn't claim such things. We hardly know one another. I have come to Florence for a reason."

"*Si*, to find me and learn about Abcynians. Your maid explained why," he said, his seriousness giving way to a lazy smile that thrilled its way from her hair to her toes. "Your pain, it is easing?"

It was. She'd been so consumed by Dante's presence, she hadn't been thinking about it. While some discomfort lingered near her temples, each sweep of his fingers through her hair eased it more. The sustenance she'd had replenished her tired, weakened body.

"Aye, it seems to be," she agreed.

Out of curiosity, she lifted her hand and wiped it across her temple. Belatedly realizing her arm was bare she looked again, discovering she was wearing a midnight blue chemise. She owned nothing of this color, yet realizing she was almost naked sent heat to her cheeks. "I'm barely clothed and my bracelet is gone. What have you done with my things?"

"The bracelet is no longer needed."

Worried about the warnings Clifton had used before she left Linwood, she wondered if she posed a danger to Dante Luciano or anyone in his household.

"You don't understand," she corrected. "Without it, I could be a danger to anyone here."

"Calm such thoughts, bella. You've a gentle soul."

"I think you like to use pretty words to distract me, Signore Luciano. What of my clothes. Where are they?"

"You are covered well enough." Dante ceased combing her hair, leaving her bereft when he sat up and leaned back against the headboard. "My word as a gentleman, I did not remove your clothing. Your companion insisted you'd be more comfortable without a gown. She borrowed that chemise from one of my maids while I'd dealt with the man who'd brought you to Florence. I did not care for his intentions toward you and am glad he is gone."

"Gone?" she echoed. "You don't mean—"

"*Si*, I mean precisely what I said." Dante crossed his arms over his chest, accentuating the broadness of his shoulders and leanness of his hips. Curiously, her heart fluttered behind her breast, her nipples tingling in response to the fine man beside her. "I paid him for safely escorting you and Mary here and he left Florence."

Glad her pain was nearly gone, Rhiannon shot upward, facing Dante. "You cannot sweep into my life and send those you dislike away. Mary and I were hired to accompany him to Florence as his maids. Without him, I've no idea how we'll return to England."

Dante sighed, shoving a long-fingered hand through his dark sable and reddish brown hair. "I did not mean to upset you, *cara*. Mary told me that you'd been injured as a child and have suffered from illness and pain for a very long time. Forgive me, *per favore*. I did what I thought best for your well-being."

Lost when he offered a charming grin, her stomach flipped in excitement. "Dante, I need to go home."

"You just said my name, how can I let you go now?" he asked. Lifting a hand to her chin, he tilted her head back, her pale blonde hair spilling to the bed. "Your home is with me now, Rhiannon."

Confused, she turned her head away. "My home is in England. There are things I must do once I'm there."

"You want to find your family." Concern in his tone brought her back to face him. His golden eyes made her tremble. "I know you have little knowledge of your past and owe you an apology for failing to understand why you didn't respond when I first claimed you. That doesn't change who you are, an Abcynian female with panthera leo blood. You acknowledged hearing me speak in your mind, thus allowing me to claim you according to Abcynian law. You are mine, Rhiannon." She started to interrupt, but he shook his head to silence her. "You must remain here where I can keep you safe and teach you what you need to know of our kind. When you're ready, the two of us will marry and complete the mating ritual. Then we can travel to England to find your family, together."

"Dante, you cannot mean to marry me. I'd prefer to tell you of why I came here. My former guardian, Baron Linwood has one of your paintings. It adorns his great hall and I fear he must have stolen it. I knew it was wrong and felt the need to find you. Something in the painting hinted that you were like me. I'd hoped you would have some answers."

"I have what you need. Baron Linwood has been plaguing me for years with his attempts to purchase my paintings. I should have known he'd try to find a way to ruin me. It is fortunate I still have the patronage of Cosimo de' Medici after the theft. Without the patronage, I'd have left Florence months ago."

"How can you know of the Baron?"

"Garfield Parker, known to Abcynians as Baron Linwood, is a converted Saturian. He has resented my family for many years. Lucien Hunter, the leader of our kind, believes Linwood was converted by Edgar Wyntrop, the Earl of Cliffton. Cliffton gained power over Saturians when his older brother, Zotikos, was destroyed by the Earl of Danford."

Fascinated, Rhiannon listened. Listening to Dante speak, watching him barely move as he relayed his knowledge was a pleasure. He was calm, looked almost lazy, but alert to anything beyond the bedchamber. Were someone to walk in the room, she'd little doubt that he could spring off the bed and defend her.

"Saturians and Abcynians became enemies long before mankind began recording history," he continued. "Because neither race wants to reveal our true secrets, we fight against one another through political or social means. There was a time when Saturians participated in raids against Abcynians, accusing many of heresy, witchcraft and sorcery. While much has remained calm between our races for almost a hundred years, I suspect trouble is lurking. Zotikos is gone. But his brother Edgar plays the king of Saturian kind."

“Wouldn’t Abcynians be justified in raiding Cliffton’s or Linwood’s estates?”

“Abcynians will do what they must to protect our kind. They will not provoke war to destroy another race, even the Saturians. Many of us prefer to blend into our chosen societies and cultures. Saturians prefer to gain the confidences of the Crown, monarchy or church to gain influence. They’ll use it to steal the identities of mortal men to disguise themselves. It is possible the Earl of Cliffton performs duties most would find distasteful.”

“I am certain the Earl of Cliffton has gained Queen Mary’s support by raiding small villages and townships throughout England looking for Protestants. Before running away from Linwood, I’d been forced to dine with Cliffton and Linwood several times. They spoke of it in great length. But I’ve never heard of Zotikos.”

“It is fortunate that you have not. He is evil, Rhiannon. The Earl of Danford only destroyed his body. His soul can possess another.”

Rhiannon shuddered, believing Dante. She didn’t think there was anyone more loathsome than Cliffton. She had much to learn about the Abcynians and Saturians.

“I think I’ve heard enough about this Zotikos. He’s not here. I’ll worry about him when I need to.”

“You will not have to worry about him alone, Rhiannon. Let us talk of something else. How were you and Mary able to find your way to Florence?”

“It is by God’s grace that we made it here,” Rhiannon said. “A few months ago, Baron Linwood introduced me to Edgar Wynthrop, Earl of Cliffton.” As she spoke, Dante growled again, sounding menacing again, yet she did not feel threatened. “When I’d learned the education Baron Linwood provided for me was a ruse to prepare me for marriage to Cliffton I balked. It wasn’t until I saw your painting that I decided to come here. Mary agreed to help me and we’ve been running since leaving Linwood. We did not intend to stop until I found out who and what I am.

“Mayhap I can converse with royalty if required, speak French and play the lyre, but I do not know my surname, Signore Luciano. How can I marry any man when I do not know my family history? A few months ago I didn’t realize Abcynians existed and I am related to them. I must deal with that before I can think of marriage.”

Dante nodded. She didn’t know if he listened. He’d declared they were mates. How could that be possible when he was much older, much wiser and in complete possession of his memories? That made him seem...unattainable.

“You are more than related, Rhiannon. You’ve panthera leo and Abcynian blood in you. You are one of us,” he said, leaning a trifle closer, his fingers beneath her chin. “I understand searching for your past seems a daunting task. You needn’t think you should go about it alone. I will be there for you.”

“That is very sweet. But you’ve work to do here. Just as Mary and I found our way in to an English silk merchant’s household and convinced him to bring us with him to Florence, we will find our way back to England when the time comes.”

Dante did nothing but look at her as she spoke. Worried that she'd upset him, she waited, anticipating rebuke. His hand shifted from her chin, caressing her jaw. Long fingers framed the side of her face, his fore and middle fingers almost touching her earlobe.

He whispered something in another language, mayhap Abcynian, and placed his left hand on her face. With the tip of his forefinger, he traced the bridge of her nose, the curve of her chin and arch of her cheekbones.

"You're very stubborn, Rhiannon. It changes nothing. You are mine. I confess to you that I watched you in the courtyard for quite some time. I felt you near, scented you above all other women. I'm two hundred and forty-two years, considered an Elder. I'd wondered if I should take a mate and ignore all other women save her. But I'd little choice.

"The panthera leo within me recognized you as my mate. It is the Abcynian way. The lion claims. The man loves. I shall love you, Rhiannon, as you will love me. What you do not know of the past does not hinder what your heart and soul already knows. Soon I shall show you the ways of our kind. You will understand."

"Nay," Rhiannon denied.

Something in his voice lulled her into believing him, compelling her to lean toward him. He smelled of heaven, of earth, of linseed oil and that indefinable musk that would forever make her recognize him blindfolded. He smelled like a man, her man.

"Do not be afraid, *cara mia*. I'll not harm you or rush you," he promised.

He smiled, staring into her eyes. Deep, deep within her womb a well of longing sprung forth, shimmering through her until her heart raced in anticipation of whatever he intended to ask.

"*Tu sei bellissima, posso baciarti?*" he murmured, his archangel's voice stirring her hair.

Rhiannon didn't know what he'd said and she couldn't look away. Gently, he tucked a lock of her hair that had fallen across her cheek back behind her ear.

"I don't understand," she said. "Baron Linwood did not permit me to learn Latin or Italian."

Talk of the Baron must have bothered Dante for he growled deep in his throat. "Fair warning, Rhiannon, never think of another man when I am about to kiss you. It matters not who he is or what he means to you, do not."

"Oh, mercy," she whispered, certain she'd heard him wrong. "Nay, Dante, you cannot—" His firm, defined mouth touched hers, whisper light, soft as a breeze. His trimmed mustache tickled the sensitive skin between her upper lip and nose. His beard caressed her chin. Expecting his mouth to be hard, she was enticed by a kiss so gentle tears welled in her eyes.

With her next breath, he pulled back, his golden eyes locked with hers. With startling clarity she knew she'd never before been kissed. She was pleased to have

shared her first kiss with Dante Luciano, feeling disappointed that he'd retreated so soon after it had begun.

The intensity in his eyes kindled with warmth and he grinned, touching his nose to hers, rubbing back and forth in a gesture so affectionate she'd not expected it of him.

"Ease your worry, *mio dolce*, there are many firsts we will share. There is nothing I'd like more than to kiss you again. I cannot right now because your maid is climbing the stairs."

"Oh, nay, you must leave the bed," she insisted.

"For now, Rhiannon," he agreed, then pulled away, standing with the fluid grace ingrained in everything he did. "I will see to getting you some clothes and food. Remain in bed. I'll have one of my apprentices bring another glass of wine. Your headache is gone now, *si*?"

"Aye, Dante," she said. The pain was a distant memory now. Her lips still tingled from his tempting kiss.

"Signore Luciano, your friend awaits you in your workshop," Mary told him as she marched into the bedroom. "I shall look after Rhiannon."

"Keep her safe for me. Do not allow her to wear the bracelet again," Dante said, walking out of the bedchamber with barely a sound.

"My bracelet, it's gone," Rhiannon recalled, looking at her bare arms.

"He flung it from you when you'd fainted," Mary said. "I managed to retrieve it before he'd carried you out of the *piazza*. I'll not let you wear that bloody thing again."

"I've no intention of wearing it, Mary. If I am a danger to anyone I will have to find another way to protect them. But we will need the bracelet when we leave here. We sold most of my jewelry to gain passage to London. Mayhap we can do the same when we leave Florence."

"Are you certain that is wise? Signore Luciano has arranged for us to work for him. He knows about your memory loss and wants to help you learn who you are. Let him. For all his size and arrogance, I believe he is a good man, Rhiannon."

"What sort of work, Mary?" Worried she may have misread Dante's gallantry, Rhiannon pressed her hand to her mouth, hoping to stem her sudden trembling.

"You needn't fret," Mary assured. Hiking up her skirt a bit, she came to sit upon the bed. "He has lost one of his housekeepers and gained another apprentice. There are many mouths to feed and beds to make. I've agreed to help cook and tend the house. You are to pose for him."

Rhiannon gasped. "Pose, nay, why?"

Si, bella, your beauty has inspired my next masterpiece. Will you pose for me, Rhiannon?

Hearing him in her mind, Rhiannon decided not to answer in kind. Let him wonder if she'd agree. Regardless, in her heart of hearts, she found herself longing to pose for Dante's masterpiece. It was surely an honor to be considered pretty enough.

Tue sei bellissima, he said in her mind. He'd heard her after all.

Chapter Four

Dante scented cassia over the crushed buckthorn berries and linseed oil he'd been working with. Straightening from his task, he looked over at his eldest apprentice, Marcello Biainardo. Giving instructions, he waited for Marcello's nod and headed for the stairs.

Just as he'd known, Rhiannon's quiet footsteps revealed that she was coming down to his workshop. It hadn't been long since he'd left her in his bed. But he was as eager to see her again as a young man pursuing his first love.

As her foot came into view, he hurried to assist her. Despite the brown dress she wore, he thought she was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen.

"Rhiannon, you should be in bed," he said, reaching out to take both of her hands in his. He regretted his impatience when they'd first met and hoped to make amends for his behavior.

"My headache has gone. I'm much stronger after drinking a second chalice of sustenance. With Mary preparing supper, I was feeling lonely," she said, her amber eyes meeting his. Intrigued, he leaned closer.

The bed smelled so much like you, I found myself longing to hear your archangel's voice, she said in their way, revealing more than she realized.

Taken by surprise, Dante warned her to mind her tongue. *Be careful, bella, I may carry you back to bed and keep you there for what remains of the day.*

"I didn't just let you hear my thoughts...I did," she murmured, looking away. "Forgive me. I had not meant to say such a thing."

"I am not offended." Unable to resist, he tugged on her hands and stepped toward her. "Nor should you apologize for revealing to me how you feel. From this day forth, I shall be honest with you in all things and ask that you'll do the same for me."

Rhiannon's smaller hands were soft and feminine. Dante longed to feel her touch his bare skin. "Regardless of my reaction toward you in the square, I am grateful for all you've done for me thus far. I will be as honest as I know how to be."

Humbled, Dante moved her further away from his apprentices. Lifting her left hand to his mouth, he offered a kiss to her knuckles. "You have a kind heart, Rhiannon. But I must atone for my behavior when we'd first met. Many of our kind live hundreds of years before they find their heart's mate. When I knew you were to be mine, I could think of nothing other than claiming you as my right."

She looked away for a moment, her thoughts guarded this time. "It is good of you to apologize, Signore Luciano. There is much for me to learn. I'd like you to teach me."

"You needn't ask. I'd prefer for you to use my given name, *bella*."

"I'm sorry." She looked sad and he longed to kiss her until she smiled.

"What have you to be sorry for?"

"For using formality when you'd rather I didn't. Even though I have accepted your offer for assistance, I've accepted nothing else. You want something from me that I do not know if I can give."

Fighting impatience, Dante attempted to smile. "You're only just beginning to trust me, Rhiannon. It's a matter of time until you realize you've already accepted me."

Dante knew she meant to argue even before her mouth parted. Tempted to kiss her into compliance, he shook his head, growling so that she would hear.

"Dante, cease that," she admonished, her amber eyes darting about the room.

"It isn't me, *cara mia*. It's the lion. Let us not argue or you may provoke him. I've given some thought as to how I might aid you. But I need to learn a few things before deciding how to proceed."

"What would you like to know?" A hint of fear softened her husky voice.

"Earlier you'd told me about the role Baron Linwood had in your life these past twenty years and your introduction to the Earl of Cliffton. Tell me more about Cliffton."

"I'm uncertain what Mary told you already. When I met him, Cliffton cruelly informed me that my parents were killed during a raid on the manor where I'd been reared. I was very young and had been injured so severely it took a long time for me to heal. I'd almost died," Rhiannon revealed, causing Dante's heart to clench as he sensed her fear. Felt her tremble. "Cliffton also claimed that I am about one hundred years old. Since I can only recall the last twenty years of my life, I have no idea what happened before waking in Linwood. Somewhere, somehow, I lost fifty years of my life. While I loathe the Earl, I don't know what would have become of me without him."

Furious to learn she'd been kept from her family for fifty years, Dante fought a roar. For an Abcynian, family was important.

"I wish I could give those years back to you, Rhiannon." Uncertain what to say, he swallowed hard. Her tremors went straight to his heart. "From now on, be assured that I will do all I can to protect you from Cliffton and Baron Linwood. In truth, I could kill them for what they did to you. But that must wait. You spoke of the manor where you'd been reared. Do you know anything about it?"

"Just the name, Wolcott," Rhiannon answered.

"Wolcott Manor?" Dante repeated, becoming more confused. "Rhiannon, what did Cliffton tell you of Wolcott Manor?"

"He said my father and mother were the Baron and Baroness and they'd been found guilty of believing themselves capable of becoming animals, of some sort of heresy. A raid destroyed the manor, leaving nothing in its wake and many were killed. Cliffton implied that their belief was treacherous, that the people living in Wolcott Manor had received just punishment as a result."

"Are you certain it was Wolcott?"

"Aye, I've reason to believe the destruction and burning of the manor was true."

Dante nodded. "I am confused, Rhiannon. You claimed Baron and Baroness Wolcott were your parents. That is not possible."

"It isn't? Mayhap my parents are still alive."

"I don't know if they are. I've never been to England. What I know of Abcynians in England has been relayed to me through a friend I'd grown up with. Colton Forrester, Baron Wolcott, died in 1453. That would have been several years before you were born. Even if you're older than one hundred it would not change your parentage. He and his wife could not have been your parents."

Rhiannon wrinkled her brow, tempting him to kiss the tension away. "Why do you say this?"

"Wolcott belonged to the Forresters," he said. "Except for Garrick Forrester's wife, Aisley, the Forresters are full-blooded panthera pardus Abcynians."

"I don't understand. What does that mean?"

"They can change into leopards."

Worry crossed Rhiannon's lovely face. "There are more than just those like us?"

"Si, panthera Abcynians share the blood and souls of lions, leopards and tigers."

"Tigers," she squeaked, her eyes rounded with fear. "Are they dangerous?"

"You needn't think such a thing. They are rare amongst our kind and so reclusive only the king of our kind, Lucien, knows their identities."

"Why?"

"It is their nature to remain secretive. Rhiannon, I will explain everything you need to know about our race. For now I must consider what you've said about Wolcott. I think it would be wise to send a message to Garrick Forrester, known in England now as the fifth Earl of Danford. I'd also send word to Lucien's eldest son, now the Marquess of Raybourne. As a Forrester, Danford will know best what happened in Wolcott. But the Marquess would have more influence over the Queen should we need it." While he spoke, something in Rhiannon's eyes changed. "What is it? Are you in pain?"

"Nay, I think...I think I remember something, Dante. Mercy, I do," she said with nervous excitement, tapping her temple as she spoke.

Fascinated, Dante urged her to continue. "What do you remember, *cara mia*?"

"A face, a little girl's face," she revealed, bringing her eyes back to his. They'd softened with delight. "Her name was Angelica. She was sweet and gentle. She was older than me but younger here," she confessed, again tapping her temple. "She was my friend. Angelica and her lady's maid, Rachel, were my friends. I was closer to Angelica because she would come and visit me often."

"This is good, *si*?" he praised, pleased for Rhiannon's sake. The rush of memory had not alarmed her. Mary had warned that Rhiannon tended to shy away from the past.

"It is good, Dante. Do you suppose—" She fell silent, her countenance suddenly growing sad. "What if Angelica died during that raid? I'll never forgive myself if something happened to her because of something I had done."

Tears erased Rhiannon's pleasure in a simple memory. Dante could do nothing other than grasp her waist and pull her against him. Holding her, his concern was to ease his mate's burden. "Hush, *cara*. Do not weep for what we do not know." Curling his right arm about her hips to hold her, he buried his nose into the curve of her neck, inhaling her spicy scent. "You are not at fault for what happened in Wolcott. I'll not permit you to berate yourself. I cannot say I know the Forresters well. But it seems they're important to your family. I shall send word to Raybourne and Danford, see what we can learn. It seems the wisest course."

"Mayhap we should just go to Valiant and ask him what occurred in Wolcott fifty years ago."

Dante tensed, uncertain if he heard her right. "What did you say?"

"I suggested we go to Valiant. The Marquess of Raybourne would know what happened to my parents and Wolcott."

Freeing her from his grasp, he stared down at her upturned face. "How is it you know his name?" he demanded, his heart pounding so fiercely he feared something within his chest had been split in two.

"Whose?" Rhiannon stared at him in confusion. Her beautiful amber eyes softened with concern for him rather than reflecting lingering affection for the man Dante considered a friend, a man who'd been like a brother to him. But time and distance between England and Florence had caused them to grow apart.

"The Marquess of Raybourne is Valiant Montgomery, Lucien Hunter's eldest son."

"It is?" she asked. She did not seem to notice his jealousy. Dante was grateful. "Why do they not share the same surname?"

"Lucien believes his male offspring should choose their surname upon reaching adulthood," Dante answered, shoving his hands through his hair. "That doesn't matter. What matters is that you remembered someone else from your past, Rhiannon. You remembered Valiant."

Rhiannon's tears dried and a sweet smile lifted the corners of her wide mouth. "I suppose I did but I don't recall much more than his name. I remember Angelica with far more fondness."

"Then you must not have known Valiant well."

"I do not think I spent much time with him," she said, her eyes growing distant. "Wait, the Marquess of Raybourne visited Wolcott from time to time. He was a tawny-haired giant and too beautiful for a man. Of course I was very young at the time. He could have been average in height and fair of face."

Dante found his breath again. "You remember him correctly. Since you did, I think it is best to send word to Valiant and Lord Danford. Both will know what became of your parents."

"I hope so," she said. "You don't suppose he is my father, do you?"

It was a fear that he'd worried about initially. But looking upon her, he didn't think so. "While you do possess Valiant's coloring, I doubt he is."

"Why? He is lion like you, like me, isn't he?"

"He is. But I doubt Valiant has ever fathered a child. If you were his, you would have stronger panthera leo traits and abilities. It is more likely that he or Lucien converted your parents, which would explain why your family has a close connection to the Forresters. Valiant trained for knighthood as Garrick Forrester's squire. He has remained close to him ever since."

"Then you were right," she decided. "Sending messages would help. Would it be easier to go to Raybourne or Danford and learn what happened from them?"

Dante shook his head. "I cannot leave Florence. I've obligations to fulfill before we can rush to England."

"You're right. It was selfish of me to think of my needs and—" Dante silenced her with his thumb to her lips, rubbing his blunt nail along the fullness of her lower lip.

"You are not selfish. You are eager to reclaim your life," he whispered, continuing the caress. She had the sweetest lips. He longed to taste them. "But leaving Florence before hearing Valiant's or Garrick's response could put you in jeopardy. I hardly think Clifton and Linwood have refrained from searching for you."

Rhiannon attempted to pull away. He was not ready to set her free and held her closer. He knew his apprentices were near. The aroma of sugar-coated pancakes baking in the hearth wafted over his senses. His maids were working in the room above his workshop. He would do nothing to risk Rhiannon's reputation. But she needed to hear him.

"Aye, they've sent men after me," Rhiannon said. "Mary and I were fortunate to reach Florence before they caught us."

"Dio, I was afraid of that," he admitted. "You will remain here for now. I cannot put you at risk. I will send word to Valiant and Garrick Forrester as soon as the missives can be written. Fair warning, *cara*, it could take several *la settimane* before word is returned. In the meantime, I will complete my commissions and teach you of our kind. When it is safe, we will to England together."

"Is that wise? Would leaving Florence ruin your reputation as an artist?"

"My reputation is secure. I've the patronage of Cosimo de' Medici. I am to meet him this eve and will explain your situation. One of his men will take our messages to the Marquess of Raybourne and the Earl of Danford."

"The de' Medici are a powerful family. Are you certain he will help?"

"He will. He knows enough of our kind to understand my desire to make a name for myself in Florence."

"A de' Medici knows of the Abcynian race?"

Spying the worry within her eyes, Dante bent closer. "I suppose you do not realize that many have learned of our kind. But much like the Romans based their origins on Romulus and Remus, twins cast in the River Tiber and rescued by a she-wolf, Abcynians were given similar legends."

"You speak of mythology. Ancient Rome and Greece believed in many gods and goddesses. None of those myths are considered true any longer."

"Weren't the Romans real?"

"Of course they were. Regardless, I doubt Cosimo de' Medici knows of your ability to change form. I mean...I assume that you can. Can't you?"

"Si." Before Dante could say more the scent of buckthorn berries warned that Marcello approached. "My eldest apprentice nears."

Rhiannon looked about, spied Marcello and smiled.

"Marcello," she greeted. "It is good to see you again. It was kind of you to bring wine to me earlier."

"I'm pleased you are feeling better, milady," Marcello addressed. Dante noticed the apprentice's eyes scanning Rhiannon's face. "Your color has returned. It is most unusual for an Englishwoman. They tend to be too pale."

"I think I am quite ordinary, Marcello," she said.

"You misunderstand. You are lovely," Marcello replied, drawing nearer. "I would like to paint you. I hope you'll permit me when I have my own shop."

"That is sweet, but —"

"Marcello, Rhiannon is my intended and has agreed to pose for me. It is I who shall paint her."

"How can you claim such a thing, milord?" Rhiannon admonished, redness swarming into her cheeks.

"Milord?" Marcello repeated, glancing at Dante.

"You needn't worry," Rhiannon said, laughing, the sound sweet and gentle. "I realize Signore Luciano is untitled. But sometimes he acts with the arrogance of a noble."

"You needn't explain anything to my apprentice, *cara mia*," Dante assured. "For now, Rhiannon, I must return to my work."

"Can I watch for a moment or two?" she asked.

"I would like that," Dante said.

Glaring at Marcello, Dante led Rhiannon across the room. Above them, a crash resounded through the stone and wooden home that doubled as his workshop. Though it was four stories high, large enough to accommodate a large Florentine family and

separate from neighboring homes, the ruckus above would have been heard outside. The crash was soon followed by a series of feminine curses, all of which were heaped upon the boys.

"Andrea, Sergio, would either of you be responsible for the shouting above?" Dante demanded.

The two middle apprentices surged forward, each darting wary glances at him. "We did nothing," they chorused in Italian.

"Signore Luciano, I think there is trouble," Mary announced, rushing down the steps and into the workshop. "One of the maids, Ysabel, is threatening to leave. If she does there will just be Serena and myself left to tend your home."

"I am not surprised," Dante said. Ysabel's departure was inevitable. She had a tendency to rant and rave at the smallest trouble. His middle apprentices prided themselves on creating it. "What's caused her upset?"

"I am uncertain," Mary said. "I do not understand her."

"All we can do is let her leave. I will see she receives the proper coin owed and recommend her to another house."

Dante heard Marcello laugh. "Ysabel has been in a temper because you haven't bedded her yet," the boy whispered, intending to make himself sound more of a man.

"My goodness, Dante, you've bedded your maids?" Rhiannon questioned. Her face flushed. "To think I was beginning to trust you."

Sending Marcello away with a wave of his hand, Dante caught Rhiannon's wrist before she could run away. She'd already begun to trust him. He would not allow her to think the worse of him.

"Let go of me!" Rhiannon growled, a low, agitated sound emerging from her throat. Almost immediately she realized what she'd done and slapped her free hand to her mouth. "I growled, I fear I am turning into a beast."

"It is all right, *cara*. No one else heard you. You were upset, jealous of a maid, you are not a beast. For that matter, you've no reason to be jealous. I have never bedded any maid in this household."

"Mayhap not, Marcello made it seem a common occurrence for women to grace your bed."

Dante promised he'd never lie to her. He planned to honor it. He'd not been an innocent since he was a youth. "What I've done in the past does not affect our future. I'll never betray you with another woman. Panthera Abcynians remain faithful to their mates for their lifetimes."

"It matters not if you do." Rhiannon tugged on her elbow until he consented to let her go. "I think I am entirely wrong for you."

"That is not possible. I told you when we met that you are my future, Rhiannon."

Rhiannon stared up at him for quite some time, leaving him wishing he did not have work to do. "How can I be your future, Dante? I do not have a past."

Concerned, he touched his hand to her face, smiling when she permitted him to cup her jaw. "You have a past. You may have trouble remembering but moments ago you recalled two childhood friends and Valiant Montgomery. More memories will follow. They may come all at once or little by little. But they will come and I will be there when they do."

He studied her face, memorizing the curve of her jaw, her wide mouth and the arch of her cheekbones. He longed to paint her, to bed her, to reveal to her a past he was sure would return to her soon. As he watched, she began to smile, the light of determination calming her jealousy.

"You are right, Dante. I am glad I followed my instinct to come to Florence. You can help me."

"*Si*, with pride, *cara mia*," he said. He grinned, well pleased with his mate. Enjoying the feel of her skin, he skimmed his thumb along her jaw, regretting that he'd have to send her away until his work was finished. "Go and eat, Rhiannon. Serena has shown Mary how to bake sugar pancakes in the hearth. Can you not smell them?" He inhaled as he spoke, noticing she'd done the same. She nodded. "You will enjoy them. They are favored by many in Florence."

"I am hungry. Dante, I haven't seen you work. May I visit later?" she asked even though she'd already withdrawn to the stairway.

"When you've eaten your fill return to me," he invited.

Rhiannon smiled, nodding. "Would you like me to bring you anything to eat?"

His stomach roared at that moment, giving his answer. She laughed in earnest as she swung away and rushed up the stairs.

* * * * *

Edgar Wynthrop, Earl of Clifton, stood in front of Dante Luciano's painting and scolded himself for spending two months searching for Rhiannon. The answer to where she'd gone hung upon the wall all along.

The door to Linwood's solar opened and the Baron shuffled into the room. "It's about time you answered my summons, Linwood. I dislike waiting."

"As I dislike being summoned to my solar," Linwood said. "Unlike some of us, I am a true noble. Pray remember in the future."

"I've not forgotten," Edgar replied, turning to face his co-conspirator. "Everything you have, from your youthful countenance to this castle, is yours because of my doing. Do not forget what I've done."

Linwood crossed his arms across his chest. "If you plan to inform Her Majesty about my favoritism for Protestantism, do so. A word from my lips will condemn you for stealing the identity of the man you killed to become the Earl of Clifton."

Mayhap Baron Linwood was not as easily manipulated as Edgar thought. "Come now, are we to battle against each other when we have more pressing concerns? We must find Rhiannon or we may lose her forever."

Linwood eased his defensive stance and walked further into the solar. "You're right. We need to strategize. I've just received word from one of my men. Rhiannon has not gone to Raybourne, Danford or Somerton. It seems as though she and Mary went to London and disappeared."

"So we have a maid to blame for helping her escape," Edgar commented.

"Mary is wiser than either of us realized," Linwood admitted. "Had I known she'd truly befriended Rhiannon, I would have sent her away long ago."

"How is it you did not notice her affection for the girl? All the other servants feared her. We now know that Mary kept the rest of your staff from harming her."

"I was fooled. We are fortunate Mary didn't suspect the effect gold had on Rhiannon until quite recently. She never knew I'd been flavoring Rhiannon's food with nepeta cataria."

Linwood sounded proud of his successful use of an herb that affected housecats the way too much ale affected a grown man. Unlike their distant cousins, Abcynians were adversely affected by nepeta cataria. If used often the initial feeling of well-being and happiness gave way to sleepiness and frightening, oftentimes vivid dreams. The amount used in food tended to make them malleable and susceptible to suggestion. Edgar had used generous portions of the herb when Rhiannon was in his care, creating a fear of the past by suggesting ferocious images while she floated through the herb-induced haze.

But the herb had to be taken every day to be effective. Rhiannon had been without it for a while now, and her fear of the past might very well recede.

"Cliffton, are you still with me?" Linwood asked.

"I was wondering how soon Rhiannon's memory would begin to return. Gold weakened the Abcynian in her. Nepeta cataria contained the panther. The longer she goes without eating the herb or wearing gold the stronger she will become."

Linwood grimaced. "I'm aware of that. What do you suggest we do next, milord?"

"We go to Florence."

"Might I ask why?"

Edgar faced the painting. "Rhiannon was fascinated with this portrait."

"Aye, she likes art. But she'd only seen that once."

"I spied her in here the next morn. She could not take her eyes away from it, nor keep from touching it. It was as instinctive as purring is for panthera Abcynians."

Linwood frowned, crossing the room in formidable strides. "If you're right we have you to blame for her decision to run away. She'd never have known about Lucien Hunter if you hadn't insisted on revealing Luciano's painting to her."

"It was not the Abcynian king who drew her to the painting. It was the artist," Edgar revealed.

"Bloody hell, I'd not thought she'd even concern herself with a painter."

"How foolish can you be, Linwood? You saw that she'd like art by letting her learn about it. You and I both know Dante Luciano is more than a painter. He is old enough to be considered an Elder and powerful enough to protect Rhiannon Mathews from undue harm."

"Do you believe it is possible Luciano is her mate?"

Edgar didn't want to think it was possible. Rhiannon was his.

Fifty years ago, he'd wielded the blade that would have sliced her vulnerable throat. Instead of giving her mercy while she screamed from numerous savage wounds inflicted by an Abcynian traitor, he wrapped a cloth about her skull and began tending to the worst of her injuries.

She owed him for sparing her life. He intended to make her pay for it. She would warm his bed as his wife and obey his commands. With her at his side, he would defeat his enemies.

Fighting his temper, Edgar swung away from the painting. "I refuse to concern myself with a Florentine artist. All that matters is getting Rhiannon back. Pack your things, Linwood. We'll go to Florence and bring her home."

Chapter Five

While eating a sugary pancake, Rhiannon sighed and reminded herself that devouring the treat would not be ladylike. "Hmm," she murmured as she swallowed.

She'd come to love the pancakes since her arrival in Florence a sennight ago, almost as much as she'd come to love the city itself.

She and Mary had taken frequent walks to the *piazzas*, learned the intricacy of paths, streets and homes that seemed to flow from the *Piazza della Signoria* and its crown jewel, the *Palazzo Vecchio*. The streets and buildings surrounding the Cathedral of *Santa Maria Del Fiore* with its mighty orange dome were fascinating.

Twice they'd been so captivated by the architecture and artwork adorning the city they had wandered far from home. By fortune Rhiannon's sense of smell led them back to Dante's workshop in the *Piazza della Il leone*.

Now as she savored the sweet cake, she waited to hear him invite her back down to Dante's workshop. While she'd tried to watch him work as often as she dared, she'd worried her presence was distracting and kept busy by assisting Mary and Selena with the housework. Tending a house filled with boys and a very large man was not an easy task, requiring each woman to do their part.

The few times she did watch Dante she realized she was in the presence of greatness. There were times when he approached his painting with an indolent laziness that caused her to worry her lower lip, but he'd touch a brush to his creation with the precision of a god creating his world.

Bella, per favore viene. Dante spoke within her mind, his voice as angelic and clear as if he were standing beside her. *I have finished.*

"He's done," Rhiannon announced to Selena and Mary, brushing her fingers together and standing without any noticeable weakness. She hadn't felt weak since Dante removed her gold bracelet.

"Rhiannon, wait until he sends for you," Mary advised. "You must remember not go to a man without proper invitation."

"Oh, but he..." Worried that she'd almost given away an Abcynian secret to the Florentine maid, she froze.

"Rhiannon, come at once," Dante summoned from the stairway leading to his workshop.

"I'll be just a moment," she said and smoothed her trembling hands down the front of her light blue surcoat. To Selena and Mary, she inclined her head. "If you will excuse me. I am eager to see what he's done."

As had become their habit whenever she entered his domain, Dante waited for her at the base of the stairs, his left hand outstretched to receive her. The moment his fingers wrapped about hers, her trembling nervousness ceased and she could not fight a smile.

"It is good to see you looking happy, *cara mia*," he said as he guided her into the workshop. "I've seen you smile many times since you arrived and like it very much."

"It feels good to smile," she confessed. He looked princely, though his tunic and breeches were disarrayed and dotted with blobs of dried paint. His hair had been mussed a time or two, revealing streaks of yellow lake and azure throughout his beautiful hair. "I've been eager to see your painting, Signore Luciano. Won't you show it to me?"

"I'm surprised you do not know what the painting looks like," Dante said. "You've visited my workshop several times over the last *la settimana*."

"I didn't look at the painting much. It was watching you work that held my fascination."

Dante nodded, looking pleased by what she said, although he did not direct her toward the painting. "You've given me the sweetest of compliments. I am grateful. But you still insist upon formality when addressing me. I'll not reveal the painting if you do not use my name."

"I use your name," Rhiannon said.

"You have, a few times, *si*," he agreed. "I'd like to hear it more. Say my name and I will show you what I've done."

Rhiannon realized this was a problem she didn't know how to face. It was true that she'd slipped a time or two when speaking to him and used his given name. Mary had cautioned it wasn't wise for a woman to act too familiar with a man unless they were betrothed. Was it too familiar to say a man's name aloud?

"Rhiannon," he said when she remained silent.

"Forgive me. I do not understand why I must call you Dante before I can view your painting."

Dante's smile faded, the gleam in his eyes becoming more intense. A shiver of delight arched its way from her heart to her womb, causing the very center of her being to pulse with something she could not quite name. "Now see? You have called me by my name. Regardless of what your maid has said, it is all right to use Dante at will, Rhiannon." As he spoke, she attempted to back away, to tug her hand from his firm, callused grip. An arch of his princely brow warned against retreating.

"Do not back away," he commanded, his voice caressing her spine like silk, making her want to close her eyes and savor the sound deep in her soul. "Come and see my painting, *cara mia*. Your opinion is needed."

Rhiannon inclined her head in agreement. She couldn't deny herself the opportunity to view the painting, failing to understand why Dante Luciano would need

her approval. He'd already gained the patronage of one of the most powerful men in all of Europe.

She chose to remain quiet, allowing Dante to lead her across the workshop to an enormous canvas panel. The apprentices were cleaning brushes and arranging the workshop for the next project and did little more than smile in greeting before turning back to their tasks.

"Be honest," Dante said when they reached the panel.

"I intend to be," she promised and lifted her eyes to the canvas. Her breath hitched. Her mouth gaped open as she took in her first view of Dante's completed masterpiece.

"Dante, your painting is wonderful!" she exclaimed, placing her hand to her pounding heart.

"You like it then," he purred, so close beside her she could feel his heat.

"Aye, I like it. Saying so seems...inadequate."

"Cosimo de' Medici commissioned this as part of a series of panels portraying Abcynian mythology. What do you see?"

"I don't understand."

"What do you see when you look at the panel?"

Rhiannon risked a step closer but kept her hands behind her back. She studied the painting for a moment, breathing in the essence of buckthorn berries, linseed oil, lapis lazuli and cochineal insects. The drying colors of preference for the day had been yellow lake, carmine and a deep blue.

"I am uncertain what I can tell you, Dante," Rhiannon said, still concentrating on the painting as Dante stepped behind her. Much to her surprise, he brushed his hands from her elbows to her waist and rested his chin on her shoulder.

"Tell me whatever comes to mind," he said.

"There are three ancient and wise men, each dressed in blue and silver robes. Their snowy beards and long graying tresses reveal their age and their broad shoulders bear the burden of power and responsibility. On first glance I'd say they remind me of what Senators might have looked like during the time of the Holy Roman Empire. The ground beneath their feet is covered in varying hues of tall green grasses, yellow wild flowers and reddish-brown earth. A gigantic tree casts a shadow down upon the men. A lion and lioness stand before them. The lioness is placing a boar near the men. Some might think she is seeking their approval. But it seems as though she is showing them how to hunt. The male keeps guard and his tawny mane looks so real I think a breeze might ruffle it." As she spoke, becoming more and more entranced by the painting and the intricate detail depicted on canvas, Rhiannon found herself wanting to touch the lion's fur, hoping to ascertain if it was real.

"Do you see anything else?" Dante's hands moved from her hips to encircle her waist, his chin remaining on her shoulder as he whispered in her ear. His breath fanned

down her neck, distracting her from the painting. Her senses became more and more aware of him. "Look at the tree behind the men."

Struggling to focus, she breathed deep. "There's something in the tree, something hidden amongst the green leaves and branches. It is a leopard," she said, catching a glimpse of the yellow-and-black-spotted leopard's long, silken tail and the shape of his regal face as he watched the goings-on beneath his hiding place.

"The grasses," Dante said, pointing to the right of the men, where the grass stood highest, reaching their shoulders.

"Oh my," she uttered.

Fascinated, she stared at the pink nose and black and orange markings of a tiger's face. His almond-shaped eyes were a startling golden hue. As she studied the painting further, it dawned on her what she was viewing.

The painting was brilliant, but it was a story first and foremost. "If I were to guess the meaning, I'd say the three men are Abcynian leaders or advisors. Perhaps they are the eldest of Abcynian kind. Because they stand near the animals, I would also think that at one time in history Abcynians had not been capable of changing form." Aware that the apprentices were still in the workshop she was careful to whisper. "Am I right?"

"Si, Rhiannon."

"Who are they?" she asked.

"They are the earliest Council of Elders." Dante pointed to the broadest of the elders. His hair was as silver as the robes he wore and the blue scarf draped about his shoulders and silver crown gracing his forehead pronounced him as royalty. "This is Lucien Hunter's *il bisnonno*, his great-grandfather, Phoebus, considered the first monarch of our kind."

"What of the others?" she asked, fascinated with the history she was viewing through Dante Luciano's masterpiece.

"Standing to his right is Tarchon, Garrick Forrester's great-grandfather. The man on his left is the least known by name. Legend claims it was Nicolai. Do you see anything else?"

"The leopard hovers above Tarchon. Nicolai stands closest to the tall grasses and the tiger's eyes are slanted toward him. The lioness has placed her prey nearest to Phoebus." Rhiannon stared a little longer, seeing the beginnings of the race she belonged to and wondered if she'd ever accept it until she trusted her knowledge of the past.

"What are you thinking, Rhiannon?"

"You already know," she said.

"I'd rather hear you aloud."

She stiffened to free herself from the circle of Dante's arms. He tightened his arms and aligned his tall, lean body against hers, trapping her close.

"Tell me," he urged when she remained quiet.

"I look upon this magnificent painting and see the mythological history. But I cannot relate to it. It's as if something within me does not want to know the history of Abcynian kind." It wasn't until she'd given voice to her words that she realized how true they were.

"You don't believe that, do you?"

"Aye, Dante, I speak true." Rhiannon managed to turn about until she faced him. "Mayhap I do not want to know the truth about Abcynians because there is something so terrible in the past that I fear discovering what it is. I fear it's something I have done wrong. The truth of that shames me more than I can say."

"Rhiannon—" Dante began, interrupted when movement behind him brought his head about. "Marcello, take the boys above stairs for something to eat."

It did not take long for the boys to leave the workshop.

When they were alone, Rhiannon found herself further drawn into the protection of Dante's arms. "Dante, you shouldn't hold me so," she remonstrated.

"I should hold you closer," he said. "I wanted to speak to you without having to whisper."

"Couldn't you speak in my mind?"

"I could. I wanted to be certain you listened." Placing one arm about her waist, Dante shifted back a step and touched his left hand to her chin. "There is nothing to be ashamed of in admitting that you're afraid. It's all right to be. You've discovered you are part of an ancient race capable of changing into panthers, all while maintaining a youthful countenance at nearly one hundred years old. Anyone would be frightened. Sometimes even I am frightened by what I could do if I weren't first a man capable of controlling the lion within me. I am not ashamed to admit my fears. Everyone possesses them to some extent, yours are understandable."

"You are gracious to think so." Part of her wanted to know what would happen if an Abcynian was not capable of controlling the panther and she sensed there were some who couldn't. "You're a good man, Dante Luciano. I am certain of it. You've been patient with me since my arrival and provided a way for me to learn about my past. Ever since Cliffton described the Abcynians at Wolcott Manor as deserving of the raid that led to their ruin, I worry that some of what he said could be true. Why else would I dream of frightening creatures intertwined with lions and leopards? Even worse, not only have I forgotten much of my life, the past has forgotten me."

"How could the past forget you?"

"Because the raid on Wolcott happened fifty years ago," she said. "As far as I know, my family has never attempted to find me. Even if my parents are dead, wouldn't I have had cousins, uncles or staff that would look for the daughter of a baron?" Tears, unbidden and unwanted, blurred her vision, forcing Rhiannon to turn her face away from Dante's compelling golden eyes. "What could I have done to make them abandon me to men like Cliffton and Linwood?"

"Rhiannon, you are sweet and beautiful and everything a woman should be." Dante caught her back to him before she could pull away. "Were your parents anything other than good, decent people, you'd never be all that I see and more."

Rhiannon fought a smile, his flattery humbling her. "You are too generous. Sometimes even the most beautiful creatures are deadly."

"*Si*, you are not among them." Keeping her close, he bridged the remaining gap between them, resting his forehead against hers. "I understand your fears, *cara mia*. This feeling you have for the past could be explained."

"What do you mean?"

"You'd mentioned frightening dreams. It is possible you'd witnessed a full-blooded Abcynian changing form. The change is frightening and is one of the reasons Abcynians cannot change until they are two hundred years old. Sometimes Abcynians are much older before they can change. Most will only do so when the moon is full. It is the easiest time to change from man to panther. We've yet to understand why the moon has such an effect."

Rhiannon listened and thought he might be right. Still she was certain there had been something evil in Wolcott and could not determine what it was. "Dante, I believe what you've said. I am still concerned about the malevolence I feel whenever those images come to mind."

"Together we will learn what happened to frighten you so," he said, offering a coaxing smile. She did so love how his mustache and beard framed his defined, masculine mouth. Oftentimes she wondered what it would have been like to experience more than the chaste kiss he had given her once. "*Dio*, Rhiannon, do not tempt me now. I'd like to wash and change. Would you join me for a walk through the city of Florence when I'm more presentable?"

His invitation sent a warm, shivery pulse through her abdomen, tightening just behind her navel. Feeling a little nervous, she smiled. "If it would please you, Dante, I would very much like to walk with you."

Upon accepting her response with a nod, he freed her. Hoping he wouldn't know how eager she was to walk with him, she braced her shoulder at the gentle touch of his finger to her cheek. Carefully he smoothed a stray piece of straight blonde hair back behind her ear. His touch was so right and confident she longed for more.

"I shall join you soon."

"Do not rush," she said. "You've spent the better part of a sennight working on your painting. I do not even know if you've slept an entire night through. But you are deserving of a bath and the time to yourself. I'll even arrange to have a tub prepared for you."

"I would appreciate that. May I escort you up the stairs?"

"Aye, pray do," she said. With a wide, masculine grin, he moved to her side and captured her elbow in a gentleman's grip.

* * * * *

Dante settled into clean, hot water and leaned back against the tub. He knew how dirty he could get when he was working and now felt the strain on his muscles after creativity waned. But rather than remaining in the bath for the better part of the day, he wanted to rejoin his mate.

Smiling as he bathed, he felt a bit like a boy preparing to impress a girl for the first time. Normally at ease with women, he found himself enjoying the anticipation of being with Rhiannon. With her he had the opportunity to explore life, Florence and the Abcynian race through her eyes. It was both daunting and a privilege to accompany her on the journey of what amounted to her own rebirth.

Just the same, Dante knew that waiting to make Rhiannon his would prove more and more difficult as the days went by. During the last *la settimana* he was able to keep his distance because finishing his painting had required most of his attention. He was pleased that she hadn't uttered a complaint.

Before he began his final piece representing Abcynian mythology for Cosimo de' Medici, Dante intended to spend as much time in Rhiannon's company as he could.

He'd already claimed Rhiannon by Abcynian law. Her acceptance of their ability to speak mind-to-mind solidified their union and would be respected as a marriage vow by other Abcynians. But she knew very little about their kind. For her to be comfortable as his mate she would want to be married in the eyes of the Church and the law. He wanted the same.

Washing his hair and soaping his body, he wondered how long he would have to wait before they married. He'd arranged for messengers to go to England as he'd promised. But it would take many *la settimana's* before word was returned. While they waited he intended to make Rhiannon his betrothed, have their banns read according to custom and secure her as his wife before he completed his next painting. He wouldn't leave Florence until she was his wife. It was the best way to keep her safe.

A floor below Dante could hear the murmurings of his apprentices, maids and his mate. Rhiannon's voice reached him far and above the others and his manhood hardened simply by hearing her speak. Ignoring what he wanted, he rinsed and left the bath, the cooler air of the chambers helping to ease his desire.

Drying himself with a toweling sheet, he wrapped the edges around his waist and sorted through his clothing. Amongst his clothing bolts of fabric and gowns he'd purchased for her, he looked about, finding himself enmeshed in the essence that was Rhiannon. Cassia, silks, softened wool, the lingering scent of sustenance and a female Abcynian's musk lingered about the room.

Inhaling deep, he appreciated her scent. Silently he vowed the next time he slept in his bed, Rhiannon would join him.

"*Si, Rhiannon,*" he whispered to himself. "I have lent you my bedchamber until we are wed. But already you've made it ours."

With that thought in mind, Dante selected *argento* breeches and undertunic and a slashed *azzurro* doublet. He wondered if Rhiannon would approve then laughed at himself.

Not long ago he'd been unaware that his mate existed. Now he couldn't imagine what would have happened if his panthera leo senses had not detected her in the *Piazza della Signoria*. She might have become lost or recaptured by the men who'd kept her imprisoned.

Dante was certain the Earl of Cliffton had not forgone his plans for Rhiannon. He had not kept her away from her family for fifty years because of affection. His reasons were foul and Dante suspected the Earl had much to do with Rhiannon's fears of the past.

It was the belief that the Earl of Cliffton had not stolen Rhiannon's virginity that kept Dante from finding the man and putting his head on a pike after he ripped the man limb from limb. But revenge had been the downfall of many Saturians and Abcynians alike. He'd not seek such measures if Rhiannon's past and family were restored. She had to come first, above everything, even his artwork.

Refusing to spend more time contemplating Cliffton, he hurried through the last of his preparations and rushed out of the room. Reminding himself to slow down he descended the stairs, Rhiannon's sweet laugh drawing him into the room.

"Dante, I am surprised to see you so soon," Rhiannon greeted, leaving the center table and coming toward him. "Tell me you did not rush."

The chuckles of his apprentices made him scowl. Ignoring the boys, he offered his hand to Rhiannon. She accepted without reservation, making him smile. "I enjoyed the bath long enough. I'd much prefer your company. Are you ready?"

"Aye," she said, flushing. "I cannot wait to see Florence with you. Will you show me some of the artwork?"

"It would be my privilege." Well pleased, he bowed low and placed his hand at her elbow. Rhiannon's smile deepened, revealing a streak of sugar on her upper lip and he wanted to kiss her. To sample her lips at that moment would be delicious and it took all of his strength to resist.

"Allow me to accompany the two of you," Mary Baker said.

Dante frowned and turned away from Rhiannon's tempting lips. He wanted to teach her all the ways a woman could please a man with her mouth. Instinct warned that Rhiannon would enjoy following her passionate panthera leo nature.

"On this occasion I shall ask that you remain here," Dante replied to Mary.

"A lady should be chaperoned," she insisted.

"Rhiannon and I need time together. You mustn't worry. I promise to behave as a gentleman while escorting her about Florence."

Rhiannon stepped forward. "Mary," she said. "I'd like to walk with Dante."

"Very well, if Rhiannon does not return within a reasonable time I shall be most upset," Mary granted.

Dante expected nothing less. He was relieved to know Mary had been caring for Rhiannon for the last twenty years. However, he wished it had taken the maid sooner to realize that Baron Linwood was acting as Rhiannon's jailor not her guardian.

"Rhiannon and I will return home when she is ready. Shall we go, *cara*?" Dante asked, turning to Rhiannon and escorting her out of his home, following the steps that led to the circular *piazza*.

Stopping at the last step, he looked at his mate. Ornamental lions graced the short twin walls on either side of the stairs. Marveling at how right she looked as they stood very close to a statue of a large male lion, he stared like a youth.

Wanting a taste of her, Dante touched his hand to her chin. For the moment the *piazza* was empty. A few pigeons fluttered about the circle, one landing atop the lion nearest to them.

"Rhiannon, there's something I must do before we can progress."

He felt her tremble. Her smile promised she wasn't going to turn away. "What, Dante?"

"Come closer," he said, guiding her closer with his hand at her chin.

"Dante?" Rhiannon's breath caught, her amber eyes widening as she drew in his scent. Her panthera leo senses were growing stronger, she was scenting him, determining if he meant danger or pleasure.

"You shall see, just come a little closer," he urged.

"Is this proper?" she teased.

He dropped his hand to her waist and tucked her close, keeping her protected by his taller, broader body.

"Mayhap not," he admitted, leaning closer. "I must taste you, *bella*." The sugar on her lip drew his attention. He felt Rhiannon tense but she seemed to reconsider and lifted her head for his kiss.

Refusing to rush, he brushed his lips back and forth across the petal softness of hers. The sugar felt rough, tasting sweet as he swept the tip of his tongue along the top swell of her lip. Intrigued with the flavor of sugar and cassia, he sought more, growling in triumph when Rhiannon hummed and touched her tongue to his.

The responsive innocence of her kiss rocked Dante back onto his heels. Never had he wanted something more than to devour a woman's mouth and brand it as his own. Somehow he slowed, managing to follow the withdrawal of her tongue into the warm, wet silk of her mouth before the quiet footsteps of a woman and two children reached them.

Fighting for control, Dante withdrew. Sensing Rhiannon's instant worry as to why he did not continue their kiss, he placed a kiss to her forehead. "It is all right, Rhiannon. I've no intention of allowing your reputation to be compromised."

Rhiannon pulled back and Dante permitted her to. "Pardon, what do you mean?"

Dante frowned. "Can't you hear their footsteps?"

"Whose?" she asked and took a moment to look around. As if testing herself, she looked up at him. "Wait, I hear them. One set of footprints is soft but firm. It's a woman. The others are her children."

"What else can you sense about them?" he questioned, sniffing at the air.

"What else?" she mumbled, mimicking Dante by scenting the air. "I smell wool."

"Well done, your panthera senses are growing stronger. You are about to meet our neighbor's wife, Signora Emilia Casale, and their two children Rachele and Cadenza. Her husband is a wool merchant."

A moment later, Signora Casale rushed toward them with her children close behind. "Signore Luciano, you have not emerged from your home in days. Am I to assume you have completed your next painting?"

"*Si*, Signora Casale, I have finished."

Emilia smiled, patting her girls on the head before turning her eyes on Rhiannon, who'd ducked behind his shoulders upon their approach. Dante felt the heat staining Rhiannon's cheeks and gave her a moment to calm her racing heartbeat.

"Who have you there, Signore?" Emilia asked.

"Signorina Hunter," he said, hoping Rhiannon would not be offended by his use of Lucien's surname as her own until they discovered her true identity. "Lady Rhiannon, permit me to introduce you to our neighbor."

Rhiannon had calmed by then and came about his shoulder. "It is lovely to meet you, Signora Casale," she said. "Signore Luciano told me that your husband is a wool merchant. You must make beautiful fabrics and gowns."

"I do." Dante watched Emilia's eyes jump from Rhiannon to him, her conclusions as to who Rhiannon was to him drawn. "I see you are English, Signorina. How is it you've come to Florence?"

Dante interrupted. "She is here upon my invitation."

"You've a proper chaperone with you, Signorina Hunter?" Emilia prodded, her eyes narrowed on Rhiannon's face.

"Her chaperone is inside. If you will excuse us, Signora Casale, I've the honor of escorting my intended about Florence," he said to Emilia, smiling at the children before guiding Rhiannon away.

Dante did not want to spend time in Emilia's company. Nor did he want Rhiannon to know that Signora Casale had made several attempts to enter his household for more than glimpses of his paintings. Though she was married with children, she was not averse to taking other men to her bed. As accustomed as he'd been to seducing many women before he'd met Rhiannon, he was not in the habit of bedding married ones.

It wasn't until they had escaped Emilia's presence that Dante realized Rhiannon was frowning. Glancing at her as they walked, he was surprised that she was able to

mask her thoughts from him, leaving him the impression of confusion and a hint of temper.

"Rhiannon, if you've something to say, do so," Dante encouraged, disliking when she kept herself from him.

"Who was that woman, Dante?"

"Signora Casale."

"Mayhap my question should have been who was she to you?"

Sensing Rhiannon's need for reassurance, Dante drew her to a halt beside him and faced her. "She is my neighbor."

"She was pretty and her hair was an unusual color."

"*Si*, she is pretty," he agreed, unwilling to lie. "Unlike your natural pale blonde tresses, Signora Casale lightens and adorns her locks with false hair. Image and fashion are important to her."

Rhiannon nodded, started to turn away but reconsidered when she lifted her pretty amber eyes to his. "Signora Casale is attracted to you, isn't she?"

Dante sighed. "She married a man not of her choosing and seeks happiness elsewhere."

"Pray tell me that you've not made her happy." Rhiannon frowned, the vulnerability in her eyes softening his heart.

Dante placed his hands on her shoulders and squeezed gently. "I have not. Before meeting you, my sins with women were many. Adultery was not among them."

For the longest moment, she stared at him, her eyes boring into his. Dante accepted her probing, measuring gaze.

When she smiled, his heart slammed in his chest. "Forgive me for questioning you. I've no right to do so."

"You've every right," he said, nudging her into step beside him. "You've yet to accept who I am to you. Remember that I am your mate. If you want to know something about me, ask or read my thoughts. I shall be forthright in all things. Of this, you have my word."

"Sometimes you frighten me when you say such things," Rhiannon confessed.

"That is not my intent," he said.

"Aye, I know. Remain patient with me, Dante. I know so little of what happens between a man and a woman and wonder how to behave around you. In the courtyard, you kissed me. Had Mary caught us together, she'd have reprimanded both of us. Your kiss seemed so right and natural, I couldn't help but respond. It didn't feel improper."

"Ah, *bella*, there is nothing wrong with responding to my kisses," Dante said. "Soon Mary will have nothing to reprimand us for."

Rhiannon frowned, her pout so pretty, Dante almost dragged her out of the street and sipped it from her lips. "Why wouldn't she reprimand us, Dante?"

"Mary cannot reprimand me for kissing my wife."

Beside him, Rhiannon stumbled and he caught her before she could harm herself.

"Your wife?" she echoed.

"We are mates. By Abcynian law we are man and wife. For the sake of English and Florentine law, I want us to marry as soon as we are able."

"Surely you've heard me when I said I could not marry a man when I do not know my past."

"You are learning about your past, aren't you? You've remembered three people, Rhiannon. It is only a matter of time before we have more answers to your past."

"I've remembered someone else," she admitted as they walked. Dante acknowledged several prominent Florentine merchants and smiled when they nodded at Rhiannon with approval, some with envy.

"Who would that be?"

"Lucien Hunter," she said, glancing up at him with a smile. "I met him once. I was very little. He came to the manor. I know not why. But he was much larger than Valiant and I told him he looked much like a lion."

"Rhiannon, when did you remember this?"

"This morning," she said. "I intended to tell you when you finished your painting."

"I'm pleased that you did." The two of them walked on. Dante sensed something was wrong. "Was there something else you remembered?"

"I'm uncertain. While we were in your workshop, I'd mentioned the frightening images I see whenever I think of Wolcott."

"Si, I remember."

"This morning, I was so excited to have remembered Lucien that I'd tried to recall more. Mayhap I tried too hard. I know not. But something horrible loomed in my mind, giving me to migraine."

Dante frowned. "I thought you might have been hurting. I intended to come to you but the pain eased before I reached the top stairs. I thought it best to let you rest."

"Aye, but don't you see? As soon as I looked away from the memory the pain lessened. Of course, I'd also had a chalice of sustenance and broken my fast. Perhaps good food and nourishment was all I needed." She shrugged, thinking quietly. "I cannot say what it is about Florentine food, Dante. The meals I've had since coming to your home have been the best I can recall. I'm especially fond of the sugary pancakes."

"I'm glad you're enjoying the food here. You need to eat. You are too thin."

"If Mary had been the cook while I was at Linwood, I'm certain I'd have eaten better. Baron Linwood never skimmed on providing meals. But his cooks had a tendency to use odd spices," Rhiannon said, drawing his eye. Her nose wrinkled in dislike for food she'd been given. "It isn't that mint is odd. Certain foods benefit from it I suppose, just not everything."

"Everything tasted like mint?" Dante clenched his jaw.

"Dante, you're hurting me," she told him.

He glanced at his hand on her elbow. He'd been squeezing too hard, his strength forgotten in light of what he was beginning to suspect.

"What is it? Something has upset you."

"Had your food always been flavored this way?" he demanded.

"Aye, as far back as I can remember," she said

Fury lanced through Dante's skull, threatening a rage the likes of which Rhiannon should never witness. Needing to calm the storm before he alarmed her, he breathed deep and was reassured by her cassia and Abcynian scent. "After you'd eaten, how did you feel, Rhiannon?"

Rhiannon stopped, bringing Dante around to face her once more. "Why do you ask such a thing?"

"Just tell me."

"When I was able to eat a full meal I felt as though I could float right up to heaven. Shortly after, I'd grow very tired and need to rest. It was always during a meal that I felt the strongest. Sometimes eating was impossible, especially when I'd first gone to Linwood. I'd be bedridden for days, oftentimes sennights at a time. Consuming anything was a struggle. It didn't feel good when I was forced to eat."

"Linwood made you eat?"

"Aye, he claimed it was necessary. He would have two male servants hold me still while a cook forced gruel or porridge into my mouth," she revealed. "I realize now that Baron Linwood was doing whatever Cliffton wanted. In forcing me to eat, he was obeying the Earl's command."

"It is as I feared." Dante freed Rhiannon for fear of hurting her. "I think your food was being flavored with nepeta cataria. It is a simple herb to humans and would taste like mint to you."

"You think my food was poisoned?" Rhiannon stood steady before him frowning, clearly not understanding what he was saying.

"Si, for an Abcynian with panthera blood a small amount of nepeta cataria would have caused you to feel as if you'd had too much wine or ale. When taken in larger amounts, the herb would make you prone to nightmares and visions, mayhap even memory loss."

As he spoke, Rhiannon's eyes widened in alarm. "If Linwood was poisoning me he was following the Earl of Cliffton's commands."

"Si, but do not be afraid," Dante answered, hating the look of fear that darkened her amber eyes. "The herb is not fatal." Wondering how much to reveal about nepeta cataria without causing more fear, he decided Rhiannon had a right to know everything about their kind. "If what you say is true, Cliffton found a way to guard against your Abcynian gifts with gold and your panthera traits with nepeta cataria. Now I

understand why your panthera leo nature is so young compared to your actual age. Nepeta cataria will stifle your abilities. Those you might have noticed, greater hearing, a better sense of smell, would have been dulled enough to keep you from questioning why you were able to sense things others could not."

Rhiannon nodded and cast her eyes about. "It wasn't until just before I left Linwood Castle when I started to question why I could hear conversations that were whispered in my presence." Upon bringing her eyes back to his, she attempted to smile. But Dante watched her lips tighten with worry. "There's more I should know about this herb, isn't there?"

"There is," he granted, withdrawing one hand and shoving it through his hair. "As far as I knew, Abcynians have kept nepeta cataria a secret from Saturians."

"Mayhap the man you'd told me about when I first arrived could have learned about the herb. You called him Zotikos."

"If Zotikos had known about it he'd have used it long before you were born. Cliffton must have learned of nepeta cataria through an Abcynian."

"Do you think I told him?" Rhiannon demanded, jerking free of his hand and scowling up at him. "Pray tell me you do not think I'd do such a thing."

"Calm yourself, I do not."

Rhiannon's temper waned, her lips pursed in a puzzled frown. "Then you believe someone else has given the Saturians the secret to controlling the panther within Abcynians."

"I do. Until I know you are safe from the Earl of Cliffton and whatever spies he's been using within the Abcynian race, I'll not permit another Abcynian to be alone with you."

"You mean any Abcynian who might have lived at Wolcott, including my parents if they're still alive," Rhiannon said, her jaw clenched.

"As your mate I must do all I can to protect you, even from our own kind," he vowed.

"You must cease saying such things," she warned. "I know so little about myself and about what happens between men and women. How can I be your wife when I cannot explain why I am drawn to you or why I am certain I've never been drawn to another man?"

Twice now, Rhiannon sought to understand the intricacies of a man and a woman. Dante wondered how he could explain that very few understood.

Remaining aware of the crowd around them, Dante made certain he did nothing to jeopardize Rhiannon's reputation.

"*Bella,*" he softly purred, noticing that her chin lifted at the vibrating sound. Her panthera leo half recognized his, responding just as he wanted. "You needn't understand why you are attracted to me. There isn't an explanation. All you need to do is follow your instincts where I am concerned, the rest will come."

Rhiannon's mouth opened, her lips forming a perfect circle, tempting him to bridge the slight distance he'd kept between them. "What will come?" she finally asked.

Sensing her panthera curiosity, Dante leaned a trifle closer. "Your ability to trust me," he said. "Trust will come, Rhiannon. When it does, much between us will change."

"What will change?"

Guiding her to his side and edging her toward the *Piazza della Signoria*. In the way of Abcynian mates, he said, *Suffice it to say, I've no intention of giving up my bedchamber for much longer, cara mia.*

"Mercy," she muttered, looking about them as she walked with a grace that hid her inner tremors.

Dante felt each and every one, was tempted to coax her into the nearest secluded spot. He would like nothing more than to take her into the hills beyond the city and stretch her out beneath the sun as he slid his rod deep into her hot, tight sheath.

It is selfish of me to have taken over your bedchamber. Pray forgive me. I shall ask Selena to prepare a bed for me in the room she shares with Mary, she said in their way, seeming more comfortable doing so.

Intrigued by her innocence, Dante decided Rhiannon should understand precisely what he meant. *You'll remain in my room, in my bed, Rhiannon. When next I sleep there, you will be with me.*

"Dante, cease this," Rhiannon insisted.

"As you wish," he granted.

She was right. A public courtyard was not the proper place to speak of bedding his mate, though none save Rhiannon could hear him.

For a short time, they walked in silence, both watching the crowd gathered in the *piazza*.

"There is something I wish to show you, Rhiannon," he said suddenly, guiding her toward the *Palazzo Vecchio*, the old palace once the de' Medici family seat.

Rhiannon followed but stopped abruptly, causing him to stride ahead. "Dante, there are lions over there," she whispered as if afraid to reveal what she was seeing.

"Si," he said. "Lions are an important symbol to Florence."

"I realized that the moment I arrived. I've seen many statues. Those are real."

For a moment, Dante gave her leave to observe the lions from a few yards away, enjoying her fascination. Citizens of Florence were well used to the sight of lions caged in the *piazza*.

"They seem so sad," she whispered, glancing up at him. "They've nowhere to go but back and forth."

Dante nodded. "It is difficult to watch. However if they were not here, they'd have died long ago."

"Why?"

"The male is too old to defend his mate and the lioness has never learned to hunt. She was injured at birth," he pointed out, taking Rhiannon's hand and leading her through the crowd toward the lions.

"She is missing part of her foot," Rhiannon said, spying the lioness's foot, her husky voice bringing the male's head about. He scented her panthera essence, snarling before Dante could reassure him that Rhiannon was not a threat. "I am sorry if I've alarmed you," she said to the male. "I mean her no harm."

"He isn't alarmed. He is scenting you and accepting you near his mate," Dante said. He would love to take Rhiannon's hand and guide it through the lion's full mane. "I call him Orlando, for his heroic spirit. The lioness is Leonora, for the lightness of her fur. I've used them a time or two in my paintings."

"I wish I could touch them, just once," Rhiannon said.

"You cannot touch Orlando and Leonora," he told her. "But it is possible for you to touch the others."

"You mean there are more lions?"

"There are several housed in the dungeons below the *Palazzo Vecchio*."

"I'd like to see them."

Dante meant to grant her wish. A familiar scent caught his attention and brought his head about. Just as he suspected, Eduardo strode toward them, several people parting in his wake.

"Signore Fabrizio," Dante greeted. "It is good to see you."

"As it is good to see you, Signore Luciano," Eduardo said when he halted. "Would you be so kind as to offer introductions, *l'amico*?" Cosimo de' Medici's trusted servant, and Dante's friend, turned his eyes on Rhiannon and smiled.

"Signorina Rhiannon Hunter," Dante began, maintaining a gentleman's hold on Rhiannon's elbow. "Might I introduce you to Signore Eduardo Fabrizio? He is my loyal friend and a servant to the de' Medicis."

"It is a pleasure to meet you, Signore." Rhiannon's smile was reserved. She remained immune to Eduardo's swarthy charm. A servant he may be. But belonging to the house of the de' Medici afforded Eduardo notoriety with women. "I am most embarrassed that we met a sennight ago and have not been properly introduced."

"You need not apologize for feeling ill, Signorina." Eduardo bowed deep at the waist and Dante sensed his friend wanted to take Rhiannon's hand. A simple glare warned Eduardo not to attempt touching her. Dante's panthera leo half was too possessive. Until he and Rhiannon consummated their pairing, he would not permit any other man to touch her. "It is good to know you are feeling better. I see Signore Luciano is accompanying you about our fine city."

"It isn't the first time I've seen Florence. But I appreciate it more through his eyes," she said.

"I am certain you do," Eduardo granted then turned to Dante. "Since I've not seen you about the city for several days, am I right to assume your painting is finished?"

"You may inform Cosimo that I shall personally deliver it later this day. I'll not let my apprentices bring it this time."

Rhiannon looked at Dante, her eyes questioning. "Is that how Baron Linwood stole your painting?"

"She knows of the theft?" Eduardo asked in Italian.

Dante nodded. In English he included Rhiannon in their conversation. "Signorina Hunter's former guardian has the painting. She came here to warn me. Now I am certain he arranged the robbery. We are fortunate that Sergio and Andrea were not seriously injured in the melee."

"Your apprentices were hurt? Baron Linwood is a barbarian," Rhiannon hissed. "Had I realized young boys were affected, I'd have attempted to take the painting with me when I ran away."

"Ease your worry, Signorina. Cosimo de' Medici has sent word of the painting's theft throughout Europe and England. This baron you speak of can do nothing with it. Should anyone know he possesses it, he will be arrested at once."

Rhiannon turned away from the lions, her eyes wandering to Orlando a time or two. Dante knew she was fascinated with the male lion.

"Dante, couldn't the de' Medicis have him arrested now? I know he has the painting," she said.

"To keep you safe, I have asked Cosimo not to pursue Linwood. I've no intention of letting the Baron learn where you are."

Eduardo stepped closer, prepared to interrupt. "I must agree," he said to Rhiannon. "I was there when Dante told Cosimo de' Medici what Baron Linwood and the Earl of Clifton have done to you. It was agreed that your presence here will be guarded."

"Then you really had messages sent to England?" Rhiannon asked Dante. He nodded.

With such a simple gesture, he saw that he'd earned her favor. Until then, she hadn't been certain he would honor his decision to send messengers to Valiant Montgomery, Marquess of Raybourne and Garrick Forrester, Earl of Danford.

"Thank you, Dante, you have been most accommodating."

"I've given my word to help you, Rhiannon. It is a pleasure to see you smile as a result. Eduardo, after I've taken Signorina Hunter home, I shall prepare some rough drawings for Cosimo's approval. He wanted a fresco for the last piece in his guesthouse featuring Abcynian mythology. He shall have it and my model will be Signorina Hunter."

In Italian, he informed Eduardo that he would need to arrange a betrothal and wedding ceremony. Dante would honor tradition, law and reading of the banns. He wouldn't wait much longer than that to make Rhiannon his wife.

"Dante, Signore Fabrizio, what are you talking about?" Rhiannon asked, removing her eyes from the lions once again.

"Our future," Dante answered. "Eduardo, I would like to take Rhiannon to the dungeons to see the lions. It is important for me to see what she will look like amongst a pride."

"I shall pave the way. Pardon me, Signorina." Eduardo bowed, strolling out of sight.

"We'll give him a moment," Dante told Rhiannon. "When he returns, I'll introduce you to the lions."

Rhiannon frowned and glanced back at Orlando. Dante recognized that she longed to understand Orlando's sudden grumbling. Several merchants strolled past, one smelling of leather, another of wool, the combined scents causing Orlando to drool with hunger.

"He is hungry," Rhiannon said.

"He is. I shall have the lion keepers bring him and Leonora more food." *Should you ever need to understand what an animal needs, you can convey your thoughts to them with your mind. Abcynians have long been able to communicate with animals.*

Rhiannon lifted her eyes to Dante's, hers compassionate and curious. "There is much for me to learn, isn't there?"

"There is," he said.

"Then it is good that we'll remain in Florence for awhile. I do not want to return to England until I understand our race. Signore Fabrizio seems to know enough about Abcynian mythology to converse about it. But he doesn't know what you are, does he?"

"He knows as much as anyone else does. To most here and in Europe, Abcynians are a myth. You and I know the truth. I've already promised to teach you what you need to know," he granted. "Let us wait for Eduardo. You will enjoy meeting Orlando's pride."

Rhiannon remained quiet, contemplative but content. Her concentration was on him and he welcomed it.

The messages had been sent. Rhiannon's memory was already returning. By the time they left, he suspected she would know everything, for better or for worse.

Chapter Six

It didn't take long for Eduardo Fabrizio to disappear through the main door of the *Palazzo Vecchio* and return to lead Rhiannon and Dante inside. Eduardo spoke mainly to Dante. Rhiannon appreciated that since she was able to look about and study everything at length.

From what she could see as they walked through the hallways, artwork was presented by the most talented and well known artists of Florence. Rhiannon had just begun to examine her love of art before she'd left England so she did not recognize the styles or who might have chiseled the sculptures and painted the frescos and canvases. However she knew she was walking amongst greatness.

Fascinated as she was, Rhiannon had to admit that strolling with Dante was a privilege. He'd proven himself an honorable man. Even though he'd kissed her twice since they'd met he had not attempted more. After her first day in Florence, he hadn't entered his bedchamber when she was there.

As far as she knew, he'd slept on a narrow cot in his workshop, claiming the proximity to his work would prove productive.

When he dined with her in the evenings, their conversations had centered on his painting and stories of his apprenticeship that led to his acceptance in the painters' guild under his actual name in 1548. Before that, he used a different name while he apprenticed under the watchful eye of Andrea del Verrocchio. The very man who'd taught Leonardo da Vinci.

As fascinating as it was to learn how dedicated Dante was to his craft by accepting two apprenticeships and inductions into the painters' guild, he impressed her more when he forgot about himself and inquired as to how she was feeling and if she'd remembered anything more. To Rhiannon, his concern was genuine.

She'd only had one minor migraine since the first day of her arrival in Florence, enjoyed Mary's cooking, Dante's presence and getting to know his apprentices. She should be overjoyed, yet the shadow of the past haunted her. Until she remembered her life before she'd been taken from Wolcott, she would never be content.

Do not burden yourself with doubts. Dante spoke within her mind, his archangel's voice brushing against her temples. *Let the past come, cara mia, you will have the answers you seek sooner than you realize.*

I pray you are right. She smiled when Dante squeezed her elbow.

Glancing up at him, she was struck anew by his fine, prince-like countenance framed by a neat, trimmed beard and mustache. His clothing revealed his liking for blue and silver, a trait she was beginning to realize Abcynians had held from the very

beginning of their race. His attire accented his height, the blue slashed doublet revealed the broadness of his shoulders. The cut of his breeches emphasized the leanness of his hips.

Belatedly, she realized her gaze had drifted to his codpiece, which was almost covered by the hem of his doublet. From what she could see, the codpiece looked to be quite large. Embarrassed, she averted her eyes, stumbling as she did so.

"Are you all right, Rhiannon?" he asked, keeping them a slight distance from Eduardo.

"Fine," she said, refusing to look up at him. She was certain he knew what she'd been thinking.

"I do," he revealed. *Until we are alone again it would be best if we talk of something else.*

Rhiannon could not have agreed more. A lady did not study the size of a man's codpiece. Just thinking of it made her feel flushed. Warmth fluttered deep in her womanhood, feeling very much as if a butterfly had taken wing.

"You seem to be good friends with Signore Fabrizio," she said. "How long have you known him?"

"Five years now. It is because of him that Cosimo de' Medici visited my workshop. Eduardo has a valued position in the de' Medici household and is a trusted friend to me and my apprentices."

"He is more than a servant." Rhiannon thought Eduardo's position might be similar to a steward or castellan for a feudal household.

Dante hesitated. "Do you like him?"

Rhiannon couldn't lie. "Aye," she murmured. *I imagine the ladies find his looks appealing. But I sense a bit of arrogance that makes him feel entitled to a woman's affections.*

"Um, you are observant, Rhiannon," Dante agreed. "However he remains a friend. You needn't worry that he might harm you."

"I'm glad. I like him." Rhiannon suspected Eduardo and Dante once shared a liking for charming ladies into their beds. She might be innocent. But she was certain Dante had enjoyed many women before they'd met.

Not for the first time, she questioned if her virginity would appeal to him. He'd had little trouble keeping his distance over the past sennight. And she'd been almost certain he'd taken a day or so longer than necessary to complete his painting of the Council of Elders.

In her mind, Dante pressed a kiss to her temple. She felt the stirrings of his breath ruffle her straight, unbound hair. *It is true I kept myself busy to protect you. The lion within me recognizes you as my mate and it is the lion that protects you from being seduced until you're ready. When we are alone, I shall show you how difficult remaining distant has been.*

He intended on kissing her again. This time she suspected he'd not pull back before she experienced the full pleasure of his kiss. Refusing to wonder when or how he

intended to seek privacy, Rhiannon kept her eyes on Eduardo's back and concentrated on placing one foot in front of the other.

Soon after, they came to a stairway that led to the dungeons. At the top of the steps, Rhiannon smelled the heady scent of the lions, male and female. Breathing in, she sensed the tangy fragrance belonged to the females. The darker, more aggressive scent belonged to the males.

The musk in the dungeon belonged to animals. Over and above it, she scented something dominantly masculine, intriguing. Dante's scent was unique to him. Rhiannon inhaled deeper. Bathwater, soap and the remnants of paint and linseed oil and man emanated from Dante's skin.

Unaware that she'd been holding her breath, he nudged her. As she breathed out, his nearness became clearer. His scent converged with her favored cassia to create a fragrance that was their own. Deep within her womb the butterfly's wings flapped, each pull of its wings sending waves of warmth through her body. Another inward breath and a hint of his fragrance on her tongue caused the warmth to widen, trailing to the very entrance of her body where an unexplainable tingle danced along the petals of her femininity.

With each breath she took, she became more aware of Dante and less aware of Eduardo Fabrizio. The pang behind her navel grew so taut, she almost gasped. Shaking her head to clear her thoughts, she trained her eyes on Eduardo's shoulders and continued on.

At the base of the stairs, a short hallway led to the dungeons. Rather than prisoners being held within the barred rooms, lions prowled about their living space. Three lionesses shared the largest cage. Curiosity over the arrival of visitors brought their heads about to identify who they were.

One that was dotted with freckles along its tawny back and hind legs pranced closer and eyed Dante, her eyes on his face. The eldest of the lionesses grumbled at the smallest and ambled forward. The middle lioness harrumphed in greeting.

"I cannot explain why," Eduardo said to Rhiannon, his gaze on the lionesses. "Dante has always had a certain way with the lions. Not even the lion keepers are granted the attention from the lionesses unless they are bringing food."

"He doesn't hold sway with the males?" Rhiannon asked, gesturing to the two cages that resided on the opposite side of the lionesses.

Dante moved closer to the lionesses and knelt before the freckled one.

"It is my belief that the males recognize dominance," Eduardo said. "Truth be told, I would not want to be alone with the males without Dante or the keepers about. Too much competition between the lions exists. I wouldn't want to test their tempers."

Intrigued by the two large males prancing back and forth at the front of their separate cages, Rhiannon stepped toward them. The smaller of the two sported a ragged mane, attesting to the lion's youth. The largest, a stocky, rather muscular beast

with a full dark and reddish-brown mane roared. The deep, thunderous warning ricocheting throughout the room, sending Rhiannon's heart racing.

Frightened, she edged back, refusing to near the big lion's cage. Dante's shadow aligned with her back, his scent and his size proving protective and calming.

"It is all right," Dante said in a voice that was both quiet and soothing. Placing his hands upon her shoulders, he brought her backward. "Raffaello is Orlando's son. He has been cantankerous since the day he was born. His roar is warning you that he is in charge of the pride when Orlando is away."

"That roar was loud," Rhiannon said.

Eduardo laughed. "That is nothing compared to what he does when he's angry. A lion can be heard from...what is the term English use for distance...fathoms away."

"I believe you." As a show of respect, she inclined her chin to the gigantic male. "Worry not, Raffaello, I am not a threat."

"Dante, your lady shares your affinity for the lions," Eduardo observed, his dark brown eyes trained on Dante's hands. "I must confess Signorina Hunter looks as natural amongst the lions as you do."

"Rhiannon and I share much in common," Dante said, tightening his hands a fraction. "Eduardo, I would like to study Rhiannon amongst the lions for a bit longer. It will enable me to sketch something to present to Cosimo later this eve."

"Are you suggesting that I leave the two of you alone?" Eduardo asked.

"I ask for a few moments."

Eduardo offered the full force of his smile, the corners of his eyes crinkling with merriment. "I shall see the two of you are not disturbed." With an elegant bow, he swung about and disappeared.

"We shouldn't be alone for long," Rhiannon said the moment she knew Eduardo could not hear.

"Worry not. Look at the lions, Rhiannon. Observe them, know them and know part of your heritage." His left hand caressed down her arm to her waist. Aligning their bodies, he pressed closer, keeping her trapped with his torso and his left arm.

Rhiannon tried to study the lions. They were beautiful, primitive and embodied royal pride. But she found herself immersed in the essence of Dante Luciano. From his scent to the feel of his chest against her back, she could think of little else.

Being held so close to Dante seemed right, as if she'd been made for him. The soft swell of her buttocks molded into the warm cradle of his hard thighs. His arm about her tightened, his right hand caressing from her shoulder to splay beneath her jaw. His fingers lifted her chin upward.

His masculinity surrounded her, promised to protect her from all that she feared. In her mind she could hear him hum like a contented cat.

"Dante, are you humming?" she asked, surprised to realize that the purring was no longer within her mind.

"Si, Abcynians have always called it purring. Soon you will as well, *cara mia*." He nuzzled her hair away from her throat with his elegant nose. The brush of his beard tickled the delicate skin along her neck, compelling her to arch against him in search of that elusive, intriguing abrasion.

"Mayhap you should release me and concentrate on the reason you'd sent Eduardo away," Rhiannon said. Her knees threatened to buckle when Dante's codpiece skimmed along the dip between her lower back and the curve of her rear.

"The lions," she reminded. "You wanted me to see me alone amongst the lions."

"Both of us know I sent Eduardo away so I could do this." Burrowing his face into the crook of her neck, his lips, beard and mustache caressed the sensitive flesh.

Rhiannon's breath caught. Pleasure warmed her from within, making her aware of the aching tightness within her womb. A tightness she was beginning to suspect could only be eased by Dante Luciano.

"Rhiannon, cease thinking, feel." Dante's arm tightened at her waist before his hand shifted to grasp her hip. "You're beautiful. Keeping away from you has been more difficult than you could ever comprehend."

"You've been a gentleman, Dante. A gentleman would free me at once."

"I have never claimed to be a gentleman." With that, he turned Rhiannon to face him and shifted until her back was pressed to an ancient stone wall, slipping his knee between her thighs.

His body pinned her against the wall. She should be furious. She should fight against him. The light brush of his muscular chest against her cloth-covered breasts prevented logic, causing her nipples to tighten. Subtle movement of his knee made her gasp with each gentle thrust of his hips. His hard thigh brushed the petals of her womanhood through her light wool surcoat and she longed to know what it would feel like if she were naked.

A little frightened and more than a little tempted to understand the throb in her womb that grew more and more intense with each press of his thigh, Rhiannon lifted her eyes from the sight of their hips moving in rhythmic cadence.

"Dante, what are you doing to me? This isn't proper," she warned, hoping he'd free her, fearing he'd pull away.

"Proper has nothing to do with how much I want you," Dante confessed, his eyes burning with longing. "Allow me to kiss you, Rhiannon. I need to more than I need to breathe."

Rhiannon meant to push him away. But the words that spilled from her trembling lips belied her intentions. "Aye, do as you wish."

Dante smiled, his face growing blurred as he leaned closer. His breath, a combination of wine, cloves and a touch of sugar, whispered across her lips. The humming in his throat continued, sending tremors through his chest, hips and thighs.

Lured by the seductiveness of what he called purring, she lifted to the tips of her toes, offering her mouth to his. Just as he'd kissed her twice before, the touch of his lips remained light, gentle and unerringly sweet. His mustache tickled a bit, his beard a pleasant abrasion as he brushed his lips back and forth, coaxing her mouth open.

His tongue joined the sensation of lips, beard and mustache. "Accept my kiss, open completely," he whispered, nipping her lower lip.

She gasped as his tongue plunged into the depths of her mouth, dueling and tangling with hers. He tasted of cloves, of man, of primitive longings and passionate artistry. Wanting more, she cried out with the thrust of his hips. But the intensity of their movements frightened her and she turned her face aside.

"Dante, you must not," she whimpered, the tension within her womb bordering on pain, seeming to warn against such intimate contact.

"Hush, *bella*," he soothed. "What you're feeling is natural. I am preparing your body to accept mine when I take you. Do not fight it."

"I cannot accept you. Not without vows," she protested.

"Soon you will have them," he promised, surprising her when he withdrew his thigh. "For now I'll not press you beyond what you're ready to accept."

He gathered her away from the wall and held her in the protection of his arms. Resting his forehead against hers, his breathing slowed, his purring continued.

"Kiss me," he commanded. His angel's voice was urgent, his hold gentle.

"We just kissed."

"Kiss me again," he said.

Because she wanted to, she wrapped her arms about his neck. Cocooned and safe, she kissed him as his hands tightened at her waist. Loving the taste that was Dante, she thrust her tongue between his lips. Their kiss became aggressive, passionate, each giving as much as they were taking.

Deep within her throat, she felt the vibrations of a purr. At first she'd thought Dante created the sound. The warmth radiating through her proved it belonged to her. Oh mercy, she was purring like a panthera leo Abcynian and she liked it.

Dante seemed to like it as well. He growled loudly, stirring Raffaello in his cage. The big male rumbled a warning, his dominant nature unwilling to accept another dominant male attempting to mate with a female. That she recognized Raffaello's complaint amazed her.

Finally Dante pulled back to take a deep breath. "I believe we have disturbed the lions long enough. We shouldn't agitate Raffaello further. He senses the lioness in you and my need to claim you. Until I do, he will perceive me as a threat to the pride."

"And what of his father...Orlando?"

Dante drew further away, keeping his hands at her waist. "Orlando is the king of his pride. Raffaello knows this. In the wild the younger would attempt to assert his dominance and Orlando would either kill him or force him to leave."

"Why would the son challenge the father?"

"It is the way of the lion. In the wild only one can be the leader of the pride. Male Abcynians with panthera leo blood behave the same."

"What do you mean? Did your father make you leave your pride?"

"In a way, *si*," Dante said, moving about until he stood beside her. "My parents were killed long before you were born. Lucien Hunter reared me. As my father, he gave me the means to leave our home and start my pride. He has done the same for his sons, Valiant and Adriano. For them, he refused to give them his chosen surname. He wanted each to establish their names and their prides wherever they wanted to live."

Rhiannon listened and understood. It didn't make Lucien any less of a man in her eyes. It seemed right for men to prepare their sons for life beyond the protection of their homes, be they English, Florentine or Abcynian.

"Are you burdened by this, Dante?" she asked.

Dante shook his head and smiled. "I am not. I am explaining the way of panthera leo Abcynian males."

"If we should marry someday, will you send our sons away?"

"When we are ready we'll have children and I will encourage them to find their place in the world," he said. "But there is no if, Rhiannon. We will marry. Abcynians may not have formal vows but you need them to feel comfortable as my mate. It is my right, my obligation and my honor to be your husband."

Annoyed, she jerked her arm from his careful grip. "I believe that I've had enough of your proclamations for one day. I'll not marry a man who sees marriage to me as an obligation," she warned.

He caught her wrist. With the arrogance of a prince, he tugged and she collided with his solid chest. His soft hair brushed her cheekbone, bringing a rush of heat to her face.

Struggling, she did not expect the touch of his hand beneath her chin to be gentle. "Forgive me. I meant no offense. You do not understand that everything I am, a male panthera leo Abcynian in his prime, demands that I should mate with you here, right now, beneath this cavernous *palazzo* with a pride of lions looking on. I want to claim you. I cannot until you fully accept me. I will wait as long as I can, Rhiannon. That is all I can promise right now."

Something inside softened, easing her momentary temper. "Do you truly intend for the two of us to marry?"

"I do. Eduardo will see to the arrangements. We'll follow the customs of marriage in the Catholic Church and be married before we leave Florence."

"If I told you I was Protestant, would that change your mind?"

"It changes nothing. Abcynians respect the Protestant Church as much as the Catholic."

Dante guided Rhiannon up the stairs and waved to a guard that she'd not noticed when they first entered the pride's den.

"Are you Protestant, Rhiannon?" he asked when the guard could not hear.

"If you had asked that question before Queen Mary took the throne I'd have said I was. Baron Linwood held a fancy for the Church of England. I am certain he still does. Since Her Majesty forbids the English to attend the Church of England, Linwood practices Catholicism."

"Do you prefer the Church of England?"

"I find strengths and weaknesses in both churches. However I firmly believe that neither should persecute those who choose not to follow the faith of whatever monarch is in power. I believe in God and Christianity. That should be the most important thing to any church."

"I agree," Dante said. "You understand that while in Florence we must follow the dictates of the Catholic Church?"

"I have no objections."

"This is good, *si*," he praised, leading her back outside. As they stepped out, Eduardo met them and followed them to the *piazza* then left.

Much of the day had gone by the time they left the *palazzo*. Dante needed to return to his workshop before visiting Cosimo de' Medici later that evening. A little saddened by the end of their excursion, Rhiannon did not complain when Dante escorted her back home.

As they walked, she found herself pleased with how much she'd learned about him in such a short time. Tomorrow would be soon enough for her to learn more, and she was looking forward to it. For once, the shadow of her past did not seem so daunting, for the future seemed more promising.

Chapter Seven

On a trade ship bound for Venice, Edgar Wynthrop, the Earl of Cliffton, stood upon the main deck and scowled at the churning waters leading him away from the English Channel. It had taken him and Linwood a sennight to reach London and obtain passage on the ship. The captain had not wanted to carry passengers to Italy. A fat purse filled with gold had swayed the man. The promise of a treasure trunk of gold artifacts upon the conclusion of the trip afforded Edgar and Linwood pleasant accommodations.

All in all, Edgar should have been pleased, but knowing Rhiannon may have already reached Florence disturbed him.

"What troubles you, Cliffton?" Linwood asked behind him. "We have left England. We'll find her. That should give you reason to smile."

"I'll not smile until Rhiannon Mathews is back in my grasp," Edgar vowed, clenching his teeth. "How that wench managed to elude our men escapes my understanding. But what's done is done. We must find a way to make her obedient again."

"She is not an animal."

"She is Abcynian. What is this I hear in your voice? Have you feelings for the girl?"

"Nay, I do not." Linwood came to stand beside Edgar. "She is pretty in face and form, I will grant you. Let's not forget she's been my ward for twenty years. Bedding her is the last thing I want."

"I should hope not. I'd have to kill you if you touched her."

"Mayhap you're the one who's developed feelings for Rhiannon."

"She'll make a fine bedmate," Edgar said. "I'll not have a wife who's afraid of the marriage bed. It's most fortunate panthera Abcynians have a ferocious appetite for mating. I believe she will make an entertaining wife."

Linwood inclined his head, his eyes trained on the churning sea. "It's been more than two months since Rhiannon ran. Isn't it likely she's already mated with Dante Luciano or another man for the cost of traveling to Florence?"

Rage welled in Edgar's chest. He didn't love Rhiannon. But he gave her back the life she should have lost to one of her own kind. She would become his wife and help him defeat the Abcynians. If he discovered any man took her virginity before Edgar had her, the man would die. If Luciano bedded Rhiannon, she'd watch the painter die.

"Cliffton," Linwood prodded.

"I'll not worry myself over what she did to escape. Our first priority is reaching Florence without Rhiannon knowing. Once we're there, we will contact the spy you've

been using to watch Luciano and know when to steal his painting. I will want to know everything that has happened since Rhiannon stepped foot in Florence.”

“What will you do if Rhiannon resists returning to England with us? She hasn’t had nepeta cataria for a while now. She will grow stronger, remember more. If she does, she will hate you. You were there when she’d been attacked. You watched a panthera attack her and leave her for dead.”

Edgar had been there. He’d spied her fleeing into the woods of Wolcott just as he and his men converged on the manor and charged her father Sir Brandon Mathews, Baron Wolcott and his wife Judith, Baroness Wolcott, with heresy. He hadn’t thrown her to the turncoat Abcynian. But he had watched in delight as those powerful panther’s jaws bit into her flesh, tearing and ripping tissue, crushing bones in her skull.

Edgar had no idea why Rhiannon had tried to run away, though he’d used her fears and created new ones by summoning the monster within him to plague her whenever she attempted to remember what had happened in Wolcott. His other form and nepeta cataria helped keep her memories at bay.

“Do you have no answers, Cliffton?” Garfield questioned.

“I admit to being part of the raid against Wolcott. It was necessary to rid England of the heretics living there.”

“It was necessary for you to rid England of a few more Abcynians. Several died that night, punished for their sins. You’d better pray Rhiannon does not remember the faces of those you’d had executed. If she does, she’ll not become your tool of revenge by converting you.”

“Rhiannon was near death when the first man was executed,” Edgar heard himself say, surprised that he had to defend himself to a mere baron. “It isn’t possible for her to know or remember who I’d had killed. She was too young. It took years before she could even speak much less accuse me of treachery.”

“Mayhap not,” Linwood said and shrugged. “Conversion is your means of revenge, is it not? Where Saturians failed you intend to succeed. If you managed to be converted a Saturian could live your life as an Abcynian. Abcynians are known to the world now, accepted in the same manner as Greek and Roman mythology. Few believe they can live to such great ages or become the were-panthers of legend. But fascination with mythology has allowed them to blend into societies throughout Europe. Saturians have to hide, as we always have.”

“Saturians hide because Abcynians chose war with us over the chance to conquer the lesser minions of the world. Saturians have been forced into hiding, never revealing our gifts because ours are feared and jeered as witchcraft. I’ll concede one thing,” Edgar said, facing the Baron. “Conversion will enable us to take over the hold Abcynians have in England and Europe. Europe is expanding, exploring new worlds and new cultures. It will be the Saturians who follow into those worlds, the Abcynians a mere afterthought in history.”

Still guarding his secrets, Edgar turned away, looking out at the waters. Land was nowhere in sight. They were on their way to Venice. From there, he and Linwood would travel to Florence and reclaim Rhiannon Mathews. Once he had her under his wing, he would complete his conversion, growing strong, stronger even than his brother, Zotikos.

His brother had promised his soul to the devil to receive his power. Edgar needed one woman and her bite. Edgar laughed. The possibility of overthrowing his brother was almost as seductive as Rhiannon's face and pretty amber eyes.

* * * * *

A set of jaws flashed in Rhiannon's vision. The beast's teeth were long, sharp, dripping with spittle and blood when the monster roared, intending to kill. Shuddering, she tried to back away.

Fire lit the forest, silhouetting the beast. It was gigantic. Male shouts echoed through the trees. Their voices creating panic.

"This way," she shouted for help, pleading for forgiveness as the ferocious panther lunged and grasped her head between its tearing jaws. "I didn't mean to run," she pled to the beast, hoping God might hear her prayer.

The panther showed no mercy. Its fangs bit into her skull, the pain of torn flesh unbearable. Her folly echoed in the crunch of bone. An endless rain of blood coated her, the ground and the beast. The Abcynian was intent upon killing her and she'd only herself to blame for running away.

"Nay, I couldn't have been running away!" The pain thundering inside Rhiannon's skull was no longer part of a dream. It was real. On a loud, ear-piercing scream that splintered through her temples she wrenched out of bed and fell to the floor in a tangle of silk covers soaked in sweat and tears.

"Dante!" she screeched when she found herself kneeling on the floor, her head between her knees in effort to calm her fear. "Dante!" she screamed again, thinking of the one person who could come and speak to her and soothe her.

"Rhiannon, what's happened?" Mary's soft, maternal voice whipped through Rhiannon's head.

"Dante, I want Dante," Rhiannon muttered, her face still pressed to her knees. If she lifted her head she might vomit. A frisson of heat abraded her skin, warning that Mary was holding a candle aloft, the light further reason to keep her eyes averted. "I cannot bear the pain. He can make it stop, please get him."

"I wish I could," Mary whispered, coming to kneel beside Rhiannon, the candle far enough away now to reduce the discomfort. "Signore Luciano has gone to prepare his supplies for tomorrow's work."

"Pray do not speak," Rhiannon whimpered now, wanting Dante and the safety of his arms.

But Dante was working late into the night, as he'd done every night for a fortnight since they'd kissed in the lions' den. He'd made it known that he could not remain in the same house with her at night, not until they'd properly wed or she agreed to accept him as her lover.

"I will help you back into bed once I've changed the covers." Mary moved away, the shuffle of her feet sending splinters of pain slicing through Rhiannon's skull.

Tonight something was different. The pain was no longer based in her head. Something akin to the prick of tiny needles stabbed her left breast. As the needles stabbed, heat radiated within her chest, becoming almost unbearable. Sweat continued to drip down her body, causing her lightweight chemise to cling to her skin.

"Let me help you," Mary urged, surprising Rhiannon at how quickly her friend had worked. "The bedclothes were soaked. As is your chemise, I'll find something dry for you to wear. Can you stand?"

"I...don't know." Rhiannon wanted to, but feared she'd grow ill before she could try. "I may be sick if I move."

"We'll take it slow," Mary said, touching her shoulder.

Rhiannon wished it was Dante touching her, his voice soothing her. She braced her spine and lifted her head, swallowing the bitter tasting fluid that had slid from the back of her throat to her tongue.

"Ugh," she groaned. "I need sustenance."

"I will get it for you just as soon as you're back in bed," Mary promised. "Let's remove that chemise first."

Unable to stand the touch of silk against her left breast that felt as though a branding iron had seared her flesh, Rhiannon allowed Mary to pull the chemise off.

"Dear God, have mercy," Mary cried out, then slumped to the floor, crossing her chest in prayer.

"What..." Rhiannon's voice trailed away as she looked down upon her nakedness and discovered the silvery, near translucent mark burned into her left breast. Even as she watched, the mark grew in size, claiming the entirety of her breast, areola and even her distended nipple.

"Mary, I'm scared," Rhiannon whimpered.

Uncertain what to do, whether she should dare even move, she stared down at the mark. She feared she was possessed by something far more hideous than a lioness.

Unlike the clever woman who'd led their escape to Florence, Mary remained on her knees, her face pale. She murmured and crossed her chest once again.

Pain and fear confounded Rhiannon's understanding. Her head pounded. Bitterness swarmed onto her tongue. The mark expanded, extending down her left ribs to her side, the image becoming blurred.

Her cries echoed throughout the room, piercing her skull. Something deeper, angrier bellowed along with the cries, summoned from the depths of her throat.

Rhiannon could not tell if she was yelling, crying or roaring. Mercy, was she roaring? Did lionesses roar? Did Abcynians?

Young male voices reached her sensitive ears, exasperating her pain. Unable to stand any longer, she rushed for the chamber pot and vomited.

Rhiannon, calm yourself. I am coming. Dante whispered in her mind, his voice the one thing that did not hurt her.

"Dante?" she uttered aloud, lifting her head from where she'd knelt.

"He's not here, Rhiannon," Mary said.

"I think he will be soon," Rhiannon replied, forgoing all else save the sound of his voice.

It is all right, cara mia. I will be there, promettere. The promise fought Rhiannon's pain, easing it some.

Dante's apprentices were in the hallway. Their reluctance to approach the bedchamber was fed by Serena's promise to drag them back to their beds by their ears if they dared look inside. Rhiannon could hear them muttering their concerns. It was another set of footsteps pounding up the stone and mortar steps that reached her.

"Serena, get the boys down to the workshop or out of the house. I'll not deal with them now," Dante warned, his footsteps urgent, calming the worst of Rhiannon's fears.

She realized then that she was still naked and that dreaded mark pulsed in recognition of each step Dante took toward the bedchamber.

"Nay, do not enter the chamber." She had to stop him from seeing the mark and looked about for something to wear. Her mouth felt gritty, pungent. The smell of her sickness threatened more of the same.

Before she could even reach for a bed sheet, Dante entered the room. To her horror, she slumped to the floor beside the chamber pot and purged her fear and pain into the pot again.

"Out, you cannot come in here when Rhiannon is—"

"I'll not stand for any interference," Dante interrupted, his steps quiet but forceful as he stalked closer. "See to the boys. I will care for Rhiannon."

"You cannot," Mary argued.

"I assure you, I can," he amended, ending further argument when Mary shrieked.

"Cease," Rhiannon grumbled into the chamber pot, certain she could not know any further humiliation.

She reached out, finding a sweat-soaked cover and tucking it around her body. Hating the feel of the wet cloth abrading the sensitive, scorched flesh of her left breast and rib cage, she bore the discomfort.

Dante came to where she knelt and caressed her down-turned head. "Rhiannon, look at me," he softly said, trying to bring her head up.

"I cannot," she grumbled to the floor. "I'm almost naked and ashamed."

"You've nothing to be ashamed of." Speaking in his soft, angelic voice, Dante moved his hand from her head to comb her hair back over her shoulder. "You're beautiful. Why do you hide from me?"

"Because I hurt all over," Rhiannon said. She realized then that she'd called for Dante and he'd come. "And I now know it was my fault that I've lost my family. Memory loss has been my way of running away, of continuing to run away from Wolcott," she confessed, still looking at the floor.

Dante shifted, wrapping his arm about her shoulders. "Hush, *cara*, hush," he coaxed. With gentle, insistent urging, he maneuvered her to rest her forehead against his shoulder and tucked his other arm beneath her knees.

"I've been sick." She winced at the thought of remaining so close to his warm, musky scent. His breath smelled of cloves and sustenance. A hint of linseed oil and paint clung to him.

"It doesn't matter." Rhiannon's world spun as he rose with her in his strong, capable arms.

"Dante, I need clothes." It seemed a logical comment. If she weren't so horrified by her sickness she might have flushed.

"I'll find something for you," he promised, carrying her across the room. "Rest a moment," he said upon placing her on the bed and stepping back.

Bereft after his departure, Rhiannon refused to whimper and waited with her eyes closed. Her head still pounded, her breast and rib cage throbbled. Dante walked about the room, sounding as though he'd gone to his clothing trunk.

While he searched the trunk, she dared to take a peek beneath the cover. "Mercy," she muttered, hiding her body from Dante. "That cannot be."

"Would you like me to help you put this on?" Dante asked, having returned to perch on the side of the enormous bed. "It is just a tunic but it's soft."

"It doesn't matter," she said. "Nothing will feel right against my skin."

"Were you injured when you fell out of bed?" Dante tossed the tunic onto the bed, its familiar silver color calming.

"How did you know I'd fallen?"

"The same way I knew you needed me," he answered, shifting closer. "You're keeping something from me. Were you injured, Rhiannon?"

"I'd had a nightmare and awakened with a headache," she said. "After I'd fallen pain ripped through my breast." She cupped her hand over the damp material she'd used to cover herself, embarrassed to know she'd touched her breast with Dante staring down at her.

"A burning, needle-sharp pain?" he said.

"Aye, how can that be? It feels as though I'd been burned."

He said something she could not understand and leaned closer, ignoring her attempt to shrink away when he reached up to take the cover in one hand. "I'm going to look." He caught her wrists and pushed them up and over her head.

"Dante, pray do not," she pled, fearing what he would see. "I've done something dreadful and now I am marked." How else could she explain the branding she'd received upon remembering her folly as a child?

"You've done nothing wrong," Dante attempted to reassure, his deep voice calming. "Let me tend to your burn."

Embarrassed and still ashamed, Rhiannon turned her face to the side as Dante lowered the bed sheet.

"It is hideous," she whispered into the pillow.

"You are beautiful. The mark you've received identifies you as an adult Abcynian."

Fighting the pounding pressure behind her temples, Rhiannon winced when Dante urged her to sit up and replaced the damp sheet with his silver tunic. It didn't take long for him to dress her and ease her head back to the pillows. She was amazed at how efficient and gentle Dante had been, never once making her feel vulnerable or exposed.

"Your head still aches?" Dante asked.

"Aye," she said, trying to remain still.

"I'll return in a moment," he promised, leaving her alone on the bed. Hoping he kept his word, Rhiannon closed her eyes. The pain in her skull lessened a bit. Her breast and rib cage still felt scorched.

Dante returned, the scent of sustenance touching Rhiannon's nostrils. He sat on the mattress and helped her to sit up enough to accept the chalice.

"Here, *bella*, drink," he said.

"Um, this is very good," she murmured between sips, remembering to drink slowly.

"It is my understanding that you made this along with Mary," Dante praised.

"According to your instruction," she said.

"You've learned much since arriving in Florence."

"I have," she agreed, pleased that his mesmeric voice continued to calm her aching head.

Silence fell between them, causing Rhiannon to look up at Dante. The concern in his eyes and clenched jaw softened her heart. He cared for her. She knew it now for a certainty. She needed him and he'd come, that gave her reason enough to trust him.

Thankful that the sustenance cleaned the sickness from her breath, Rhiannon attempted to smile. Doing so proved difficult for she could not ignore the reason for her dream. She'd run away from Wolcott, abandoning her family on the very night a horde of soldiers descended on the manor and set it ablaze. She had left her family to die. Horrified and ashamed, she cast her eyes to the bed.

"Do not look away from me." Dante caught her chin and brought her face upward. "I know what you're thinking and I promise that you've nothing to feel guilty for."

"Don't I?" Feeling ugly compared to the beautiful man leaning against the headboard, she found it difficult to look at him. "I abandoned them, Dante. I was running away the night Wolcott was seized and someone caught me. I was meant to die. I should have died for my sins. Now I must live with the consequences."

"Cease this," Dante growled, grasping her shoulders and dragging her across the bed until she was sitting on his lap and his mouth pressed against her temple. "*Dio*, you were a child then. Mayhap you'd been running away. Mayhap you'd seen something that frightened you or you'd argued with your parents before trouble rained down on Wolcott. We may never know the reason. But you were a child and I'll let no one fault you for being afraid, not even you!"

"Don't you see? An Abcynian tried to kill me because of what I'd done!"

"And you'd dreamt of that, *si*?" he asked, holding her close to his solid, muscular chest. The warmth of his body penetrated hers to further ease the intensity of her burned skin. "You fought against the panther in your dreams."

"I suppose I did," she said. "I do not remember who it was or whether it was leopard or lion. I remember the jaws, the pain and blood soaking my hair and my body." Trembling in earnest, she might have leapt from Dante's lap if he hadn't guessed her intentions and trapped her against him.

"I wish I could take that memory from you. It is one you shouldn't have had to remember." Dante's lips touched Rhiannon's temple again, his gentle, soothing kiss more healing than any amount of sustenance could ever do.

Her migraine was almost gone now, a ghost of pain threatening to return if Dante was not there to chase it away with his kisses. Another kiss was offered to her skin as echoes of reassurance whispered through her mind. Rather than words, he relied on thought, feelings, his devotion apparent in his hold, in his healing kiss.

To her amazement, he did not press his advantage.

"Dante, what had you meant about the mark?" she asked, the ache along her breast and rib cage reminding her of the strange, translucent image that had formed on her skin.

Dante shifted enough that she could lift her head and look up at him. "All Abcynians have the mark of their panthera half. It usually doesn't present itself until we reach a certain age. The age when we can change form," he explained. "It was my understanding that while a converted pair or their children cannot physically change, they do gain the strengths and characteristics of the panthera. Now I think it's possible that when my essence flows into you once we're truly mated, you'll change like I do. Abcynians are still learning about what happens to those who've been converted into our race. Apparently we do not know everything."

"The mark on my skin, it is permanent?"

Dante nodded, smiling now. "It is. I cannot explain why your mark presented itself as it did. A maturing Abcynian will feel the burn for a sennight or longer before the mark appears. It happens in stages so the body accepts it. Yours came all at once. Were I to guess, I would say your dream brought out your lioness's need to defend. It is the way of all mankind, to fight or seek flight."

"I was seeking flight."

"Nay, *bella*, the panthera awakened you to fight." Reaching out, he brushed his fingers through her hair. "Part of you still thinks of yourself as an Englishwoman. You are more than that. Soon you will learn to use the strengths of the woman and the lioness. If I'm right and Lucien or Valiant converted your parents then you are panthera Abcynian."

"Are you claiming Abcynians have no weaknesses?"

"Everyone has their weaknesses. Abcynians once held an affinity for gold, admiring it so much we nearly attacked rival civilizations for the promise of more. Our homeland, Abcynia, was lost because of it. Gold is now our cross to bear. We cannot touch it, wear it or look upon it for long without growing weak."

"That is why Cliffton and Linwood used gold jewelry to contain me. How do you paint with gold leaf if you cannot touch gold?"

"I have found a way to use silver in my paintings and seldom use gold leaf. If I do, my apprentices prepare the leaves and I wear a glove when I paint."

Rhiannon meant to say she thought he was rather resourceful. She found she'd rather feel his arms about her again. Before she could ask, Dante swept his hand across her cheek to her nape and brought her back into his arms, nestling her head upon his chest. "The mark still pains you, doesn't it?" he said once she'd settled with her right side against him.

"Aye, a little."

"I have a way to ease the pain," he suggested.

"Should I drink more sustenance?"

"Sustenance is the remedy. You needn't drink any more tonight unless you want some." With exquisite gentleness he ran his hand down her tender rib cage. "You'll need to trust me. What I'll do is for your own good, not mine."

"I do not understand," she admitted.

"Give me a moment," he bid, shifting out from beneath her. "Lie on your right side." Rhiannon decided to do as he asked.

"What do you plan to do?" she asked when she heard him return.

"You'll see soon enough," he answered, seating himself on the bed. Rather than lying beside her, he knelt at her back, his knees skimming her spine as his left hand tugged at the hem of her tunic.

"Dante," she protested, realizing he meant to remove it.

"Allow me to aid you." He ignored her protests and lifted the fabric from her skin, pulling it up past her shoulder. Her body was now exposed from the shoulder down.

"I really think—" Dante's forefinger touched her lips, silencing with a simple touch.

"Trust me," he insisted, taking his hand away.

Aware of her nudity, she feared he would be repulsed by the sight of the silvery mark now covering the whole of her left breast and rib cage. Dante claimed it was the mark of a lioness and she had no reason to refute him.

She'd seen the odd, silver-colored tattoo. It was a lioness. Her face as elegant as a princess, her neck arched about the rounded globe of her breast. Her nipple formed one of the lioness's elongated fangs and part of the lioness' shoulders marked her rib cage.

And it burned. The mark had been as scorching as a branding iron, forever identifying her as an Abcynian with panthera leo lineage.

"Dante," she murmured when he neither moved nor looked away. She could feel his eyes on her breasts, his need to touch her.

"It is all right, *cara mia*." The slosh of wine behind her head told her Dante had swirled his finger into the chalice. "I confess I was taken with the imagery of your panthera's spirit. You are beautiful."

"I am marked," she argued.

"*Si*, you are marked for me," he whispered, causing her to frown.

"What does that mean?"

"When you are ready you will understand." His wet finger touched her rib cage, startling her when sustenance dripped on to the burn. At first it hurt and she flinched. Within two calming breaths the burned faded as her skin absorbed the wine.

With the skill of an artist, he covered her rib cage, trailing his finger to her breast. Once again, he dipped his finger into the chalice, the absence of his touch more painful than the lioness's mark. Wine dribbled over her breast, sliding along the swell, clinging to her erect nipple.

"Oh mercy," she muttered into the pillow, amazed that the wine could feel cold, her flesh fiery hot. The touch of his callused forefinger following the trail of wine was agonizingly sweet. A butterfly awakened behind her navel, the drag and pull of its mammoth wingspan tugging deeper and deeper within her womb. "I cannot take it."

"*Si*, you can, *bella*, you can," he assured, a clunk behind her warning that he'd just put the Venetian chalice aside. "This is about healing, nothing more. As much as I'd like to bed you, I know you cannot tonight."

His wine-drenched middle and forefinger continued to caress her breast, leaving none of the mark unattended. The part of her breast he did not touch was her nipple. She sensed he avoided doing so for her peace of mind. To her disappointment, he removed his hand from her breast too soon.

Miraculously, the sustenance became soothing. She could feel the tingle of healing, cooling the burn. "I think it is working."

"Good." He settled on the bed behind her, his long, lean body snuggling against her back. "Just lay still and close your eyes. When next you wake the pain will be gone."

"I do not know if I can sleep," she confessed, worried that her dreams would haunt her once again.

"Your dreams will not plague you while I'm here. I will chase away your fears. I vow it." With that, he draped his arm about her waist, avoiding her tender rib cage as his knee wedged between her thighs.

"I'm almost naked." She tried to pull the tunic back down. He caught her hand.

"Leave it until the wine dries," he said, blowing hot breath along her skin. With a minor struggle, he lowered her hand to the bed and settled back again. "Close your eyes and you will sleep, you will see."

With his promise, Rhiannon closed her eyes, forgoing her concern for her near nakedness for the rightness of sharing his bed. All that mattered at the moment was that Dante Luciano was there, holding her, protecting her. It wasn't long before her breathing eased and she slept in peace.

* * * * *

The sun was beginning to brighten the bedchamber when Dante stirred. Something soft tickled his nose, compelling him to bury his face further into the softness. Breathing in, he appreciated the scent of Rhiannon and cassia, arousal and innocence, lioness and woman.

He ruffled his nose through his mate's silky hair. The urgent need pulsing in his groin kept him from falling back to sleep. His erection strained against his breeches and Rhiannon's naked flesh, tempting him to push his breeches to his knees, pull her just a little closer, part her thighs a bit more and slide into her.

Dante wanted her. But he knew he could not abuse Rhiannon's fragile trust by taking what he desired too soon.

Wanting to prove he was stronger than lust, Dante opened his eyes and stared at the graceful arch of Rhiannon's bare neck and shoulder. It would be so easy to awaken her with kisses, sharp little bites and slow, wet licks of his tongue. She would purr and offer the full expanse of her throat, seeking his life sustaining essence.

In less than three *la settimana's*, she'd captured his complete devotion, eliminating his need to find surcease with whatever woman caught his eye. Never would he seek another woman, even though he'd yet to take Rhiannon.

To protect her, he caught a pillow in one hand and stuffed it between his swollen manhood and her deliciously curved rear.

"Dante," Rhiannon mumbled. "Is it morning?"

"Si," he whispered, wishing she'd go back to sleep. "It's all right, you needn't awaken just yet."

"I think I'm hungry."

Dante laughed in earnest now, pleased to hear the growl of her stomach. "Didn't you eat supper last eve?"

"I did."

"In that case, *bella*, I shall awaken Serena and Mary. We will have something to break our fast." As he eased away from her, the pillow was a barrier he wanted to shred into tiny, feathered pieces. "I'll also have a bath prepared for you."

Rhiannon sighed. "A bath sounds like heaven."

"Then so shall it be." Dante pushed up to his elbow, appreciating the sight of her straight pale blonde hair fanned over the bed. He brought the covers up and tucked them about her bare shoulder. "Turn over and kiss me good morning. I will then leave you in peace."

"That sounds better than a bath," she chuckled, her pleasure radiating down Dante's spine to his groin. He had to leave the bed or he'd take her.

His attempt to leave was thwarted when she faced him. Her eyes were opened but softened with sleep. Her pretty mouth was pink and slightly parted, an invitation he could not ignore. Abandoning his best intentions for a moment longer, Dante bent and kissed her.

Rhiannon's purr trembled through her throat, spilling onto his lips, inviting him to deepen their kiss. Her tongue slipped past his lips and tangled with his before drawing his tongue deep into her mouth.

Dio, do not tempt me so, he warned within her mind, reluctant to pull away. Looking down at her, he found her flushed, beautiful. "I'm warning you now. I've had Eduardo arrange for our betrothal ceremony during this morning's Mass. The first banns will be read. When it is proper, we shall wed."

"You cannot mean that." She gulped, pushing upright with the covers tucked to her chin. "After learning that I'm unworthy of a husband, how can you consider marrying me?"

"Why would you think you are unworthy?"

"Because I abandoned my family," she whispered, the catch in her husky voice calming his temper.

"Hadn't we discussed this? You didn't abandon them."

"I ran away."

"I'm willing to believe you had good reason. But it doesn't matter. Not to me." Pushing out of bed, he stood above her, taking her face between his hands. If he'd remained in bed much longer, he wouldn't care about vows and banns and betrothals, he'd take her. "You are my mate and I intend to claim you. Let it go, Rhiannon. Let go of your guilt and believe that you are everything I see. You are beautiful, sweet, a defender and lover of the arts. You are more than worthy. You are meant to be mine."

Rhiannon frowned but allowed him to hold her face. A gesture she'd not realized was a measure of trust. "When have I defended anything?" she pondered, biting her lower lip.

"You defended my work by coming to Florence and telling me about my painting," he said. "You defended Sergio and Andrea when you'd learned they'd been attacked when that painting was stolen. I've seen you care for my apprentices since you've arrived, making certain they are fed, clothed and their beds tended. You even cried for Leonora one night when you thought about her crippled paw and how you wished you could help her. I heard it, Rhiannon. I knew."

"That means nothing."

"It means everything. Don't fight me anymore. Say you will join me at Mass this morning. Become my betrothed and I will guard your trust with everything I am, everything I have."

Dante watched the emotions flickering in her eyes. She was trying to resist by dwelling on her fears and convincing herself she'd been in the wrong. He was certain it had been Rhiannon who'd been wronged the night Wolcott fell. He would have to find the patience to convince her.

Still as a statue he remained standing, holding her jaw in his hand.

"Believe in me, *cara mia*, believe in us," he urged, offering a smile.

When she returned the smile its sweetness became temptation incarnate. Her doubts eased and he felt her decision to join with him. Even as he watched, he heard the pounding of her heart, the shallowness of her breath as she drew his scent into her nostrils and began to purr.

"Aye, Dante, I will marry you," she said with an embarrassed flush sweeping over her cheekbones. "I'll need time to prepare."

"As soon as the banns have been completed we will be wed." He could not wait beyond that. He would begin working on the fresco planned for Cosimo de' Medici's guest chamber. He hoped he'd be able to resist taking her until they were man and wife. "By that time the moon will be full and you'll have finished your menses."

Rhiannon's eyes widened. "How do you know that?"

"Male Abcynians are aware of a woman's cycle. The reading of the banns will give you time to finish your courses and become my lover without the worry of childbirth."

Rhiannon pulled away. "You do not wish to have children with me?"

"You needn't think such a thing. I want children with you. I just want to wait a little while. Mayhap when we're in England would be best. If it is what you want, we will be careful during the times you can conceive."

"I'd like to spend time getting to know you as well," Rhiannon admitted, bringing her head back up and smiling. "I didn't come to Florence to marry, Dante. Now I realize that I want to be your wife."

"This is good, *si?*" Dante leaned close enough to steal a kiss, his intention to deepen it thwarted by Mary Baker's footsteps coming up the stairs. "Your guardian approaches."

"If she catches you in here she may box your ears."

"She could try." Reluctant to pull away, he reached down and helped Rhiannon readjust the tunic that had gone askew during the night. "I will have a bath prepared for you."

Before Mary stomped into the room, Dante withdrew into the hallway and stalked to the narrow stairs leading to the apprentices' rooms. Growling at having to wait until the banns were read before he could return to his own bed, he made his way to Marcello's room where he'd stored some of his clothes the day before.

Chapter Eight

Soaking in a hot bath scented with a touch of myrrh, Rhiannon recalled the last four sennights. It was fortunate Dante was so well acquainted with Cosimo de' Medici, she mused. His association gave him privileges to the Church and permitted their betrothal and ceremony without recriminations. Also, she had arrived in Florence after the conclusion of Lent and Easter, allowing their marriage to take place today, seven sennights after her arrival in Florence.

Never had she expected to come to Florence and prepare for her wedding, but she intended to marry Dante nonetheless. After such a short acquaintance, she knew she was in love with him.

It wasn't his handsomeness or his mesmeric voice that had captured her heart. It was his unselfish devotion to listening when she relayed the fragments of memory that continued to return after the night she'd remembered nearly being killed as a child. Though she still did not know more familiar knowledge about herself and her family, she'd remembered enough of Wolcott to give him a description, to call Angelica Forrester her friend and speak of her youthful admiration of Lady Aisley Forrester, the Countess of Danford and Lord Danford himself.

Dante had also gained her admiration for his devotion to art. Already, he'd begun the fresco for Cosimo de' Medici. The painstaking process of using powdered colors and wet plaster to bind the colors to the wall was extraordinary to behold.

She loved posing in the guest chamber with two lions for company, the youngest of the group she'd met in the *Palazzo Vecchio's* dungeons. It wasn't until the third day of posing that she learned Dante worked from both her actual pose and a series of cartoons he'd drawn the very night they'd returned to his workshop after their encounter with the Florentine lions and their first passionate kisses.

A knock at the bedchamber door signaled Mary's arrival. She'd heard her longtime friend pacing the floor outside the room. "Rhiannon, may I enter?"

"You needn't ask," Rhiannon answered, reaching for a cloth, soap and the vial of oil scented with myrrh. Needing a little more fragrance in her bath, she dribbled a bit into the water and watched the oil trickle through the ripples as she moved.

A moment later, Mary entered the chamber, her face flush with worry. "My dear Rhiannon, you must finish your bath and come have something to eat. You are to marry today."

"I'm very aware of this," Rhiannon said, smiling. She was happy and Dante had caused it. "Have you seen him, Mary? Is he as nervous as I?"

"Aye, I think he is." With a gleam in her eyes and lightness in her spirit, Mary rushed toward Rhiannon's bathtub. "He went to the workshop for a little while and gave his apprentices chores while he's away from the house, I expect."

"What?"

"Didn't you know? I shouldn't say anything more," Mary chided herself, clicking her tongue against her teeth. "I shall leave the rest for to Dante to say. We do not have time to delay. What may I do to assist?"

"You can hand me that bowl of cream." Rhiannon pointed to a small bowl of depilatory that she planned to use under her arms and on her legs. She'd already washed her hair long before adding oil to the bath and she bound it atop her head with a few hairpins.

For a brief moment, she considered ducking further beneath the water. Her lioness' mark was visible on her skin. It had not faded since the night it appeared. Although the glow had lessened some, it remained a pale silvery blue throughout the day. When Dante was near, her left breast and rib cage would grow warm, sending shimmers of sweet tension to her womb.

"Would you mind if I brush out your hair while you use the cream?" Mary asked.

"Mary, you've overseen my care for years now. You've never asked if you can brush my hair."

"I'm not your maid anymore, Rhiannon. You are a woman grown, one who is about to embark on marriage. I would like to brush your hair as I'd like to have done for my daughter on her wedding day...if I'd had one."

"Oh, Mary, I would like that very much," Rhiannon replied, touched that Mary Baker held such affection for her. "You are more than a maid to me, you've always been."

"This is good, *si*?" Mary tried to sound a little like Dante.

"*Si*, my friend, it is," Rhiannon answered in kind, giving over to Mary's attentions.

* * * * *

Dante paced about the bedchamber he and Rhiannon would use for the first two nights of their marriage. Making certain all was ready, he looked at the bed. The soft, silk covered mattress beckoned thoughts of laying her there and parting her thighs to receive him. He looked at the plush sitting chair provided for a guest's use, imagining what it would be like to sit there with Rhiannon on his lap, facing him or facing away. The floors were covered with exotic rugs bought from a wool merchant. The rich, bold colors of *rosso*, light and dark *azzurro*, *verde* and a hint of *marrone* teamed together to add dimension and depth to the bedchamber. Byzantine artwork and paintings adorned the walls and tables, complementing the rugs and the *rosso* bedcovers. He would enjoy taking Rhiannon against one of the walls, her back pressed to the earthen stone, and after, the floor atop one of those rugs.

Dante breathed in the lingering scent of frankincense and smiled. Rhiannon would soon be his. He had won her hand yet he knew that she still believed she'd been in error the night she almost lost her life. They did not know what had happened to her that night. But he vowed that he would stand by her regardless of whatever truth came forth.

"Dante, we should go." Eduardo called from the next room, coming to join Dante in the bedchamber. "The house is ready for you and Rhiannon."

"More than ready, *si*," Dante said. More than ready to marry his mate, his eyes alighting upon the book he'd chosen to give Rhiannon when they were alone. "Eduardo, have you heard anything from the messengers sent to England?"

Eduardo frowned and shook his head. "I have not. Cosimo would have informed me if he'd received word from the Earl of Danford or the Marquess of Raybourne. You must be patient, Dante. It is possible our messages have only just arrived."

"I shall pray you are right. Rhiannon grows restless. She needs answers, as do I," Dante said, turning and marching from the chambers.

* * * * *

Valiant Montgomery's heavy wooden bed groaned with his deliberate thrusts, the moans of the lady beneath him echoing her enjoyment of his prowess.

God's teeth, he loved women. Part of him wished he could remain inside of her for a fortnight. There was nothing better than a woman's smell, a woman's thighs wrapped about his hips.

"Oh, oh, my lord," Lady Cordelia, widowed heiress of Morehaven panted, her small, nimble fingers biting into his shoulders. "It isn't normal for a man to last this long. I shall perish if you push me to release again," she protested as he stroked in and out.

"You'll not perish, Cordelia, except for *la petite mort*," he teased. A great distance from Raybourne Manor, horses neighed, signaling the arrival of guests. "Bloody hell," he grumbled, refusing to be interrupted when he was so close to surcease.

Empowered by potential trouble, Valiant withdrew, coaxed Cordelia onto her stomach and lifted her pretty arse into the air. "I shall finish this my way, love," he growled when he found haven within her tight, moist flesh.

"My lord, my lord," Cordelia uttered into the mattress, her words slurred by their relentless coupling.

He timed his thrusts with the sound of his chamberlain's footsteps nearing his bedchamber. Cordelia sputtered and floundered, crying out when he reached between their bodies and pleased her toward a shattering completion as he withdrew to spill himself outside of her body.

Several heartbeats later, Valiant edged away from his mistress and slumped to the pillow. "Cordelia, I know it would be rude of me to leave you alone, but I must go for a little while."

"If it is your wish," Cordelia muttered. "Might I ask one of your servants to prepare a bath?"

"I shall make your wishes known," Valiant promised and eased from the bed. Cordelia turned over to face him and he studied her for a moment. She was pretty with her shining reddish brown tresses falling across the bed and covering her generous breasts and hips, but something about her left him a little cold. They'd been lovers for a fortnight and already he was growing restless.

"Have I done something wrong, my lord?" Cordelia pouted, her full, luscious lips hinting of pleasures yet to be offered.

"All is fine. Rest and I'll have a bath drawn for you," he said and walked away, dragging a bed sheet with him to tuck around his hips.

His chamberlain had just reached the chamber when Valiant opened the door. "Ah, Byron, I thought I heard you approaching. Is there trouble?"

"I don't know my lord. Two messengers have arrived from Florence insisting to speak with you at once. I have directed them to your favored solar."

"From Florence," Valiant repeated, frowning at his chamberlain. "God's teeth, Dante is in Florence." Saddened to know they'd lost touch due to his obligations to the English Crown and his title, he wondered what could be amiss. "Offer the men something to refresh themselves after their journey, I shall be there shortly."

"As you wish, my lord," Byron said. "What of the young lady?"

"The...young lady will require a bath and a maid, please see to both."

"Aye, my lord, I will send a maid for her." Bryon bowed and strode away, whispering about the various ladies Valiant had visiting Raybourne. Valiant might have rebuked his chamberlain for questioning his conduct, but settled on stalking back into his chambers and finding something suitable to wear.

Cordelia hadn't moved since he'd left the bed, her eyes were closed. Hoping she'd sleep and that she wouldn't miss him, he dressed, brushed his hair into a queue and quit the chamber.

By the time Valiant entered his solar, his worry for Dante Luciano had grown. "Gentleman, allow me to introduce myself, I am Valiant Montgomery, Marquess of Raybourne," he said.

"You are gracious to receive us, Lord Raybourne," one of the men said, rising to his feet, the other standing a bit slower. "I am Signore Vincenzo Ilario. Signore Giovanni Renaldo and I have come with word from Signore Dante Luciano and Cosimo de' Medici," he continued, offering a sealed envelope.

"Is my brother all right?" Valiant demanded before accepting the page.

"Your brother, my lord?" Signore Ilario asked.

"Dante Luciano is like a brother to me."

"Ah, I see. He is well. You should read the letter, Lord Raybourne. I know not the contents."

Valiant took the message and broke the seal. As he read the Latin script, a language Dante Luciano knew he enjoyed for its association with Abcynian ancient tongue, Valiant concentrated on the words.

"Nay, this cannot be possible," he murmured.

A woman named Rhiannon had gone to Dante in Florence, believing she was the daughter of the former Baron and Baroness of Wolcott. But that she had no real memory of whom she was. The message claimed she'd been detained at Linwood Castle in England for the past twenty years, which were the only years she could account for in her memory. And worse to Valiant's thinking, the woman seemed to be close to one hundred years old and had little knowledge of the Abcynian race. But Dante was certain she was one of their kind.

Dante also revealed that Rhiannon was his mate and that she'd gone to him for fear of being forced into marriage to the Earl of Cliffton.

Bloody hell, the girl had been missing for fifty years. "Rhiannon, we thought you were dead," he said aloud, certain he'd read the missive right and certain the woman was Rhiannon Mathews. "Signore Ilario, have you any further information?"

"I do not, my lord. Have you word to return to Florence?"

"Aye, give me a few moments and I will prepare a letter. Take it to Dante Luciano, no one else."

"I will," Signore Ilario promised, bowing his head in elegant acceptance.

Valiant marched to his desk, found foolscap, quill and ink and began to script his letter. Every now and then, he'd stop and read Dante's message. Could it be? Had Brandon and Judith been right when they claimed Rhiannon had not died fifty years ago?

They'd all seen the blood, the evidence of a struggle that had taken place in the forest bordering Wolcott. They'd found an Abcynian soldier beaten and bloodied, who claimed he had come upon Rhiannon while she was being dragged through the forest by several raiders but they found nothing of her. She'd just vanished and they assumed the worse. Later they learned the soldier had lied, that he had been part of Wolcott's destruction and Rhiannon's death. That he'd been trusted by the Forresters and Abcynians alike was devastating and the man died refusing to reveal what he knew about Rhiannon.

Regardless, for ten years Brandon and Judith led the search for their daughter. When nothing came of their efforts they accepted that she was gone and went to Africa to find peace after such a tragic loss. A few months ago, Brandon and Judith returned to England. They had other children and wanted them to be trained by Garrick and Grayson Forrester's powerful soldiers.

"God's wounds, Rhiannon," Valiant said, writing as he spoke.

"Lord Raybourne, we must leave soon. We need to reach Danford as soon as we are able," Signore Ilario urged. His companion remained silent, vigilant, but eager to leave nonetheless.

Valiant finished the letter, signed it and sealed it without delay.

"Nay, you needn't go to Danford. If you are willing to trust me, I will take the missive to the Earl of Danford. I am well acquainted with him. You needn't think I will fail you," he told the men, handing over the missive.

"You are the Marquess of Raybourne, we trust your word," Ilario decided.

The second man offered the message for Garrick Forrester.

"Your work is done here. If you should need anything before leaving ask my chamberlain," Valiant offered. "At the very least, refresh yourselves with a hearty meal and rest your horses before journeying back to Florence."

Giovanni and Vincenzo accepted the offer and reclaimed their seats. Without hesitation, Valiant quit the room and found Byron standing nearby. "Look after the men, Bryon. I shall leave Raybourne as soon as I gather supplies, saddle a horse and choose a small guard."

"Where do you go, my lord?"

"To Danford, there is news to share," Valiant answered, marching away.

"And what of the lady in your chambers, what shall I tell her?" Byron asked when Valiant was a good measure away.

"Inform Lady Cordelia that I've urgent business to attend and she should return to Morehaven by morning. I doubt I shall return to Raybourne for several sennights. There is nothing for her here while I'm gone."

"As you wish, my lord," the chamberlain said, seeming aware that Lady Cordelia's return to Morehaven heralded the end of Valiant's liaison with the pretty heiress.

Chapter Nine

The old cathedral echoed with the priest's homily, sending a cacophony of butterflies to take wing inside Rhiannon's chest as she spoke the vows that would make her Dante Luciano's wife. Though the words were spoken in Latin, Rhiannon understood the significance and repeated them, rejoicing when Dante spoke in his archangel's voice.

At long last, the priest joined their hands together, his wise, dark eyes upon them as he blessed their union.

All the while Rhiannon stared up at the man who'd become her husband. In the sennights since she'd come to Florence, her life had changed. Thus taking the vows of fidelity, of love and marriage felt right. For the first time since she stood upon the parapet at Linwood Castle and demanded to know who she was, she knew she'd done the right thing.

She may not have remembered everything from her past, but she was now Signora Rhiannon Luciano. The man before her was her future.

Soft-spoken words stirred within her temples. *You are happy, cara? You've no regrets about this day?*

She shook her head, relieved to hear Dante's voice. *I am happy. You are my future, Dante Luciano. I believe this now.*

Dante breathed deep then bent toward her to place a gentle kiss upon her lips. As gentle and chaste as the kiss was, anticipation pooled low in her womb.

Dante withdrew and smiled, understanding gleaming in his eyes. *The next time I kiss you, it will not be chaste, Signora Rhiannon Luciano.*

Rhiannon grinned. "I shall hold you to that, my husband," she said.

Standing straight and tall, Dante took her elbow. "Shall we go and celebrate our union, cara?"

"With pleasure," she agreed as she turned with his guidance. Dante's apprentices, Mary, Signore Fabrizio, several of Cosimo de' Medici's servants, prominent merchants and two Florentine artists sat in the pews, their gazes approving.

The priest spoke as the cathedral's bells rang, announcing to all beyond its ancient stone walls that Signore and Signora Dante Luciano were about to march down the aisle and begin their life together as man and wife. With the priest's permission, Dante guided Rhiannon down the aisle and into the vestibule. Two acolytes left their posts and opened the arched wooden doors.

Sunlight brightened their path and Rhiannon did not falter. She had Dante Luciano at her side. Nothing was more promising.

* * * * *

As the sun began to fade, Rhiannon stood still and silent, appreciating the splendor of the day and the promise of the night.

"Rhiannon, are you all right?" Mary asked behind her, her hand coming to rest upon Rhiannon's shoulder.

"Oh, I am more than all right, Mary," Rhiannon answered, pleased to say it and mean it.

The wedding had been like a fanciful tale spun by the finest of writers. From the day's warmth to the vows she'd shared with Dante the day had been perfect.

Taking her eyes from the setting sun Rhiannon found her husband speaking with Eduardo Fabrizio and another de' Medici household servant. The three were conspiring about something and she'd little idea as to what they'd planned.

"Do you know why those men are huddled together so?" Rhiannon wondered aloud, looking at Mary.

Mary clicked her tongue against her teeth, a habit she'd done several times this day. "Well now, my dear, if I conspired against Dante, his plans wouldn't be a secret. It is best if I remain mum."

"Mayhap I will speak with Dante about the matter."

"You should let him show you when the time is right," Mary suggested.

Rhiannon meant to respond, but at that moment Dante glanced up at her, a new purpose intensifying his golden eyes. He spoke to the man on his right, nodded to Eduardo, then headed straight for her.

"I trust you have enjoyed the celebration, *cara mia*?" Dante asked when he stood before her, looking resplendent in his azure and silver Florentine finery. She liked his habit of slashing his doublet, allowing for peeks of silver to draw the eye. Her gown, a complex design of silk damask with varying hues of blue and a hint of silver, complemented Dante's attire. It was obvious by the way they were dressed that they were now husband and wife.

"Rhiannon," Dante said, lifting an elegant brow.

"I heard you, I was admiring my husband," she replied, offering Dante a sincere smile. Oh, how she'd come to adore his trim beard-shadowed jaw, his masculine lips defined by the brush of his mustache. "This has been a splendid day. You've given me a wedding ceremony I never dared imagine. I am grateful, my lord."

Dante's golden gaze caressed her face, her throat, her damask silk bodice, and downward before returning to her face. "If that is so, Signora Rhiannon Luciano, might I suggest we leave? There is much more planned before the night has ended."

Nervous, Rhiannon licked her lips. Dante's eyes traced the gesture. His tongue edged his masculine lips, following the same path, as if imagining doing so to her mouth. Deep in her womb, the slow draw of a butterfly's wings tugged, sending feminine awareness to every part of her body.

"What have you planned?" Regardless of her innocence when it came to the pleasures to be shared between a man and a woman, she felt certain she understood Dante's intentions.

Dante took her hand, entwining his fingers with hers. "You shall have to trust me to show you."

"I trust you, Dante Luciano. You are my husband, lead and I shall follow."

Laughter roared from his chest, deep and loud, his happiness echoing about the piazza. "Then follow me, *cara mia*," he answered, sending a glance in Eduardo's direction.

Eduardo snapped his fingers and the gathering of celebrants stepped apart.

"He's sort of like Moses," Rhiannon whispered to Dante. "He's parted the sea."

Then she saw a magnificent stallion waiting at the end of the path, his dark sable coat reflecting the setting sun. A flash of white on the horse's forehead captured the eye, making him seem more mysterious, more beautiful.

"Dante, is the horse ours?"

"He is. We shall call him Aeneas, Latin for excellent. He is an excellent horse, *si*?"

"Aye, he's beautiful, majestic." Rhiannon studied the horse, noticing the fine musculature of the beast and his proud, graceful stride.

"Dante, I love horses," she recalled with clarity. "When Mary and I came to Florence, we came by boat and by cart. I wish now that we'd have traveled on horseback."

"Then it is good that I found one for you. Before leaving Florence, we shall purchase another."

"I would like that very much. How did you know I liked horses?"

"I didn't. I am pleased to know I guessed correctly."

"Oh, you did. May I go to him?"

"Of course, he is as much yours as he is mine."

Rhiannon tugged on Dante's hand, inviting him to come with her. Together they walked toward Aeneas, the memory of a man stopping her.

"Oh no," she grimaced.

"What is it?" Dante drew up short, keeping Rhiannon still while the groom led the horse to him and offered the reins.

"I remembered a man...my father I think...teaching me to ride." This time, the memory came without the burden of pain. Searching her thoughts, she looked up at her new husband. "He had a kind face and he was not overly big. But he was very strong, a warrior. Dante, he was a knight and his wanting me to ride was an extension of his knighthood." Her father's face flashed behind her eyes. He'd been handsome, confident but not given to arrogance. "He was so proud the day I rode upon the back of his destrier without him," she continued, looking toward the past while staring at her

husband's face, her future. "My mother, she was furious with him and scolded him so that all in Wolcott could hear, but he heard nothing but my laughter and pleasure. 'You needn't worry so, Judith, my love, I will not let Rhiannon fall,' he told her, his arms ready to catch me if I tipped off the saddle. I knew I was safe and I found a liking for riding as I sat atop the world on the back of a warhorse."

"Do you realize you just told me your mother's name?" Dante asked, bending enough to catch her eyes.

"Nay, I didn't," she rejected at first, surprised. "I did and I'm not ill. I felt nothing but the memory and it was pleasant."

"I am pleased the memory came without causing you discomfort, *cara*." Dante's left hand came up to cup her cheek, his big, capable fingers framing her jaw. His thumb caressed her skin, adding shivers of pleasure to the wonder of remembering her mother's name.

"Aye, as am I." Almost quickly as it had come, her father's face began to dim, and try as she might, she could not say his name. In place of her momentary pleasure, unbidden worry plagued her temples, threatening a headache. "But I do not remember my father's name. I can see his face, but not his name."

"Rhiannon, be proud of what you've learned. Remembering his face is a victory, your mother's name a step in reclaiming your family."

With Dante's encouragement, Rhiannon blinked and gave her attention back to him. "You are always so patient with me. How is it you don't berate me for worrying about my past? We've been married for less than a day and I haven't asked if you've enjoyed the celebration. I should be thinking about you."

"Our marriage does not change your need to learn where you came from. Signora Rhiannon Luciano, I am proud to call you my wife. Giving you a horse has induced a memory that came without pain. I'd give you the very stars in the sky if it would make you smile like you did when you said your mother's name. Leave your worries in the city. Allow me to lead you into our future. If you do, I am certain more memories will continue to flow."

She gaped, nervous in the face of the purposeful gleam in Dante's eyes. "We are leaving Florence, now?"

"Cosimo de' Medici has offered the use of a guesthouse, located far beyond the walls of Florence. It is his gift to us and it is secluded."

"That sounds nice. I would like to go there very much."

Dante smiled and grasped her hand to lift it to his lips. The kiss he pressed to her knuckles was warm, intent, his tongue sneaking out to moisten her skin.

"As you wish," he said, urging her hand to Aeneas' shoulder.

Stroking the stallion's sleek coat, a purr emanated through her body. At first, the horse shied, tossing his proud, sable head upward, his eyes widening in fear.

"He senses what we are," she whispered.

Calm him with your thoughts. He'll understand, Dante said in her mind because Eduardo came to join them. *Abcynians communicate with all animals. You do not just possess the lineage of a lion. You are an Abcynian woman, first and foremost.*

Rhiannon ran her hand from the horse's shoulder to his flank, sending him waves of reassurance and calm. Within moments, Aeneas settled, his tail swishing back and forth.

Dante went down on one knee and cupped his hands, forming a step for her to climb onto the horse's back. Touched by the gesture, she stuck her foot into his interlocked fingers and allowed him to give her a gentle push upward until she was seated in the saddle.

A heartbeat later, he lifted himself into the saddle and settled at her back. "Sit like this." He assisted her to place her legs over the left side of the horse with her back resting against her husband's strong chest.

"Watch over my workshop, Eduardo," Dante asked of his friend. "I'll trust my apprentices to your care."

"I'll keep them safe," Eduardo promised, bowing low, his smile sincere.

Eager to leave and a little nervous, she leaned against Dante, supported by his solid chest. With each clip clop of Aeneas' hooves over the streets that led them away from Florence, Rhiannon knew she was falling in love with Dante Luciano.

She had not planned it or wondered at the right or wrong of it, nor questioned the length of time they'd known one another. Her love was there, as real as the sun dipping lower in the sky, peaks of gold, silver, blue and purple splitting the heavy clouds.

Looking at the fading sun from the angle of Dante's chest, she couldn't help noticing that the sun had slashed the clouds, much like her husband's penchant for slashing his clothing.

Lifting her head, Rhiannon looked at Dante, finding him regal, handsome, the prince of dreams she'd never realized she had until they met. "Might I ask you something?"

"Of course you may," he said.

"It is my understanding that because I am the child of converted Abcynians I will age faster than you, a full Abcynian."

"That is true, for now. But once we complete the mating ritual you will age along with me."

Puzzled, she frowned. "You mean as long as we copulate our aging will match?"

"Abcynian mating is more than that. It is also the sharing of our essences through biting."

"Biting?" Trembling, Rhiannon became more nervous. "Nay, Dante, I'll not bite you," she protested, worried that she was to behave like an animal. "I was bitten once. I was almost killed by an Abcynian in panther form. I'll not take your life likewise."

"You misunderstand," he soothed and tightened his left arm, leaving her to realize that he was left-handed. "When you bite me or I bite you we are offering our spirit, our essences to each other. With my essence in your blood, you will become stronger and heal faster than you already do. Your headaches will not burden you or cause you to rely on sustenance to relieve them. They will cease altogether."

"If Abcynians heal faster why am I plagued by headaches at all?"

"You were kept bound by gold and nepeta cataria for fifty years. Both kept you from being what you are. Your body needs to adjust to the changes."

"Dante, if I resist this ritual of biting will it disappoint you?"

"Nothing you ever do will disappoint me. I understand your reluctance to bite, for now."

"What if I can't accept it, ever?" Rhiannon loved Dante. But knowing someone had attempted to take her life with their powerful jaws made her question whether she could accept the mating ritual. What if she bit him too hard or tore his flesh and made him bleed?

Shuddering, she almost cried. "Do not misunderstand, Dante, pray do not. I've bound my life to you today. I love you. I am your wife in all things, but biting...that...scares me."

"I know," he said, compassion echoing in his voice. "I love you, Rhiannon Luciano, always. I'll not rush you into any intimacy you're not ready to accept. When it is right we will come together in this."

"You will not rush me?"

"I will not. Have I failed to honor my promises thus far?"

"Nay, you have not. Speaking of promises, have you heard anything from England?"

"I'd hoped to have something to tell you tonight when we were alone. Eduardo and I believe word may have only just arrived. As Danford is further away from Florence than Raybourne, the message will reach Valiant first."

"What do you suppose Valiant will do?"

"If he's received the message, he will go to Danford and confer with Garrick. After that, he may attempt to come to Florence."

"But we are to go to him."

"It is the plan. Truth be told, Rhiannon, I feel certain Valiant will wait for Garrick Forrester's advice before proceeding. In some things, he can be very impulsive. When it comes to loyalty to *famiglia* and *l'amicos* you'll not find a better man."

"I admit that I'm looking forward to meeting him again," she said. "If it's all the same to you, I'd rather think of us."

"As would I," he returned, pressing a kiss to her temple.

Looking back, Rhiannon saw nothing of the city. Night was approaching, the moon rising, replacing the sun.

"The moon is full, just as you'd claimed it would be."

"*Si*, Abcynians love the full moon. It is easiest to change form during this time, none are certain why."

"Mayhap someday we will know."

"Mayhap," he said.

For a time, they fell into a companionable silence. Rhiannon enjoyed being cradled in Dante's lap as they rode, the horse's muscles rippling beneath them. The night became magical as they galloped with the light of the moon.

Exhilarated from the ride, she laughed, pleased to hear and feel Dante's warm, deep-seated purr. Soon they came to a halt before a quaint house made of wood and stone and surrounded by olive trees.

Dante lowered her to the ground then dismounted and stabled Aeneas in a small barn. As she waited, she began to tremble, even though she wanted to follow Dante into the private sanctuary of the house. Rubbing her arms to ward away her nervousness, she wasn't surprised when he strode out of the barn and spied her doing so.

"You needn't be afraid," Dante said when he came near, taking her hands and pressing them to his lips. "There is nothing inside this house that will harm you, nor will I."

"I know you'd never hurt me, but you've made love before. I haven't. I know nothing."

Lowering her hands, he stared down at her, a smile curving his lips. "Look at me," he encouraged when she attempted to look away. Swallowing, she met his gaze. The tremors halted as his confidence rained down upon her, filling her with his strength. "You know more about making love than you realize. Once we're inside, do not doubt or question anything. Let your heart guide you and all will be fine."

"Then take me inside," Rhiannon said, ready to become Dante's lover.

"Kiss me first," he invited, his free hand touching her chin to tilt her head back a little further.

With pleasure, she thought when Dante bowed his head and captured her mouth.

She adored the scrape of his beard, the tickle of his mustache. The gentle brush of his lips invited her to gasp and he became more urgent, masterful, his tongue sliding in and out, in and out, wrapping about her tongue, tangling, dueling. Wanting to be closer, she clasped her hands behind his nape and discovered that he liked having his neck touched and caressed.

Unable to deny herself the pleasure of kissing him there, she broke away and lifted to the tips of her toes. Her head fit beneath his chin, which he arched with the nudge of her forehead. Sneaking a taste, she licked the pulse of his throat. His purr tickled her

tongue. Encouraged, she licked him again, over and over. His skin was slightly salty, his scent pervasive and heady.

"Hmm, I love how you smell," she purred now, the vibrations becoming one with Dante's. "Cloves, linseed oil and a touch of the pigments you used yesterday. Crushed buckthorn berries, lapis lazuli, cochineal beetles. They are all a part of you, Dante, and I love them because of it. Just the same, I smell the bathwater you used this morning, clean, simple hot water, nothing else. So nice, so wonderful," she crooned, running her tongue over his pulse, tasting him, twirling the tip of her tongue over his warm skin.

"*Dio, cara*, continue this way and I may take you out here, on the ground," he warned.

"I think our first time should be in a bed," she said, hoping he'd agree. *I'm not sure it's right to love beneath the stars, with the horse as a witness.*

"Anywhere we lay together is right."

"Why is it that I don't hear you as often as you seem to hear me?"

"You can hear me, you just need to listen. Then again, there were times during the last four *la settimane* that I've thought of taking you in ways that might have frightened you. If I'd given my thoughts to you, you may have boxed my ears."

"I'll not box your ears if you take me in the house," she promised.

"As my lady wishes," he laughed, hoisting her into his strong arms and jostling her a bit when he opened the door and carried her over the threshold.

He did not stop until he'd placed her on the bed and went to light a candle. She enjoyed watching the flame flicker across his face.

"The house smells wonderful." Inhaling, she drew in the scent of frankincense, the exotic aroma flooding the bedchamber along with the traces of myrrh on her skin.

She didn't even venture a guess as to what the remainder of the home looked like. Had a vague idea of the vibrancy of colors throughout the room, but she felt the luxurious bedcovers beneath her, the scarlet silk growing warm with her own feminine heat.

"You planned this, didn't you?" she asked, watching him light a few more candles placed about the room.

"I wanted our first night as man and wife to be special. I'd asked Cosimo for use of the house and he granted two nights. I am grateful because no one can interrupt us."

"As am I." She knew Dante would have liked to have more time alone. Finishing the fresco before they left Florence made that impossible.

Dante stalked to the bed, removing his doublet as he moved. By the time he reached the bed, his torso was bare, leaving her awed.

It was her first view of his naked chest. He was splendid. His body was etched with muscle, a shadow of dark hair crossed his chest and arched to his navel, emphasizing his lean waist. She could see his copper areolas through the dusting of hair on his chest,

his small nipples were peaked, making her mouth water and sending ripples of pleasure and warmth to her womb.

"Are you not going to remove your breeches?" she asked.

"I never wear clothing in bed," he said.

Rhiannon licked her lips as Dante perched on the giant four-poster bed and removed his boots. A few moments later, his breeches and codpiece were tossed to the floor beside the rest of his clothing. Unwilling to remain passive, she began to wiggle out of her gown until he stopped her.

"I will undress you. There's no need to rush unless we want to."

Dear God in heaven, with each passing breath, the intimacy and exotic fragrance of the house combined with Dante's rapidly bared body was making her want things she'd never known possible. She wanted his hands, his lips, his body, everything that he had, she wanted. And she wanted him now!

"You have me, Rhiannon," he said, reading her mind. "You have from the day we met."

Dante stood, drawing Rhiannon's eyes to his naked, hair roughened thighs, his taut calves and big, surprisingly elegant feet. She'd never before thought of feet as anything more than a means to walk. Tonight, she found herself wondering if her husband liked to have his feet rubbed, touched...kissed?

He lifted his eyes, lids widening, revealing that she'd given him her thoughts. "*Si*, all of it, as you will."

"I believe you." Rhiannon's heart was racing. She longed to take this amazing, talented artist into her arms and love him. "Won't you join me?" she asked, lifting her gaze from his feet to his thighs, and onward.

She wanted to see all of him, to study and master his body. At the moment, she could see his skin glowing in candlelight, the coarse hair crossing his chest, the leanness of his hips and the width of his shoulders. Tempted to look lower, she halted, wondering if it was right for a woman to look at her husband in such a way.

"It is all right to look upon your husband, Signora Luciano."

"You are beautiful," she praised.

More splendid than Michelangelo's David, Dante's body was sculpted perfection, testament to the hard work he did every day by wielding a paintbrush or a chisel and hammer, pounding pigments with mortar and pestle, lifting canvases and preparing them for use. The leanness of his hips revealed the strength of his legs. His manhood, large and erect, bobbed a little with each breath he took. Heat swarmed into her cheeks and she'd no idea where to look, what to do. She was fascinated nonetheless.

Merciful God in Heaven, were all men made like him? She'd never seen a naked man and had no comparison. Some of the maids in Linwood giggled when they whispered about the male servants in the castle, but she had the feeling that men they gossiped about were not nearly this beautiful. Mayhap she'd married a Roman god?

Purring and growling low in his chest, Dante lowered himself to the foot of the bed and began to crawl toward her. With the glow of candlelight behind him, his mahogany and brown hair looked like a full lion's mane, his golden eyes glowed, his mouth parted to reveal just a hint of his canines. He looked ready to pounce and Rhiannon wanted him to.

"You compare me to a Roman god, *cara mia*," he said, his smile so intense it sent waves of heat through her abdomen, awakening the dewy softness of her womanhood. "Not a Greek god?"

"Nay, Roman," she said. "I know many of the gods in Greek and Roman mythology share similarities, but you...hmm...you remind me of what Mercury might have looked like, long, lean, strong and agile, but infinitely powerful."

"At least you didn't compare me to Venus," he chuckled, enjoying their banter.

"How could I dare? You are a man, Dante Luciano."

"In that case, come to your god, my beautiful wife, let me worship you."

"Shouldn't I worship you?"

"Let us compromise and worship each other," he amended.

"I like the sound of that." Waiting for him to lie beside her, she gasped when he slid on top of her and straddled her hips. Accepting his weight, she was surprised that his nudity did not embarrass her. Instead it made her feel hot and her flesh more sensitive to the barrier of damask silk impeding her ability to feel him from head to toe.

Knowing what she needed, Dante tugged on her wrists until they both sat up. With an adjustment to accommodate his hardness, she gasped at the sight of his thighs widening to embrace her skirted knees.

"Let me undress you," he murmured, already working at the fastenings in the back.

It didn't take him long to find each fastening, loosening the gown until the sleeves lowered to her elbows. A brief tug had jolted her before her bodice and shift spilled to her waist, baring her generous breasts to his appreciative gaze. Heat blazed within his golden eyes, warming her skin, sending wave upon wave of pleasure to the heart of her womanhood.

"What you do to me, *bella*, I cannot describe," he uttered.

"You needn't describe anything. Show me. Paint my body as you would your portraits. By your hands, make me yours."

"Your body is beautiful. Painting you will be a pleasure." Without hesitation, he cupped her breasts, weighing them, caressing the rounded globes. "Succulent," he murmured, dipping his head to watch her nipples elongate with the brush of his fingertips, his right forefinger and thumb paying homage to the lioness's mark on her left breast, enticing a silvery glow that radiated through her entire being.

"My, oh, my," she cried out, arching her hips toward him with the scrape of his shortened nails. Over and over, he etched her nipples, scraping, pulling and tugging, never hurting. Just as he'd seduced with a kiss outside the door, he did the same to her

breasts, making them his, loving each and every part. His callused artists' fingers found every curve, the soft underside, stiffened nipples and pebbled areolas, making her feel as if he were sculpting her breasts.

On sheer impulse, Rhiannon lifted her hands and rested them atop of his. A growl rumbled through his chest, sending a ripple along his taut abdomen. His manhood pulsed against her still clothed thigh. Turning his hands to entwine his fingers with hers, he caught her palms up against his chest, splaying her fingers through the silken hairs of his chest.

Understanding what he wanted, she teased his nipples with her thumb and forefinger, pinching as he'd done to her. What if she kissed them? Dante told her not to doubt herself and at present she wanted very much to lap him with her tongue.

"*Si*, do what you'd like." His voice was so deep rivulets of sensation pooled deep within her feminine sheath.

With his invitation, Rhiannon ran her hands all over his chest, learning every curve, dip and muscle, playing with his nipples. Leaning closer, she nuzzled his sternum but she needed more. A small, tentative lick on his right nipple compelled him to thrust, his manhood knocking at her navel. She licked again, circling the tiny little bud, sweet tingles echoed along the petals of her femininity with each twirl of her tongue.

"Cease, for a moment, *Dio*." Dante pushed her from him long enough to maneuver her out of her gown. She'd not noticed until then that he'd ripped her shift to shreds when he loosened the back of her dress. It lay in pools of silk cloth about her waist. That too was soon removed, leaving her naked before his heated gaze.

"Rhiannon Luciano, you are glorious and sweet and all mine. Always mine," he proclaimed, pressing her backward until he was braced above her, his arms on either side of her head.

"Kiss me," she invited.

"A sweeter invitation I've never known." He bent at the elbows to take her mouth.

Softer this time, his lips whispered across hers, back and forth, beckoning her lips to part. His tongue stroked the upper and lower curve of her lips, diving between her teeth, withdrawing before she could meet it.

"Umm, do not tease," she implored.

"Ah, *cara mia*, I shall never tease you when it comes to this," he promised then kissed her as her arms wrapped about his shoulders.

He lowered his body to hers, his furred chest feathering across her nipples. Arching at the contact of their bodies, she pled for more. Dante answered, his talented mouth worshiping her chin, her jaw, her throat. He nipped once, causing her to start.

"I'll not hurt you. I promised not to rush you into the ritual," he said, kissing the spot he'd nipped. "On my honor, *cara*, I will not betray your trust."

"I believe you." Liking the feel of his mouth on her neck, she lifted her chin, granting him access to her vulnerable skin. Understanding her gift, he worshiped her

throat with kisses, licks and the sweet abrasion of his beard and mustache. His facial hair reminded her of a paint brush, sparking her imagination as he skimmed his face over her bared, heated skin. As he shifted, their thighs connected, his manhood nestling against her mound.

At first she thought he would enter her. He shook his head, showing that he meant to offer more before making her his wife in every way.

Encouraged, she ran her hands over his shoulders, pressing her fingers into the notches of his spine and the masculine tightness of his buttocks. Squeezing, she invited him to kiss and lick her sternum, her throat, her rib cage. When she thought she could stand no more, he lifted his head and nuzzled her left nipple with his nose. With a playful roar, he did the same along the entirety of the translucent lion's mark.

Heat radiated from the tattoo, sending frissons of pleasure to her womanhood. Then his clever mouth dampened her nipple, his tongue laving. His teeth nipped once, twice, then pulled her nipple into the warm, wet cavern of his mouth and suckled as a babe seeking milk. Arching into him, she lifted her head, amazed to see almost half her breast within his mouth. His strong sucking pulled at her womb, each deliberate tug made her moan. Her hips rocked in rhythmic cadence with his. The soft brush of masculine hair lining his thighs and calves tickled, and it seemed as though he were indeed painting her body with his.

Then she felt it. Beneath the dark brown and mahogany hair that crossed his chest, his lion's tattoo glowed, growing warmer with the tug and play of his mouth.

A full mane crowned the lion's massive head, dominating the right side of his chest. Rhiannon stared, amazed to find that his mark fit against the lioness on her left breast.

How she'd not seen it before amazed her. She guessed the cross of hair upon his chest had masked the silvery blue tattoo and their touches brought out the translucent glow.

"Si, you are right," he praised, lifting his head, their combined purring rumbling through the soft, feathered bed.

"I cannot wait much more, pray do not ask me," she demanded.

"We needn't rush the first time." The throb of his manhood warned that waiting longer wouldn't be possible.

"Please, make me yours," she hissed when they shifted in unison and the head of his shaft began to nudge her small entrance. "Please."

"Your wish is my command." Widening her thighs a bit more, she cradled him as he began to press into her. "This may hurt, just once, *cara*, and never again."

Feeling full and loved, Rhiannon arched against Dante, accepting his final, penetrating thrust. A burst of bittersweet pain startled her, forcing him to remain still. Almost as quickly, the sting eased. The moment the pain subsided, he flexed, thrusting to the very hilt, withdrawing, thrusting.

"Oh...mercy...oh," she cried, amazed at how right and natural it was to take Dante's thrusts and meet each with her own, their rhythm intensifying at times, slowing when both edged too close to a precipice that she was just beginning to understand.

"*Si*, Rhiannon, rock with me, love with me," he murmured as he withdrew and drove forward.

"Dante, I...need...oh mercy." She was spiraling, her insides tightening into a delicious coil of tension that seemed almost elusive and fragile. Yet every thrust of hips made her feel stronger, more alive, a passionate, living woman accepting the love of her husband.

"I know what you need." Bracing most of his weight with his left arm, he kissed her while his hand caressed down to where their bodies were joined.

Feeling awkward by his boldness, she tried to clench her thighs to keep him from touching her there. Another kiss calmed her and he pressed his advantage.

This time, Rhiannon received his touch, his thumb and forefinger finding a pulsating knot hidden close to her woman's entrance. His thumb etched her feminine petals, parting her more, his fingertip circling the sweet, aching nub that pulsed with each deliberate drive of his hips, his manhood buried so deep it seemed as though he touched her heart.

With the skill of an artist, Dante's long, callused fingers drew her closer and closer to a startling, indescribable crescendo. All at once, the tension in her womb broke, sending wave upon wave of pleasure through her entire body as she soared straight to heaven.

With his hand and with his body, he made love to her, made her his wife, his lover. When she was certain she would fracture into tiny pieces, Dante thrust so hard and so deep that her inner muscles clutched him until he roared loud enough to shake the walls of the stone house. Rhiannon's world coalesced once again into sweet waves of oblivion, inviting her husband to find his own, soul-wrenching release.

When next she could breathe, her world remained filled with Dante Luciano, her husband, her lover. He'd draped his long, lean muscled body along hers, enveloping her in love and reassurance.

"I love you, Rhiannon Luciano," he said, bestowing a kiss to her brow before resting his head against her breasts. Their panthera marks were connected, glowing with contented warmth.

Wrapping him in her arms, she cherished the feel of him still joined with her, the rightness of it bringing tears to her eyes. Happy and at peace, she purred along with her husband and waited for their bodies to recover.

Chapter Ten

Wrapped in Rhiannon's arms, Dante had never known such pleasure after being with a woman. This woman was unique, for she was more than his lover. She was his wife and mate.

Knowing she was strong but still growing in her Abcynian gifts, he knew he should remove his weight from atop her but he sought to stay a little while longer. This was where he belonged, where he'd become a man, even though he'd been considered an Elder for forty-two years.

Rhiannon hummed beneath him. "Dante, I never realized how wonderful relations could be."

"Neither have I," he confessed, smiling to himself when he lifted his head and pressed a kiss to the lioness's neck, where it arched over the curve of her breast. He was tempted to nuzzle her flesh and pierce her skin to seek the vein that would carry his essence to her heart, bestowing upon her his very life, his soul.

He wouldn't. He could not offer her that gift until she could accept what it meant. He understood her fears. He only hoped to find a way to convince her that she could trust the custom of panthera Abcynian biting.

Drawing their combined scents deep into his lungs, he appreciated the aromas of frankincense and myrrh, cassia and linseed oil, soap and wine, and the underlying, unmistakable fragrance of their shared sweat, lingering arousal and the musky satiation of their loving. The longer he lingered at the mark on her skin, the more tempting it was to reveal his panthera leo dominance. It would be easy for him to flip her to her stomach, sink his teeth into her neck or shoulder and take her. Rather than frightening her, he restrained himself.

"Dante, nay, do not," Rhiannon said, following his train of thoughts, which he refused to hide from her any longer. "If you want me, I am yours. But pray do not bite me like that." That she trusted him enough to ask and believe he'd honor her request touched his heart.

Raising his head, Dante caught her eyes, the amber depths swirled with passion and worry. "Ease your mind, *cara*. I'll not do anything you're unwilling to accept." Placing his hands above her shoulders, he pushed himself up, withdrawing from her warm, wet, tight sheath. *Dio*, he did not want to pull out, but it was necessary.

"Are you all right, Rhiannon? I did not hurt you?"

"You didn't," she smiled. "And I am grateful for your understanding about the biting. Be patient with me, Dante, and maybe things will change."

Smiling down at her, he nodded. "Your willingness to try is all I need to remain patient."

"Grazie," she said.

Touched by her use of such a simple word, Dante edged closer for a kiss. Lingering over the swell of her bottom lip, he swiped his tongue along the curve and drew her lip between his teeth. Holding her gaze, he nipped, just enough to keep her from pulling back, but not enough to sting.

Signore Luciano, are you trying to seduce me again? she asked in their way, surprising him when she touched her tongue to his.

The thought had crossed my mind. Freeing her lip, he delved his tongue into the silken cavern of her mouth. Innocent and tempting, her tongue parried his and she wound her hands about his neck. *I'd planned to love you in all sorts of ways before entering you the first time, Rhiannon. I don't wish to rush you now. If we continue on this path, I will be tempted to ignore my best intentions.*

Rhiannon gasped in longing, her willingness to let him take her apparent in the tightening of her hands, the arch of her hips against his already hardening staff. It wasn't uncommon for Abcynian men to be capable of copulation soon after climaxing but his wife needed to rest a little while. She may not have noticed the inevitable tenderness between her thighs, yet he suspected she would soon enough.

He shifted and kissed her sweat dampened brow. "You are my wife now, Rhiannon. I hope to prove a worthy husband from this day forward."

"I know that you will," she said, unclenching her hands from his neck to run her fingers through his short hair. "You've given me much this day, Dante. I shall always be grateful."

"Have you any regrets?"

"Nay, the day was lovely." Rhiannon pushed up to her elbows as he moved to the edge of the bed. "Although, there is one thing I might have added."

"What is it? If it is in my power, I will correct it," he said.

"Under the circumstances I'm not sure how you could. I'd have liked to have had my parents at our wedding."

Dante would have liked that as well. "I wish I could have found them for you, Rhiannon. Since I could not, mayhap there is something we could do when we find them."

"What do you mean?"

"Would you be willing repeat our vows after we've found your family?" he asked. Kneeling on the floor beside the bed, he met her eyes.

Rhiannon frowned. "Aren't we wed in the name of God and the law?"

"We are." Wanting to soothe her momentary fear, he placed his hand beneath her chin to keep her from turning away. She could be such a shy thing when she misunderstood him or worried about the past. "I'd meant that we could have a second

ceremony in England. Anything you want, *cara mia*. If it is within my means, I shall give it to you."

"As tempting as a second ceremony sounds, I'd like to think on the matter," she said, turning her face into his palm much like a kitten with her master. Her purr tickled his fingertips, bringing genuine joy to his soul. "Our ceremony and the celebration in the *piazza* meant everything to me, Dante. I could not ask for anything more. This day was our wedding day, you made it perfect. Having another ceremony won't make me any happier."

Pride warmed her amber eyes. "Then you are happy?"

"I am, my husband, I am." Rhiannon surprised him when she bent closer and kissed him. The soft brush of her lips against his tempted him into returning to the bed, but there were matters to attend before making love to his wife again.

Pulling back, Dante combed his fingers through her silky hair and stood. "I have something to share with you, Rhiannon."

"Pray not another gift, you've given me enough as it is."

"It is a gift for both of us."

"Who has blessed us so?"

Before answering, Dante strode across the room to pour a chalice of sustenance, which he had placed on the side table earlier in the day. Finding the leather-bound tome beneath the side table, he kept it covered with a cloth, tucked it beneath his right arm and carried the chalice with his left hand.

"What have you there?" Rhiannon's curious gaze lingered on the wine then turned to the gift.

"You need to drink some sustenance," Dante suggested, strolling back.

"I had some earlier," she assured.

"I know," he said. Placing the covered tome on the foot of the bed, Dante playfully slapped Rhiannon's hand when she attempted to touch it. "Not yet, drink first, *bella*," he ordered.

"If you insist, taskmaster," she pouted, sticking her tongue out at him in a sensual gesture that induced his groin to throb and his shaft to swell with renewed vigor.

"Careful, vixen, I may have to take you to task for that impertinent tongue," he warned, lifting a stern brow and succeeding in making Rhiannon laugh. The sound was so infectious and sweet that he grinned and sat beside her.

"You'd never hurt me."

"I wouldn't, there are other ways for you to use that tongue," he said and gave her the chalice. Noticing that she winced when she accepted the wine, he frowned. "Drink slowly, it will ease the tenderness you're feeling."

"I am a little sore," she told him, two crimson streaks heating her cheekbones as she drank. "Tell me we'll be able to be together again soon. I'm not sure once is enough."

Dante smiled and touched his hand to her cheek. "We will, very soon."

Rhiannon drank from the chalice, leaving it half full and then offering him the rest. "Won't you show me the gift?" she said.

He drank his fill and set the empty chalice aside. Already feeling refreshed, he nudged her to the center of the bed. Reclining against the plethora of bolsters and the massive olive wood headboard, he patted the place next to him. "Join me, my wife."

"Is it safe to admit that I love being your wife?" Rhiannon settled beside him, her bare thigh brushing his.

"It is, and I'm glad that you do, *cara*. You will be my wife for a very long time."

"I love that even more."

"As do I," he praised and jostled the thick, leather-bound tome with his knee until he could reach it. "Now let me show you our gift. This is very rare and we are fortunate that Cosimo de' Medici wanted to honor our marriage with such a treasure," he said.

Rhiannon stared at the package, her eyes widening as she studied it. "It looks like a book."

"*Si*, it was first printed in 1550." With the book in one hand, he removed the cover.

Again Rhiannon stared, her fascination with the ornate, leather binding obvious even though she could not read the title. "It's beautiful," she whispered, reverently fingering the papered edges and peeking at the text. "I do not understand the language, Dante. I studied French when I was at Linwood Castle, but other languages are a mystery to me."

"I shall teach you Latin and Italian," he promised.

"I would like that, but first tell me the title in English."

"It is Vasari's Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects."

"Oh my, I didn't realize there was such a volume in existence." With the curiosity of a female Abcynian she studied the bold script, her fascination apparent. "Are you described in this book, Dante?"

"Nay, I am not. I've made certain that I wouldn't be included. I've lived in and out of Florence for the better part of ninety-five years. At first I'd come to study my father's contribution to the arts and his fascination with classical thought and ideals. My instinct and desire to become an artist was sparked while I'd visited and Lucien Hunter later arranged for me to meet Lorenzo de' Medici in 1469. Since then I've left the city long enough to prevent anyone from growing suspicious as to my age and to keep anyone from writing stories about my artwork. I did not come to Florence for fame or personal glory, Rhiannon. I came because I love the arts and wanted to contribute to the beauty and grandeur of the city. After apprenticing and gaining acceptance in the painters' guild forty years ago under a different name, I left and spent time in Spain, Germanic settlements and Venice. On my return to Florence ten years ago, I apprenticed again, entered the painters' guild and was fortunate to gain the patronage of the de' Medicis. I

am grateful. But before you'd come, I'd begun to fear that I would have to leave again when those closest to me realize I do not age as they do."

Rhiannon lifted her eyes from the book, her gaze concerned. "Then it is a good thing that we are going to England," she said, chewing her bottom lip in a gesture he'd never seen before. Suspecting it was a habit from her youth Dante moved closer and touched his thumb to her lip.

"It is good, Rhiannon Luciano. Meeting you in the *Piazza della Signoria* was a blessing. You may have come to Florence needing my help but you provided me with the means of living the remainder of my life with a true sense of purpose."

"You...mean you do not intend to return to Florence and resume your work?"

Dante shook his head. There was much about Florence that bothered him, the laws, the crowds and the expectations for a man of his stature to live in accordance to Niccolo Machiavelli's *Il Principe*. But beyond that, someday he would like to return to the city as a visitor.

Knowing he'd been silent long enough, Dante smiled at his wife. "Florence, like most cities, has its faults. I'm ready to leave. I should hope to visit when it is safe. I'd also like for us to travel to Rome, Venice and Milan to study the artists there, mayhap contributing when I dare."

"I'd like that."

"You know I'd not go anywhere without you." Gently, he placed his hand atop hers where she'd rested it on the book. "This book details much of the lives of those I've known and worked with for more than ninety years and I'd like to share their stories with you."

"Reading this book with you is something I will cherish, wherever we are. If you do not want to live in England, Venice or Milan, we can return to Florence and I shall help you find a way to stay and paint to your heart's content. Isn't there a bible passage promising such a thing? Aye, it is in Ruth. Where you go, I shall go. Where you lodge, I shall also lodge. My place will be with you, Dante Luciano, wherever we choose to live."

Falling more in love with her, Dante wrapped the tome in the protective cloth and set it on the floor. "You have pleased me, Signora Rhiannon Luciano, very much," he said when he settled back beside her. "Lean against me, *cara*."

"Hmm, I'd like that," she agreed, jostling the pillows until she found a comfortable spot and turned to place her head on his chest.

Loving the feel of her soft, pale blonde hair teasing his skin, he began to comb his fingers through the long, silky tresses. For awhile, he relished in the wonder of stroking her hair, allowing his fingers to lightly scrape her scalp. To his surprise, he felt several irregular bumps hidden by the length of her hair.

Curious as to why, he lifted his head. Brushing the pale tresses away from her scalp, he discovered that the bumps were jagged scars that had aged over fifty years.

Once healed, an Abcynian did not scar unless the injury was made from gold or was so severe that one's life would have been lost had a miracle not intervened.

By miracle of God's own hand, Rhiannon had survived and it was a blessing to know that such grave wounds did not result in the reduction of her wits and mind. True, she'd lost her childhood memories, but her intelligence remained strong. Mayhap the slow, meticulous healing had been the reason she'd healed so well, and for that he'd always be grateful.

Rhiannon must have sensed Dante's tension, for she lifted her head and caught his eyes. "The injuries have healed, Dante, you needn't feel sad. The scars are nothing. I've you now and the means to control and lesson my headaches. Let us not be sad on a night like this."

Agreeing, he released his pending anger and tucked her back against his chest. "You have a likeness for the arts, don't you, Rhiannon?"

"Aye, I do." Shifting her head against his chest, she settled with her face pressed to his lion's mark. With the touch of her cheek, the mark grew warm. "Regardless of his faults, Baron Linwood believed teaching me about painting, sculpture, literature and music was part of educating a noblewoman. As much as I detested French lessons and the dark days spent in bed, learning how to paint was like a balm to my soul. Learning about mythology, being taught classical thought, keeping a writer's journal and reading Gutenberg's Bible helped me feel alive. I'm not a very talented artist and writing in a journal is for my enjoyment alone, but I do believe I know what I like when I see a work of art or read a classic piece of literature."

"Tell me more," Dante prodded, enjoying the conversation that helped take his mind off his aching, growing erection.

As much as he intended to have Rhiannon many times before the night ended, he wanted this moment to linger. Holding her close, knowing she was safe, was a gift he would treasure deep in his Abcynian heart.

"Hmm," she breathed, teasing his lion's mark and nipple. "The day we met, I stood before Michelangelo's David, knowing I was standing before greatness. There was such majesty and depth in the sculpture. It seemed as though the statue would speak at any moment, commanding the attention of every person in the courtyard, servant and master alike. When you took me to Orlando and Leonora's pride, I studied the artwork decorating the hallways leading to the *Palazzo Vecchio's* dungeons, all of which rivaled Michelangelo's genius. The instructor I'd had in England was good. Yet he'd never have been able to sculpt David!"

"Mayhap you do not give the instructor enough credit," Dante suggested, far more interested in the feel of his wife pressed against him than discussing another man.

"Nay, I am too generous. It is fitting that I married you, Dante. Now I can learn from a master. Not to attempt to become an artist, mind you, but to understand the significance of a painting and offer assistance to individual artists such as your young apprentices."

Dante continued combing Rhiannon's hair and listened to her purr. "All my apprentices show potential," he decided to share. "By right of age and experience, Marcello will join the painters' guild once I leave Florence. He is ready for a workshop of his own and stays out of loyalty to me and lack of patronage. I may arrange for Marcello to have my house and workshop, since we'll not return to Florence for several years. The others, Sergio and Andrea, are talented, but I'm not certain either one wants to be an artist. Sergio's parents live in a very poor village and he was sent here against his wishes. He grows frustrated at times and I doubt he'll register in the guild if he doesn't feel it will benefit his family. Do not misunderstand, I sense Sergio would rather be elsewhere. To his credit, he does the work asked of him and seldom complains."

"What do you think will happen to him?" Rhiannon asked, her concern apparent as she rubbed her nose into the curls of chest hair hiding his lion's mark.

Wishing his wife would continue what she was doing, Dante tried to concentrate on their conversation. "I shall arrange for another artist to assume his apprenticeship and ask Eduardo to keep an eye on him. That is all I can do."

"It is admirable that you will find a place for him." She lifted her head to look into his eyes. "What of the others, Dante? Andrea and Paolo seem such sweet boys."

"Andrea revels in causing trouble, yet I hope to see him work with Sergio. They are friends. Paolo, I worry about," he went on, tightening his arm about Rhiannon when she settled against his chest. "He's the youngest and has a tendency for clumsiness. For reasons I cannot surmise, Paolo finds it difficult to remain still or concentrate on one task for any length of time. Crushing pigments can become tedious and must be done with great caution when handling expensive substances like lapis lazuli. An apprentice cannot begin working on a painting until he masters mixing pigments and preparing canvases. I worry for him. Like Sergio, his family is poor yet he shows more promise because he is sincere in his desire to become an artist. He hails from the same village as Leonardo da Vinci."

"Will you send Paolo to another artist?"

Dante shook his head, uncertain if that was best. "I do not know. I'd like to take the boy with us and continue his training."

"The journey to England could prove dangerous. It wouldn't be wise to subject a small boy to that."

"Si, I agree." Settling back into the bolsters, Dante wrapped Rhiannon closer. Her nuzzling resumed, her full, luscious mouth covering his nipple, making it peak. "Rhiannon, continue what you're doing and my intentions of remaining honorable will be for naught. I just want to give you a little more time."

"I am fine, Dante," she said, parting her luscious, soft lips and taking his erect nipple between her even, white teeth. *Why should we abstain any longer? We are wed. Nay, I'd prefer to make love gain. We can discuss your apprentices in the morn.*

"We can," Dante agreed, enjoying his mate's easy use of their mind-to-mind communication and the distinct huskiness of her voice. "It is enough to know that you

care for the boys, Rhiannon Luciano. Worry for them can wait. Come here," he invited, shifting her until she straddled his waist. He was as hard as marble and aching, but this time he intended to take his time making love to her.

"I believe I like looking down upon you, my lord," she teased.

"Just as I like when you refer to me as your lord, *cara mia*," he whispered, smoothing his hands up her bare back to cup her shoulders. "Lean a little closer."

Purring as she bent closer, she touched her mouth to his. Her lips were soft and sweet, tasting like cassia and Abcynian arousal. Intrigued and needing more, Dante tightened his hold and deepened the kiss. Their tongues mated. Hers sweetly passionate, his more deliberate, but somehow merging together in a tantalizing feast. Drawing in her scent, her taste, he relished in the newness of having this woman as his mate, as his wife, and drew her tongue deep into his mouth, sucking hard.

Withdrawing her tongue to trace the top and bottom half of his lips, she moaned, "Hmm, I love when we kiss." She brushed kisses along his beard, rubbing her chin against the abrasion, and he felt her skin growing warm and pink.

"I love your beard and mustache too," she murmured, lifting her head. "I never realized I would like facial hair on a man. I am certain I'd be disappointed if you were to shave it anytime soon."

Dante appreciated Rhiannon's compliment, but he'd grown the beard because it was in fashion. Some of his colleagues wore much longer beards, and while he'd thought they looked distinguished, already fashion trends were seeing the disappearance of beards.

"I cannot promise never to shave it off. It itches and becomes hot at times. Shaving will make me appear younger. The known world may accept the mythology of the Abcynian race, but they do not know the truth. I cannot allow anyone to suspect my true age, or yours."

"Nay, of course you cannot. Although I think your beard makes you look much like a prince," she said with a smile. "At least, what I think a prince would look like. Without the beard and mustache, I suspect you're far more devilishly handsome."

"Grazie," he said.

Sifting his right hand through her long, straight hair, Dante brushed it back over her shoulder and cast his eyes on her lioness' mark.

When he returned his gaze to hers, her amber eyes had softened with love. "Pray forgive me if I haven't said this, Dante. I love you, very much."

Moving his hand to her chin, he kept her eyes locked with his. "*Ha catturato il mio cuore*," he confessed.

"You must teach me your language," she insisted, purring all the while.

"You have captured my heart," he said in English. "I love you, Signora Rhiannon Luciano. I have from the moment I saw you in the square, even before you realized who I was to you."

"Then won't you kiss me again? If you don't I will be forced to have my wicked way with you."

"By all means, have your way with me. But not until I have mine," he warned, growling deep and tugging her back into his arms, where she belonged.

At once, his lion's instinct to mate rose to the fore, demanding satiation. As an Elder, he'd learned to control his panthera half and to use it to his advantage. Rhiannon liked when he growled and rained kisses over her face, nose, jaw and chin, moving down her neck.

His wife moaned and arched backward, giving him access to her lovely, silken throat. With his lips, tongue and teeth, he stung a path of warm, wet kisses along the sensitive line of her pulse, tasting her fragrant, salty skin. Exotic scents filled the bedchamber, but there was nothing more potent to his male senses than that of Rhiannon's arousal.

Wanting her with a force that bordered on desperation, Dante bestowed kisses to her collarbone, the dip of her sternum, the ridges of her rib cage, where the shoulders of the lioness marked her skin. It amazed him how prominent the mark was and he enjoyed favoring the silvery blue mark with kisses.

Boldly, she rocked back and captured his right hand, placing it on her left breast. The lioness's mark glowed stronger, the heat scorching his palm.

"*Dio*, you're on fire," he said.

"For you, Dante, always," she promised. Purring and mewling, she arched into his palm, offering herself.

Needing no further encouragement, he kneaded her generous breast, his thumb caressing the translucent mark. "You do realize that I won't be able to stop now? The time for you to recover has ended," he said as he blew hot air across her taut nipple and watched it tighten into an inviting peak.

"*Si*, my husband, *si*, I don't wish to wait."

"*Grazie, la moglie*," he returned, expanding the vee of her thighs to accommodate his full erection.

With the slightest coaxing, she leaned toward him, offering him whatever he wanted. He took her puckered nipple into his mouth and sucked hard enough to elicit a rumbling roar from his wife's throat as her hands caressed from his chest to his taut abdomen, and then to his manhood.

"*Dio, bella, si*," he groaned, fearing he might spill himself before they progressed further.

Not since he was an adolescent had he lost control before entering a woman, but this was not an ordinary woman. Rhiannon was his mate. For as long as they lived as man and wife, she would be the only woman to make love to him. That realization both calmed and excited him. With his left hand, he reached between them and caught her fingers, showing her how to stroke him.

"You feel like iron wrapped in satin. Hard but satiny soft to the touch," she told him. Dropping her head, he'd almost thought she'd become shy then he realized his error. She was curious, her touch inquisitive and sweet, yet growing more confident. "I could touch you like this all day and not grow tired."

"Ah, *bella*, someday very soon, we shall love with just a touch, just our hands." He was tempted to show her what he'd like to do. Imagined what it would be like to spend an entire day stroking his palms over her naked skin then later sliding his fingers in and out of her warm, wet sheath.

She continued to stroke him, learning when to tighten her fist and when to be gentle. Her hand was soft, her fingers long and graceful. A light sheen of sweat broke on her brow, and the tip of her tongue traced the upper swell of her lip. Dante longed to grasp her nape and coax her head to his lap. He wanted her mouth on him, but he didn't want to frighten her away.

This night, their first as man and wife, was meant for the two of them to share, not just for his pleasure. "*Bella, per favore viene,*" he whispered. They were the first words he'd spoken to her, he recalled, smiling when she lifted her eyes and caught his reference. "*Kiss me, per favore?*"

"With great pleasure," she agreed and pushed so close, her generous breasts grazed his chest. While they kissed, he caught her about the waist and dragged her against him, his erection caught between her silken inner thighs. Finding her warm and wet, he purred louder, joining hers. Delicate vibrations coursed through his entire body and the head of his shaft and he parted her lips with his tongue, delving deep into her mouth.

Chest to breast, hips to thighs, man to woman, they slid against one another. Rhiannon's panthera leo Abcynian passion came to the fore, her purring grew more prominent, her caresses more certain, almost aggressive. Though she never bit, her teeth scraped his shoulder, the underside of his chin and the line of his beard. Her clever little tongue swiped across his lips, dipping into his mouth, only to retreat and offer kisses to his collar.

Seductively, she shifted until his shaft slid against the petals at the apex of her thighs, tightening her muscles to hold him against her dewy softness. Running his hand down her spine, he pressed the curve of her lower back and taught her to circle her hips, creating a deliberate friction that pleased them both.

"Love me, Dante, please," she cried out, almost impaling herself onto him.

"I am. Everything we've done from the moment we walked in the door has been seduction."

"You know what I meant," she growled, baring her teeth. The flash of her teeth caught his eye. As an adult male Abcynian, he was tempted to ask her to bite him, hard. The lion within growled. Neither man nor beast would make demands upon her.

Her growling grew fierce. She'd understood his thoughts. "Not yet, Dante, pray do not ask me yet."

"Ease your mind and let me love you," he soothed, grasping her hips to lift her.

“Dante, oh—” She gasped, her eyes widening as he found her entrance and slid into her warm, tight sheath. With deliberate slowness, he slid further into her, keeping her from taking his full length until she felt every last inch of his penetration. Buried to the hilt, he growled at the feel of her warm, silken muscles gloving his length.

Dante was incapable of speaking. Being inside of her was the closest he’d ever come to touching heaven. Needing more, he coaxed her hips up until he withdrew to the crown, tightened his fingers and slammed her back down his length. They both cried out, he nearly spilling his seed, she grasping his shoulders.

“*Dio*, again,” he shouted.

Of her own accord, Rhiannon lifted and plunged, taking him deep.

Together, they rode the fierce storm of need that swept through them. Having her on top of him permitted him the luxury of caressing her breasts, teasing and tugging her erect nipples. With just his fingertip, he traced the lioness’ mark and brought her head to his shoulder as their frantic thrusts slowed, each catching their breaths and enjoying the rhythmic, gentle rocking of their hips.

Their panthera leo marks were connected, their bodies joined. Their mouths sought one another, their kiss mimicking the thrust and parry of their hips. Beyond all thought, Dante gave his love to his wife over and over again, every thrust saying he loved her, every moan whispering he needed her. As sweet and innocent as she’d been hours ago, Rhiannon’s instincts had come to the fore and she needed only the gentlest of touches and coaxes to follow what they both wanted.

Feeling her inner muscles begin to quiver with her pending release, he ground his pelvis into her, finding the jewel of her need. As one, they crested, Dante’s seed bursting forth and rubbing his breath while Rhiannon sobbed, her tears those of feminine, passionate joy.

Collapsing to the bed, he wrapped his arms about her, holding her still as their hearts slammed against one another, their marks throbbing with gentle warmth.

“This is where you belong, Signora Rhiannon Luciano, forever and always,” he said, kissing her temple as he combed his fingers through her sweat dampened hair. She smelled of cassia, of sex, and now of him. Breathing deep, he closed his eyes and treasured the gift of his wife lying content and replete in his arms.

* * * * *

“Sergio Romano,” Signora Casale beckoned, her voice grating Sergio’s ears.

Attempting to ignore her, Sergio moved on through the *piazza*, his master’s workshop within sight. He didn’t want anyone noticing Signora Casale’s interest, not when word could reach Dante Luciano’s ears. He hadn’t wanted to come to Florence and work as an artist’s apprentice, yet he remained.

Moving on as though he hadn't heard the signora call to him twice more, Sergio rounded the front entrance to the only home he'd ever known other than his own. A married lady wouldn't follow him to the back entrance.

"Sergio, dare not attempt to run from me," Signora Casale warned, her steps heavy by the time she caught his elbow and spun him around. Quickly, she glanced about. "*Buon pomeriggio, Sergio, come sta?*"

"*Sto bene,*" he replied, noting that they were alone.

When he'd first met the signora, he'd thought her kind and beautiful. He'd been flattered to know the wife of an *Arti della Lana* had noticed him. Had he known that the wool merchant's wife befriended him for the information he could give about master painter Dante Luciano, he would have kept his distance.

The signora promised him coin and favor for his parents' small herd of sheep, enough to feed his family for many months, and she was beautiful. At ten and five, it was difficult for one his age to ignore a beautiful woman. Now, he saw the aged lines about her mouth, the fraying of her false blonde hair and the shadows beneath her eyes.

"What is it you seek, Signora Casale?" he asked, guilt weighing upon his shoulders.

"Have you anything to tell me, *il bambino?*" she replied, referring to him as a baby. Not long ago, she'd commented on his handsome dark looks, on how much like a man he'd become since arriving in Florence. She'd even touched him in a manner a lady of her standing should not dare touch a boy.

"I am not a baby. *Mi scusi,*" he said, intending to walk away.

To his surprise, the signora grasped his elbow, her nails biting into his skin. His father had always warned never to harm a woman and Sergio calmed at the thought of his father. "Do not walk away from me. There is much to discuss."

When she dropped her hand, Sergio faced her. "I've nothing to say, signora. Signore and Signora Luciano have left Florence for a few days. I am uncertain when they'll return."

"How can this be? Signore Luciano is not married. What games do you play?"

Sergio was surprised she did not know of Dante Luciano's recent marriage. "Weren't you invited to the wedding celebration? I'd always thought Signore Luciano and Signore Casale were friends of a sort."

"My husband need never know of my concern for Dante. He is my *l'amico,*" she said.

"Signore Luciano pays little attention to your existence, Signora Casale." His words made her wince. It was the truth. Signore Luciano spared her little notice compared to her merchant husband.

"Dare not mock me," she grumbled. "A simple word to Dante will have you back home with nothing. Your parents and siblings will suffer because you failed."

"Had I known why I was brought here, I'd have turned my back on you long ago."

For the good of his family, Sergio told the signora about his master's work and his spying had led to the theft of one of Dante Luciano's paintings. Out of guilt, Sergio had placed himself in harm's way, taking the beating meant for Andrea.

"It is a little late for that, isn't it?" Signora Casale rebuked. "Now tell me the truth. How is it that Dante Luciano has married and I was not informed?"

"You and your husband left Florence when the first of their banns were being read. He married his love yesterday," Sergio said. Hiding a smile, he waited for the signora to bellow.

"Whom did he marry, a peasant girl?"

"He married Rhiannon, an Englishwoman."

"You lie," the signora spewed, spittle dripping from the corner of her pink lips. "He'd claimed she was a visitor. How could he betray me in such a way?"

Sergio lifted a brow, feeling far older than he was. "Signore Dante Luciano can marry whomever he chooses. The entire household believes he's found love with Rhiannon. She is always seeking to make us feel at home. She suffered from terrible headaches while in England. Since coming to Florence she's hardly ever ill anymore. I like her and am glad Signore Luciano is happy."

"Let us pray that he remains so," Signora Casale replied, turning away. "When he returns to his workshop, I expect to know. I also expect you to tell me everything you can about Dante Luciano and his affairs, however many there have been. If he takes a mistress, I want to know about it."

"He's married. He'll not betray Rhiannon."

"Then you are to find something about him, something a lover would know. Come through for me in this and I'll never again ask about Signore Luciano's artwork again. Your family will be well fed this winter and the next."

Sergio meant to reply but the back door opened and Signora Luciano's English maid stepped outside. "Sergio, what are you doing back here?"

"Aiding the signora," he explained, gesturing to Signora Casale. But he needn't have bothered. She'd already rushed out of sight.

"Was that woman bothering you, Sergio?" Mary Baker asked.

"Si," he said. "She is trouble. It is best that everyone in this household stay away from her in the future." He felt the maid's kind eyes on him when he neared. Dare he tell Signora Casale what he knew about Dante Luciano? Would it affect Rhiannon in any way? He liked Rhiannon, yet his family came first.

* * * * *

"We must have the devil's own luck," Linwood grumbled and hunkered down in the captain's cabin as the merchant ship lifted and plunged back to the churning sea. "This is the second storm we've encountered at sea, my lord. There must be an easier way to reach Florence."

"I'll hear no complaints, Linwood," Edgar warned, feeling ill as the ship lurched. He'd thought he was immune to seasickness but coupled with a cold meal, bitter ale and the smell of rot and decay that appealed to his deepest, darkest secret, he had vomited twice since the ship left London.

It required all of Edgar's strength to ignore the beast clamoring for supremacy and to give into the human weakness of seasickness. He could not risk revealing what he was to Linwood, much less the captain and his crew.

"Mayhap we should consider disembarking at the next port?" Linwood suggested. "Captain Carmichael did comment at supper last eve that we would stop in Valencia for much needed repairs and supplies. We could purchase some horses, hire some men and continue on to Florence. Dare not forget, Cliffton, this ship goes to Venice, we must travel to Florence by land anyway. I'm still uncertain why we did not arrange to bring more than six men with us. That was unwise."

"As it happens I've been considering the same thing," Edgar said. "I'm tired of this rat infested ship. Captain Carmichael can keep his purse and we can keep our promised treasure. We will need to melt the gold pieces and use them if Rhiannon Mathews refuses to return to us on her own."

"That is an excellent idea," Linwood agreed, closing his eyes. His pallor was green. "Pray the girl hasn't already found Dante Luciano and left before we reach Florence."

Edgar didn't want to worry over the possibility. Instead he swallowed the bile that stung the back of his tongue and lurched off the captain's bed, seeking the half filled chamber pot. God's teeth, the wench had better be in Florence when this trip ended or there'd be hell to pay, with Rhiannon the first to burn.

Chapter Eleven

“Rhiannon, are you certain you’re ready for this?” Dante asked, his concern lightening Rhiannon’s heart.

“I think so,” Rhiannon said, though she was a little apprehensive. “You are safe here, Dante, aren’t you?” Looking about the small olive grove that was surrounded by a narrow stream on one side and Tuscan plants and flowers on the other, she noticed nothing out of the ordinary or alarming.

“It is safe. To be certain, turn to your senses. Smell the air, listen for footsteps and look about. You’ll know if someone approaches.” Dante smiled and his handsome face became dearer to her in that moment than it had been last eve.

They’d loved one another many times throughout their first night as man and wife. She’d not known until he touched her that love was so much more than a feeling, so much more than an emotion. It was all-consuming, touching her body and soul.

When they’d woken this morning she’d asked him to teach her more about the panthera leo Abcynians and he told her what she’d already known deep in the recesses of her mind. Once he spoke, she listened and believed. Along with her understanding came a deep need to witness Dante changing form. She’d heard him describe it but she couldn’t imagine it.

Out of concern, he’d warned that watching the change can be difficult and painful, especially for a mate. As mates grew closer and more accustomed to each other, they started picking up on feelings, not just thoughts. Therefore she would feel his pain. He’d also reminded her of the frightening image she’d remembered from childhood, of possibly witnessing someone changing form and misunderstanding. She was grateful for the warnings. Yet Dante Luciano was her husband now and she needed to know what that entailed.

Mayhap if she could accept his ability to change from man into a lion, she could soon accept the biting ritual shared between mates.

“Are you ready, Rhiannon?” he inquired, bringing her attention back to the matter at hand.

“I am ready,” she assured, leaning back against the aged trunk of an olive tree. Its knurled branches offered respite from the day’s heat. “Change at will.”

“You might want to brace yourself against the tree. This can be difficult for you to watch and feel,” he warned then turned away to study the horizon.

As Dante had instructed, Rhiannon followed his lead and scented the air. She smelled the two of them, the sunshine, the trickling stream, the Tuscan countryside,

olives, grass and wood. A few measures away she smelled a small mouse scurrying about for food. A bird hovered in the tree, a smattering of twigs in its beak.

Along with the scents, Rhiannon spied the varying shades of green grasses, noticing how Dante depicted the colors in his paintings. There was more than green. There was yellow, brown and a hint of orange combining to make the fields look as alive and vital as the city of Florence itself. Nearby she heard the buzzing of an insect, his small jaws chewing on a leaf.

"Do you sense that we are alone?"

"Aye, I do," she answered.

How extraordinary it was to lie back against an olive tree and pinpoint the scents and sights all about, and know that they were safe as she did so! More so, she had the innate ability to tune out the sounds unless she wanted to listen.

"Rhiannon, if at any time you sense trouble or become worried, give me your thoughts. There will be a moment during the change when I cannot see. Not until the lion's sight takes the place of mine will I see you again. When I am changed, I am a lion. But I will recognize you as my mate and protect you as such. The only means I can communicate with you is through our minds. Remember that and I will hear you."

Rhiannon almost told him to remain in his true form. Refusing to be a coward, for she feared she'd been one while she'd lived at Linwood Castle, she fought her fears and nodded for him to proceed.

With her consent, Dante pulled off his tunic. "Why are you undressing?"

"Clothes must be removed or they are torn beyond repair."

"Oh," she whispered, wanting very much to immortalize him on canvas just as he was now, naked with the afternoon sun baking his broad shoulders and narrow hips, his manhood growing erect. "Dante, are you...umm...enjoying this?"

Dante caught her eyes, his grin mischievous. "I am enjoying the feel of your eyes upon me, *cara mia*."

"Mayhap I should avert my eyes."

"Keep your eyes on my face, for now," he said.

Loving him all the more, she looked up at Dante's handsome face. His eyes grew heavy, his lids closing and his jaw taut. With his next breath, he knelt to the ground, bowing his head in prayer and then he lurched, his back arching violently.

Pain ripped down Rhiannon's spine, forcing her against the tree for relief. Dante's face lifted, contorting into a mixture of pain and shadows. The pain running along her spine intensified, sending sharp bites down her arms and legs to her fingers and toes. Bracing further against the tree, she watched as Dante's handsome face disappeared, replaced by a lion's jaw and broad nose.

Becoming frightened, she closed her eyes. She couldn't watch. For though her corresponding pain was difficult, she knew her husband's was excruciating.

Rhiannon didn't know how long she'd kept her eyes closed or how much time had passed, but something warm and moist touched her fingertips, seeking to unclench her fingers.

It's all right, Rhiannon. You may open your eyes.

Rhiannon peeked, her eyes widening the moment she saw him. "You are beautiful and...huge." She was now face to face with a full grown lion. She should be scared, frightened, anything but fascinated. Yet she couldn't look away.

The lion's face was extraordinarily complex, his royal power evident along its powerful jaws and golden eyes. A mahogany and dark brown mane haloed the lion's massive head, running down the back of his neck to his wide chest and front shoulders. He stood before her proud, mysterious, wild and untamed. Still Rhiannon did not feel frightened. Deep in her heart, she knew the lion would not harm her. And as she looked into his deep, golden eyes, she found Dante's soul.

"You are the most magnificent creature I've ever seen," she said again, understanding that the lion was a proud, haughty beast and would demand her acceptance.

Might I touch you, Dante?

The lion lowered his head, indicating that she could. Dante remained quiet within her mind, giving her time to adjust to this new and wondrous creature. Rhiannon reached out, noticing that her arms were sore and would remain so for quite a while. Instead of worrying about her aching muscles, she combed her fingers through the lion's mane. It was coarse to the touch, not as soft as the smooth hair on his forehead. As she stroked her fingers through his mane and along his face, she discovered he liked it when she touched beneath his jaw.

She tickled his jaw again and he lifted his chin higher, offering better access. *You're just a big kitten*, she laughed, thinking of the litter of kittens she'd rescued when she was a little girl. *Oh, Dante, I pray you hear me. I remembered something!*

The lion brought his chin down, catching her eyes. *I hear you, cara. What did you remember?*

"Can you hear me when I speak aloud," she asked first. The lion nodded. "I remember finding a litter of kittens in the woods. The mother had died and I found her near them. I was too little to know why. The kittens had barely opened their little eyes and were so fragile and helpless." Rhiannon looked away from the lion now as the memory returned in a rush. "Aye, I have the right of it. Angelica was with me and she was crying because we found the mother. I scooped the three kittens into my arms, told Angelica to follow and we hurried back to the manor house. Mama and Lady Danford came to greet us, each aware that we were upset. It didn't take long for Mama to guide us to the nursery and have some milk prepared for the kittens. Angelica and I found a way to make them eat and we nursed them until they were old enough to run about on their own. As they got older, they started chasing away the mice from the manor house and Papa allowed them to stay."

Rhiannon fell silent then, the sound of the lion's grumbled purr assuring her that he was still near. Looking about, she found the lion perched on his haunches, looking very much like Raffaello guarding the entrance to the *Palazzo Vecchio* dungeons. Pleased with herself for remembering yet another piece of her life, she offered her hand to the lion and smiled when he licked her palm.

Didn't I tell you that your memories would come if you let them? Dante asked as the lion licked her hand. *In the short time we've been married you've remembered much and you weren't burdened with pain today.*

"Nay, I was not." Still, she hadn't remembered her surname. "Do not get me wrong, Dante. I am glad I remembered the kittens. Why can I not remember my surname? It seems as though I remember the little things."

Mayhap that is best for now.

"Mayhap," she agreed.

Do not be sad. You'll be amazed at how important the little things are to remember. When the time is right you'll remember the rest.

Rhiannon realized he was right. She didn't understand why her memory was returning in bits and pieces, but she had Dante now. Because of him, she could look to the future without worrying over what happened in the past. Mayhap letting go of the fear that something terrible hovered in the shadows of the past would help to restore her memory once and for all.

Dante crouched to the ground and curled onto his side, his massive head in her lap. Drawing in the scents of the nearby fields, Rhiannon was once again reassured that they were alone and leaned back against the tree. Her arms and legs still ached from Dante's change, but she didn't mind. Closing her eyes for just a little while, she reveled in the lion's lazy purr.

* * * * *

Valiant Montgomery, Marquess of Raybourne, charged toward Danford with the authority of his title and six Abcynian Guards in his wake.

As he rode, Dante Luciano's letter brushed against his thigh where he'd kept it out of sight, reminding him of the importance of reaching Garrick. He hadn't spoken or heard from the Forresters in well over a month or more. However he knew Brandon and Judith Mathews would need to know that their daughter may be alive and Garrick could find them.

At last he caught a familiar glimpse of the manor that had once been his home. Its majestic manor house reminded him of the friendships he'd gained there, of the times he'd erred as a youth. The one thing he hadn't erred on was aiding in the rescue of Aisley Forrester, the Countess of Danford. He didn't plan on failing Rhiannon Mathews.

God's wounds, Rhiannon had been just a girl when he last saw her. Impish and pretty, she'd been loyal to her friendship with Angelica Forrester and Angelica's maid, Rachel. His part in converting Judith Mathews, once Angelica's nurse, meant that the Mathewses were family. He'd viewed Rhiannon as a cousin. Now he prayed that Dante was right, that this woman was the girl who'd disappeared fifty years ago.

As the questions lingered in his mind, Valiant reined his palfrey to a halt when he crossed through a gate marking the entrance to Danford Manor. Almost at once, servants came to assist, recognizing his colors. Familiar faces greeted him, the ladies smiling as he passed. He didn't have time to respond. His first and foremost priority was Rhiannon Mathews.

Valiant wasn't surprised to find Garrick Forrester waiting in the courtyard. Hurriedly, he vaulted off his mount and strolled to his long time friend. "Garrick, it is good to see you, my friend," he greeted, extending his hand. They'd long since forgone the formality of addressing each other by titles.

"Aye, it is good to see you as well," Garrick said, accepting Valiant's hand. "What brings you to Danford, Valiant? You usually write before coming to visit."

Without further delay, Valiant offered Dante's missive. "I received this message from Dante Luciano two days past. It is important you read it now."

Garrick's jaw clenched as he took the missive and began to read. After a few moments, his mouth parted, his eyes widening in both alarm and anger. "Nay, this is impossible. We searched for her until Brandon and Judith could no longer feel her soul. We'd sent men to Linwood many times. How could we have failed her, Valiant?"

"Just as you said, Brandon and Judith couldn't feel her. Mayhap her memory loss kept her from reaching out to them. We may never know. What should we do?"

"Tell Brandon his daughter may be alive," Garrick said, reading the letter once again. "Is there anything else?"

"You've a missive as well. I promised Dante's messengers that I would deliver it to you." Valiant found the second letter and handed it to his friend.

After a moment, Garrick lifted his head. "Dante wants to bring Rhiannon back to England but he'll not do it until he knows it is safe for her. She's his mate. He'll not lead her into danger. Bloody hell, Edgar Wyntrop, now the Earl of Cliffton, and Garfield Parker, Baron Linwood, were behind Rhiannon's disappearance. She's been gone for fifty years, twenty of which she can account for. What might have happened in the thirty years prior?"

"I wish we knew. First let us speak to Brandon and Judith. Before leaving Raybourne, I sent a message to Dante warning him not to come to England until he heard from us again."

"Or until he and Rhiannon have a proper Guard," Garrick suggested, the gleam in his green eyes warning that he was already formulating a plan.

"Where is Brandon?" The simple question caused Garrick to frown as he tucked his missive into his waistband.

"He and Judith have gone to Somerton. They wished for their son Jackson to meet Grayson's eldest son, Clayton. It is time for them to begin their training as knights, both shall become my squires."

"God's wounds...Jackson is still a boy," Valiant murmured, surprised that Brandon's eldest son was old enough to squire.

"He is becoming a man. Now is not the time to worry about that. We've much more pressing concerns than this."

"You speak true. Shall I continue on to Somerton?"

"We'll go together. By the time we reach my brother's domain we'll have formed a suitable plan to bring Rhiannon safely home."

Valiant turned away and strode to his horse. "Should I allow the men to rest before we leave?"

"Aye, they will need it. I cannot leave Aisley without fair warning."

"Nay, she would take you to task. At least I don't I have a mate to concern myself with yet."

"You will someday, my young friend."

"Someday," Valiant returned, his eyes trained on a pretty maid spying on him nearby. Knowing he didn't have time to flirt, he informed his men that they should dismount and rest. Their journey was far from over.

Chapter Twelve

"Hmm, Dante, cease," Rhiannon mumbled when her husband's tongue traced the shell of her ear, awakening her from a delightful dream.

"Your dream cannot be as good as this, *bella*," Dante purred, taking a playful nip of her earlobe. "The taste of your skin is better than a dream. The softness of your body against mine is far better than silk and pillows."

Enticed beyond measure, Rhiannon wiggled her naked backside against Dante's hips, feeling the unmistakable pulse of his erection slipping between the vee of her thighs. He rocked his hips, stirring her further. But when he might have entered her from behind she stiffened in fear.

Bracing herself for his next thrust, she was relieved when Dante's hand settled on her shoulder and helped her to turn and face him. "Easy, Rhiannon, I'll not take you in any way that causes you to be afraid." Though he was being patient, disappointment lingered in his voice. "You know I'd never hurt you."

"Aye, I know, Dante. I do not fear that you would cause me any pain." Not for the first time since they'd wed she wondered how long he'd remain patient with her.

She had overheard the gossip about her husband when she and Mary visited the *piazzas*. Women envied her marriage, merchants extolled about her husband's prowess with the ladies. He'd known many lovers. He'd even admitted it once. Hearing the tales made her worry that she'd continue to disappoint him. He might do the unthinkable and turn to another woman.

Dante curved his hand over her hip and used his other arm to prop himself up on their bed. "It has been four sennights since we married and I've not once been disappointed in you as my wife. Together we will learn why you are hesitant about this, just as we've learned so much about your past. Fret no more and kiss me good morning, *cara mia*."

Smiling back at him, Rhiannon shifted closer and kissed him. Loving the feel of his mouth and the scratchiness of his beard and mustache, she sighed in pleasure as their kiss deepened. Dante's soft purring continued, her body vibrating in kind, her doubts pushed to the back of her mind.

With a growl, he dropped his arm and pressed against her, pushing her down to the mattress.

He broke their kiss to offer sweet homage to her chin and neck. "I love waking up with you, Dante Luciano. And I do love you, regardless of not being able to—"

"I love you, *bella*. Cease your worries." He silenced further comment by running his hand to her thigh and bent her knee. "Just let me love you." His voice was low and

baritone deep, as seductive as his callused fingers caressing upward and inward, finding her soft, plump petals and delighting her with delicate, coaxing strokes.

He shifted until he was lying along the length of her, their bodies connected, their hearts pounding. Purrs filled the chamber, vibrating their enormous bed. Rhiannon's breasts were crushed beneath Dante's chest.

How she loved the silky feel of his chest hair teasing her nipples, the sense of security she felt in his arms, the rightness of his mouth painting tempting kisses along the curve of her collarbone.

Pleasure swelled deep in her womb, the play of Dante's fingers and the scent of musk filling her with achingly sweet tension.

"Please, do not tease."

"As you wish," he agreed. He looked so handsome, ever the prince, with subtle traces of the lion she'd seen only once since they'd married. "You're so beautiful."

"As are you, my husband." Sighing in need when he kept them lying side by side, she permitted him to pull her thigh up and over his hip. "Come inside of me."

Holding her gaze, he entered her, making certain that she felt all that he had to give. Just as slowly he withdrew and it was Rhiannon who arched to pull him back. A feral gleam entered Dante's eyes, the slowness of his seduction alternating with a purpose that drove her to flex and rock in one accord.

It wasn't long before all thought, all sensation, pooled low in her womb, sparking the pulsing bud of her womanhood. Bursting and cresting, she grasped him by the hair and pulled him closer for a long, long kiss as he joined her in release.

When she came back to her senses she found that Dante had maneuvered back to his side of the bed, remaining close, his arm draped over her waist. "I wonder if your apprentices can hear us."

"These walls and floors are stone, I think we're safe. Even if they do, the boys are old enough to understand what happens between a man and his wife when they retire each night."

"Mayhap I shall avoid them this morning and join you when you go to Cosimo's guest chamber. I've the need to see how your fresco progresses."

"It goes well." Dante smiled. "You may visit. But I'll not need you to pose today. I've plenty of drawings to work from and plan to complete the lioness this day."

Rhiannon lifted her brow. "Would it be better if I stay away?"

"I'd like you to visit. But I might be distracted and do not wish to disappoint you if I haven't the time to talk."

"I will keep my visit brief. I've a busy day planned myself. Your apprentices need fresh supplies and clothing."

"You're always good to them. I am grateful for it."

“How could I be anything less? Those boys have left their homes to earn their place in Florence. As your wife it is my duty to care for them and make this house their home.”

Dante’s grin radiated with pride and he dragged her closer for a sweet kiss. The telltale sounds of the apprentices awakening a floor below forced them to break away. It was morning and time to begin a new day.

Uncertain as to why, Rhiannon wondered when they would hear from Garrick Forrester or Valiant Montgomery.

Dante heard her thoughts and offered his own. “Soon we will hear from them.”

“I pray you are right,” she whispered, feeling a strange sense of urgency.

Rhiannon and Dante both worried that the Earl of Clifton and Baron Linwood would come looking for her. She hoped they weren’t intelligent enough to guess where she and Mary were. If they had, they could arrive in Florence any day.

“I refuse to worry on what promises to be a nice day. Out of bed with you, husband. I need to dress and talk to Mary.”

Dante kissed her again before scooting out of bed, giving her a generous glimpse of how much he wanted to stay in bed with her. But the day beckoned and neither could ignore their duties.

Once Dante lit a candle and finished his morning ablutions, Rhiannon dragged herself from the bed. Her husband was dressed and at the door before she brushed her hair.

“It is all right,” she said. “Go and I’ll meet you downstairs. Will you break your fast with us this morn?”

“Si,” he agreed, bowing as he left.

Aware that he was itching to return to his fresco she did not dawdle. The sweet scent of sugared pancakes tickled her nostrils, reminding her that she needed more than just food. Upon completing her morning rituals and dressing in a simple blue frock, she located the pitcher of sustenance, drank what she needed and poured a chalice for Dante.

Refreshed, she joined Dante, Mary and Serena in the living quarters of the house, the smells of the morning’s repast filling the entire house. One by one, the apprentices made their way down from their quarters, each grumbling their greetings.

“Marcello, join me,” Dante called to his eldest apprentice.

Marcello approached, his gaining maturity over the last four sennights becoming clearer. Dante spoke to the young man while the others enjoyed their morning meal.

The boys were fun to have around. Though they were a bit negligent in their household chores they performed well in the workshop. Because Dante was trying to finish the fresco, he left Marcello to oversee the day-to-day work an artist was required to perform.

Mary enjoyed the fuss the boys made over her cooking. A talent, Rhiannon realized, was wasted when Mary served in Baron Linwood's household. Still if Mary hadn't been her lady's maid, she'd never have reached Florence and found Dante.

While the boys ate their fill, Rhiannon observed. They chatted among themselves, unaware that she could hear their whispers. Andrea was talking about Dante and Signora Casale. He hinted that the signora liked flirting with Dante whenever Signore Casale was away from Florence. Sergio denied it.

Recalling the gossip she'd heard in the city, Rhiannon paused. Dante was renowned as an artist and admitted to having numerous affairs. He was a man, but she prayed she was woman enough to keep his affection and fidelity for the rest of their lives.

Rhiannon, you are my love, you've nothing to worry about. Cease your thoughts or I'll not be able to work and I must go.

My apologies for allowing my thoughts to detain you, she said. Go, as you must.

Marcello will take charge of the workshop while I'm gone.

He will do his job well.

It had been decided that Marcello would be given Dante's home and workshop upon their departure from Florence. Eduardo Fabrizio was seeking Marcello's acceptance into the painter's guild and all would be settled before they left. Sergio and Andrea would be sent to a new master artist and Rhiannon prayed they would follow the course Dante had set for them. Paolo would remain under Marcello's watchful eye. Marcello and Paolo worked well together regardless of their vast age difference. Rhiannon was pleased to know that the boys would be taken care of once she and Dante went to England, but she was worried about Sergio. He did not seem eager to change his apprenticeship.

"Have you eaten?" With little notice from the apprentices, she offered the chalice of sustenance to Dante, her gaze on his face. "You must keep your strength."

"Mary made me a cheese pancake. I am pleased that she is now our cook. I've never eaten better."

"Nor I, now off with you. I shall see you soon."

Dante leaned closer and placed a lingering kiss to her lips. Andrea and Sergio mumbled under their breaths. Paolo buried a chuckle. Rhiannon didn't protest. She loved Dante's kisses almost as much as she loved him.

Soon after Dante departed Marcello led the apprentices to the workshop. None of the boys complained, but Sergio lingered at the stairwell, his weary brown eyes meeting Rhiannon's before he rushed away.

"Shall I assist you in cleaning the dishes?" Rhiannon offered to Mary.

"Serena has the task this morn. The two of us can seek supplies for the apprentices," Mary answered, brushing her palms against her apron to wipe away lingering traces of sugar. "First you must eat, Rhiannon."

Without argument, she took a seat at the now vacant table and reached for the last sugared pancake. As she ate she talked to Mary and Serena about the day's chores while Mary pounded bread dough for the evening's meal and Serena straightened the mess left behind by four boys.

Upon completing the morning's tasks, Mary and Rhiannon ventured outside. By unspoken consent, Mary trusted Rhiannon's ability to lead them toward the *Piazza della Signoria*. Rhiannon knew the city well now. Making her way to the various merchants by following her keen sense of smell was something she enjoyed.

A day rarely passed when she did not coax Mary into visiting the lions. Dante had been right, she'd realized. She understood the lions. She knew when Orlando was feeling protective of his mate. She knew when Leonora needed reassurance when spectators stared at her mangled paw.

During the last sennight Raffaello and his lioness, Pia, graced the *Piazza della Signoria* as Dante was using Leonora and Orlando for his fresco. Raffaello would greet her with a grumbled roar while his mate yawned in boredom.

On this day, Mary reminded Rhiannon that there was much to be done, and neither of them enjoyed carrying too much money when the market was busy. Two sennights prior, Mary had her small coin purse snipped from her waist, the coinage gone long before she'd thought to look down.

"Rhiannon, I wish to visit the wool merchant," Mary said, gesturing to the street that led to Signore Casale's workshop. "I want to make something for Marcello before we leave Florence. I like that young man and want him to remember us."

"I've no objection," Rhiannon said, though she'd rather avoid seeing Signora Casale.

Twice, the wool merchant's wife approached her about Dante's current work. Dante didn't like talking about his work to anyone outside his workshop and Rhiannon respected his silence. But he remained cordial with Signore Casale because he was a member of the *Arte della Lana* and former elected official of the *Signoria*. Dante was privileged to have received minor patronage from the wool merchant after he'd entered the painter's guild.

Aware that it was important to remain courteous to Signore and Signora Casale, Rhiannon braced her shoulders and hurried in to the shop. Wool fabrics decorated the walls, displaying the intricacy of colors and fashions. Several servants were milling about and Rhiannon acknowledged them with smiles and nods.

Mary was drawn toward a pretty bolt of fabric and Rhiannon remained close to the door. There was something different about the scent of the shop, she thought, inhaling. Wool dominated the room but something pungent filled the air, making her a little nervous.

The pungent aroma soon became cloying when booted steps neared Rhiannon's left side. Turning her head, she noticed a young soldier. He was rather decent looking and at first glance she assumed him to be Florentine. A closer inspection revealed that he

had darker skin. When he spoke to another soldier, an older man of some status, his language differed from the language spoken in Florence. Mayhap the soldiers were Spaniards.

The two soldiers walked on and she realized the odor belonged to the men. They were covered in dirt and sweat, looking as if they'd just arrived in the city.

Signora Casale entered the room from a small doorway in the back of the shop. She looked pretty in a fine green tunic with her hair intricately styled atop her nape. As she neared, Rhiannon scented the same pungent sweat that lingered upon the younger man and realized why the odor offended her. Emilia had lain with the soldier.

"Good morning to you, Signora Luciano," Signora Casale greeted Rhiannon. "How do you fare?"

"Very well, *grazie*," Rhiannon answered. "Are those soldiers Spanish?"

"They are. They've accompanied two noblemen to Florence." Emilia turned her eyes upon the younger, more handsome man. Dirty though he was, the signora didn't seem to care. "My husband has taken the nobles to our home in the country while the soldiers remain in the city as my guards."

Rhiannon felt her eyebrow lift in amazement. Did Signore Casale know his wife was trifling with soldiers?

"I see," she murmured. "It is good of your husband to welcome Spanish nobles to Florence."

Emilia Casale shook her head and straightened. "He is a generous man. He wants me to be happy when he is away."

"Forgive me, Signora, I do not think I understand. Aren't all husbands supposed to assure their wives happiness?" Rhiannon asked. "Dante loves me and provides everything I need. That makes me happy."

Signora Casale lifted her hand to inspect the back of her knuckles. Her nails were clean and buffed. Her fingers appeared soft. For one who worked with wool fabrics, it was obvious Emilia left the hardest work to her servants.

Abruptly, she dropped her hand and stared into Rhiannon's eyes. "It is good to know you are happy, Signora Luciano. Remember your husband has a reputation with the ladies of Florence. I fear he will disappoint you in the coming years."

Rhiannon stifled a pang of jealousy and doubt. "Whatever he has done before we married matters not at all. Dante is faithful to me."

Emilia leaned closer, the scent of stale sweat and recent sex causing Rhiannon to turn her face away. "Are you so certain Dante will remain so? Men of his standing take mistresses."

"Not all men."

Emilia's sudden laughter cut a sharp sliver of doubt through Rhiannon's heart. "Your husband has had many lovers and will likely have many more after you bear him a few children. He's not a man to remain faithful to any one woman for any length of

time. I should know. He seduced me and a sennight later you arrived in Florence and he forgot me."

"Dante has never lain with you," Rhiannon whispered, beginning to tremble.

"You are a fool to believe that," Emilia warned.

"He has never given me reason to doubt him."

"How would I know of the tattoo on his chest if I have never lain with him?" Rhiannon gasped when Emilia placed her hand over her right breast where the lion's mark resided on Dante's chest.

"You know nothing," Rhiannon whispered.

Emilia smoothed her hand over her breast. "It's a lion and it appears to glow when he is...excited. The first time I saw it he claimed it was a trick of the candlelight flickering across my bed."

Feeling ill, Rhiannon stormed away from Emilia.

"Mary, I must go," she cried out, rushing out the door.

By the time Rhiannon's feet touched the street, Mary caught up with her.

"What happened?" Mary demanded, stumbling. "Slow down, I cannot keep up with you."

Rhiannon slowed and cast her eyes to her friend. "Forgive me. I could not remain in that shop one moment longer."

"You were speaking to Signora Casale. What did she say to offend you?"

"Lies, I hope," Rhiannon said. "Would you mind if we return to the house? I realize we have much to do this day but I must go and speak with Dante before doing anything else."

"If it is your wish," Mary agreed.

Mary did not press Rhiannon to confess the reason for her sudden need to see Dante. After they arrived at the house, Rhiannon asked Serena to assist Mary for the remainder of the day and left for Cosimo de Medici's guesthouse.

With an aching heart Rhiannon retraced the familiar steps toward the *Piazza della Signoria* and then veered down a side street that led to the guest home. Cosimo de Medici had wanted the fresco painted in the *Palazzo Pitti*, the current residence of the de Medici family. After conferring with Dante, he decided it was best to begin decorating a house that catered to visiting dignitaries and noblemen.

Dante was fortunate to gain the commission. Rhiannon was proud of him, but fury and doubt had taken hold of her. How had Emilia known about the tattoo if she hadn't lain with him? It was a puzzle and the doubts plaguing her since rising earlier that morning came to the forefront of her mind.

Mayhap he intended to remain faithful to their marriage. Mayhap she had succumbed to an accomplished lover because he'd erased her original fears of learning

that she was part Abcynian. She wanted Dante to tell her Emilia was lying and she wanted to believe him. She didn't know if she would.

As she walked, something warm and wet rolled down her cheek. Wiping away her tears, she swallowed, the back of her throat aching. If he lied about his relationship with Emilia Casale, how could she trust his intentions in the future?

At last she reached the de Medici guesthouse. From her spot at the front door, she smelled the damp plaster and paints Dante was using inside. The buckthorn berries he used for yellow lake were dominating the *piazza*.

Part of her did not wish to disturb him while he was working, but she couldn't walk away. Dante was her husband. The sanctity of their marriage was more significant than a fresco.

Rhiannon braced her spine and opened the door. Inside the house the scents of buckthorn berries and plaster grew stronger. A hint of *sinoper* and *verdaccio* teased her nostrils. Drawing a deep breath for courage, she headed for the master's chamber located two stories above the entranceway.

* * * * *

Dante stepped back from his work the moment he sensed Rhiannon coming. Hearing her footsteps falter on the stairway, he set his tools aside. Even though he scented her familiar cassia fragrance, he could not hear her thoughts, he could not feel her.

Twice she hesitated at the top of the stairs. Silence reigned. She'd closed her mind to his soothing thoughts. He could not reach her unless she wanted him to.

Growing worried, he turned from the fresco and stalked to the doorway. "Rhiannon," he greeted, meeting her eyes before she looked away.

Not since the day they'd met had she been uneasy with him. Now she appeared sad and lost. It was then that he smelled the stain of tears on her beautiful face.

"Rhiannon, what has happened? Why are you crying?"

"Dante, I cannot... How could you..." Rhiannon stuttered, the pounding of her heart echoing the worry of his.

"Tell me, *cara*." He rushed toward her to offer his hand. When she did not take his hand he grimaced and stood his ground. "Most of the time I can hear your thoughts when you walk into a room. I cannot hear you today and you refuse my thoughts. What has happened? Tell me so I may make it right."

"I know not if you can." Lifting her chin, her gaze lingered above his shoulder. "After everything we've done together how could you hurt me so?"

Dante reeled as if she'd struck him. Looking back at her, he swallowed hard. "I've hurt you? What is it you think I have done?"

"You've had lovers before me, Dante. I understand that," she said. "I even understand men are allotted certain liberties. I do not understand how you could have bedded a woman like Emilia Casale. She is married."

Anger swept through him. Rhiannon's words were as sharp as a sword piercing his heart. "I told you once I have never lain with a married woman. Why would you think I'd been with her?"

Rhiannon took her eyes off the wall and met his. "She told me of your lion's mark. She knew where it was and that it glows when you're excited. How could she know of these things if she'd never been in your bed?"

For the first time in his life Dante did not have an answer. He was aching with the pain Rhiannon inflicted with her accusations. Twice he tried to give her his thoughts, but she denied his plea for trust. Proudly, he held her gaze, refusing to touch her.

"How she knows of the mark remains a mystery to me," he said. "One I shall pursue another day. When a panthera leo Abcynian beds his mate, his mark heats and appears to glow. You are the only woman who's ever seen the lion's iridescence. Tell me that you believe me."

He watched her swallow. "Right now, I don't know what to believe," she whispered.

Nothing she could have said at that moment would have hurt worse than her hesitancy. "If you cannot trust me in this matter how can you trust me to protect you when we go to England? How can you trust me to be a good father to our children? My word is all I can give you. If you cannot accept it now then it would be best for you to return home."

Dante recognized the pain his words caused. She looked crestfallen, her eyes widening as tears spilled from the corners. His instinct was to sweep her into his arms and declare his innocence. Pain kept him from reaching out to her. Pride forced him to step back.

"I should go," Rhiannon said and turned her eyes away. Her sadness raked through his heart, tearing it more and more. "I'm sorry if I've hurt you. I was hurt as well. Loving someone is frightening, is it not?"

"I've never thought so until you admitted your doubts."

"We must get past this, Dante. Pray come home soon. There is much for us to talk about."

"I shall return when I finish the lioness," he answered. "Be aware that I will never again defend my word. You either believe me or you don't. It is as simple as that."

He waited a moment for her to say she believed him. She remained mute. His heart in his throat, returned to the master chamber.

Dante knew Rhiannon stayed in the hallway for quite some time. He sensed she was holding back tears and almost gave into his own. With sheer force of will he waited until she departed before the first teardrop fell.

Dio, he'd never once thought he would cry over a woman. Rhiannon thought he'd lied to her and he didn't know if he had the ability to reassure her of his innocence. That, more than anything else, threatened to tear his world asunder.

Chapter Thirteen

Emilia Casale reveled in her victory. Soon she would rid Florence of Rhiannon Luciano. Feeling pleased with the information Sergio Romano had given her the day before, she grinned and buried her face into the chest hair of the naked man that lay beside her.

As she thought about it, she realized Sergio should be rewarded for his deeds. She would see that her husband continued to purchase wool from Sergio's family, but she doubted she would need him to spy for her much longer.

A few days ago her former English lover, Garfield Parker, now known as Baron Linwood, had returned to Florence after a fifteen-year absence. Because she favored muscled young soldiers as her lovers if she could not have Dante Luciano, she knew she wouldn't resume her affair with the English baron. But she was pleased to know that the Baron and his companion, the Earl of Clifton, had come to take Rhiannon back to England.

The Englishmen were staying at her husband's country estate well beyond the city of Florence for the time being. They'd asked her to report Rhiannon's whereabouts and to inform them when it would be safest for them to enter the city and capture Rhiannon. Now that she'd broken Rhiannon's trust in Dante Luciano it was time to act upon their plan.

"Carlos, I believe it is safe for the English noblemen to come to the city," Emilia said to the Spanish soldier in her husband's bed. "I know Baron Linwood is anxious to see his ward again. Lord Clifton even more so, I suspect."

"This is the woman you spoke to in the workshop?" Carlos asked.

"*Si*, what did you think of her?"

"She is beautiful. It is little wonder as to why the Earl of Clifton wants to take her back to England. When he hired us in Valencia he did not know of her marriage to Dante Luciano. Once he learned of it, his fury was unlike anything I've witnessed. Before stomping off to your husband's estate, Clifton vowed he would have the marriage annulled and Rhiannon imprisoned for violating their betrothal if she does not return to England with him."

"I've no doubt that she'll go back to England. I've ruined her marriage. But that, my lover, is for Clifton to worry about. It is time for you to go to my husband's estate and bring the Englishmen to the city. Be certain to warn them that Dante Luciano has the support of Cosimo de Medici. If Dante uses his alliance with the de Medicis, the Earl of Clifton's claims will be for naught."

"I shall," Carlos agreed, preparing to leave.

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Edgar Wynthrop paced the floor of his bedchamber and waited for word from Linwood or Emilia Casale. Being detained in the country while Rhiannon pranced about Florence with her husband left him with little doubt as to what he must do to bring her to heel.

Rhiannon was his. She'd been his ever since he decided to spare her life. Her life was in his hands and her blood was in his veins, yet even though he'd sipped of her youthful Abcynian blood he'd never been fully converted. It was his intention to complete his transformation, elevating his status amongst the Saturians and ingratiating himself in the lives of the Abcynians.

Linwood did not know of his attempts to seek conversion before sending Rhiannon to Linwood Castle. Had he known, Linwood would have recoiled. As much as the man detested the Abcynians, he had never wished irreversible harm upon Rhiannon.

At least now he and Linwood had a dozen Spanish soldiers at their command, fortifying their original English guard. Like the Englishmen, they had unknowingly drunk his wine, thus beginning their conversion. By the next full moon, the Spaniards would become Saturian. The promise of near immortality would assure their compliance. When he returned to England with Rhiannon he would be leaving Saturians in Florence and Spain. Spain was seeking new worlds, England as well. If all went right, Saturians would expand along with other civilized nations and soon outnumber Abcynians.

England herself was covered. His household had long since been converted. Linwood's would soon be as well. When Edgar's brother returned to power he would find a very different world. Abcynians would become little more than a mention in history. Saturians would conquer the world, just as they'd meant to do long, long ago.

So few knew of what Edgar was capable of. Once Rhiannon completed his conversion, his inner beast would be satisfied, his means of revenge against the Abcynians complete. His brother had sold his soul to the devil to become powerful. Edgar Wynthrop didn't need the devil. He already had the beast.

"My lord, a soldier has come for you," Signore Casale announced from outside the chamber. "He has come at the command of my wife."

"Good, there is much to do before we reach the city." Edgar strode to a sideboard and grabbed a flask of wine. Sniffing its contents confirmed that the concoction was ready. "Signore, might we share a chalice of wine?" he invited, carrying the wine to the corridor.

Casale stood before him, respectful of Edgar's rank. Signore Casale knew power. He held a position of prominence in Florence and had a vast amount of wealth. His alliance would aid in bringing Dante Luciano to his knees.

"That would be wise. Let us share the wine with Linwood," Casale decided.

Edgar didn't object, but he did question how well he knew Linwood after all these years. He'd not known of the Baron's ties to Florence before reaching Italy. It had taken a sea voyage and several tankards of ale before Linwood admitted to visiting Florence fifteen years ago. At first, Edgar had been furious to learn that Rhiannon had been left alone in Linwood for almost a year.

His anger cooled when he learned Linwood's servants had kept Rhiannon bound in gold and contained by nepeta cataria. Her frequent illnesses kept her from inquiring as to where her guardian had gone. Mary Baker had been the one servant who'd remained loyal to Rhiannon. He wasn't certain what he'd do to punish Mary, but she would never return to England.

* * * * *

With a heavy heart, Rhiannon entered her home and leaned back against the door.

Aye, she realized the truth when she left Dante earlier. She had been wrong. She'd believed Emilia Casale's lies. The moment Dante vowed to never defend his word again she'd known she had erred and couldn't find the words to say she was sorry. She prayed that Dante would forgive her.

As she rested against the door, she thought back through the sennights that they had known each other. Almost two months now, she realized. Not once during that time had Dante pressed her to be anything other than what she was. Not once had he forced his will on her. He'd been patient regarding her fears and supportive as her past continued to come back little by little. Their marriage was a gift, one she wondered if she deserved, but Dante made her believe in the sanctity and the rightness of it.

She'd disappointed him. She knew she had. By confronting him rather than asking for an explanation she'd hurt him and he had turned away from her. Mayhap it was what she deserved, though she hoped that their relationship could return to the passionate, loving marriage that they'd known since their wedding day.

"Rhiannon, are you all right?" Mary inquired, making her presence known across the room.

"Nay, I've made a terrible, terrible mistake." Rhiannon pushed away from the door and went to her friend. On bended knee, she confessed to what she'd done, to what she'd foolishly believed.

"Rhiannon, do not weep," Mary begged as she knelt before Rhiannon. "You love Dante, just as he loves you. The two of you will get beyond this and become stronger for it. I know it!"

"Pray you are right. What shall I do now? How will I face him when he comes home this eve...if he does come home at all?"

Mary smiled gently, softly placing her hand against Rhiannon's face. "He'll come to you, my dear. He will not stay away knowing you are hurting. Mayhap you should

prepare a special evening for him? I shall ask Marcello to take the boys somewhere else until you send word that they can return to their beds."

"That might be the wisest course. And I have an idea that may—wait—I hear someone coming." Rhiannon turned her head toward the stairway that led to the workshop. By the scent and sound of the boy's footsteps, she knew who approached.

"Sergio, you may come in," she invited when she heard him hesitate.

"I wish not to intrude, Signora Luciano," Sergio said, seeming bashful for one prone to mischief much like Andrea.

Rhiannon pushed to her feet and met the boy at the top of the stairs. "Why do you refer to me so formally, lad? You've never done so before."

Sergio stared at Rhiannon in silence, his cautious eyes darting from her to Mary.

"What is it Sergio?" Mary prompted. "Has this anything to do with Signora Casale?"

"Why would you ask such a thing?" Rhiannon asked her friend, and then turned her attention back to Sergio. "Sergio, do you know Signora Casale?"

Sergio nodded, looking very much as though the weight of the world rested on his slight shoulders. "She is the one who brought me to Florence. It is because of Signore and Signora Casale that my family has not starved these last two years."

Rhiannon offered her hand to Sergio and guided him to the center table where they usually dined. "Tell me more. Does Dante know they brought you here?"

Sergio hung his head. His shoulders slumped. "He does not. He is a good man, one who does not deserve to have an apprentice who cheats him of his work."

"You speak of the painting that was stolen."

Sergio grimaced. "It is I who told Signora Casale about the painting. She arranged for it to be stolen and sent to England. I know not to whom the painting went but I was aware of what would happen. That is why I took the beating meant for Andrea. He had nothing but a scratch. I was laid up in bed for several days while my injuries healed."

"You must have this conversation with Dante. He has trusted you to live in his house, to learn from him and this is how you thank him?"

"You've the right to be angry, Signora. I've wronged him," he confessed. "I did it for my family. My parents, they are very poor and struggle day-to-day raising a small herd of sheep. I love my family and I'd do anything to protect them. But I've wronged you by telling Signora Casale things that only Dante's wife should know."

Surprised by the magnitude of Sergio's confession, Rhiannon stared at the boy. He was such a handsome boy. At ten and five, he was approaching manhood. She hoped that by confessing he could hold his head with dignity, although she didn't know what Dante would do when he learned of Sergio's deception.

"Sergio, what could you have told Signora Casale that only I should know?" she asked.

Squaring his shoulders, Sergio lifted his head. "I told her of the mark on his chest." For a moment, Rhiannon stared, dumbfounded. "When I was injured the day his painting was stolen, he stormed into my room without a shirt and I noticed the likeness of a lion. I was curious because it seemed...it seemed to glow...as if it were a measure of his fury. I asked how he'd come to have such a strange etching. He claimed to have gotten it in Venice. He said the glow was a trick of the candlelight in my bedchamber and he donned his shirt. I've seen him shirtless twice since that day, Signora, and did not spy the mark again."

Worried that Sergio might know more about Abcynians than anyone realized, Rhiannon leaned forward and touched the boy's shoulder. "I wouldn't worry so much about the tattoo, Sergio. We must figure out how to deal with your deception. Pray tell us what will happen if Signora Casale were to learn of your confession?"

"Her husband buys my parents' wool. For many months I've been forced to spy for her. If I did not do as she asked, she threatened to take away their patronage and make certain that no other merchant purchased wool from us. What she didn't realize was that I led her astray with false information whenever possible. I knew not what else to do."

"You might have told Dante sooner, Sergio," Rhiannon said. "He'd have protected you."

"He would have. Can you forgive me, Signora? I never meant for you to get hurt. When I heard you crying, I could no longer remain silent."

"You've done the right thing. I do forgive you." How could she not when she knew she needed forgiveness herself? Here was the explanation Dante had alluded to earlier, and with a breath and a few simple words, she'd doubted her husband at the time. She would forever make it up to him if he told her she'd been forgiven.

"Mayhap you should return to the workshop. When Dante returns, I will speak with him and we will proceed from there."

"If it is your wish, Signora Luciano," Sergio agreed.

"My name is Rhiannon, you needn't be formal." Rhiannon tapped his shoulder again and sent him back to the workshop. As soon as he was gone, she turned to Mary. "Mercy, Mary, to think Signora Casale has been spying on Dante!"

"I've spotted Emilia speaking with Sergio a time or two and I wasn't altogether certain her intentions were innocent. If I'd said something about this sooner much trouble would have been prevented. I fear there is something unholy about that woman. We must warn all the apprentices to stay away from her in the future."

"Aye, that would be wise. I'd go and speak to Dante about the matter, but I doubt he would want to see me right now. He needs to finish the lioness. When he comes home I will tell him everything. First, I will apologize."

Mary rose from the table and smiled. "I know you will. We must have faith that everything else will work out just fine. Dante will deal with the likes of Emilia Casale."

"I'm certain that he will. Pray forgive me for leaving you alone again, Mary. There is much I need to do before Dante comes home. I believe I shall take you up on the offer to take the apprentices from the house for a little while. They need to purchase supplies for the workshop and Marcello can lead them through it."

"Serena and I shall keep them busy and I'll ask Marcello to delay as long as possible. Mayhap we will picnic in the country afterward. There is nothing like spending the afternoon beyond the walls of Florence."

"Aye, but remember to be careful, my friend. Avoid Emilia Casale and guard the boys well. Marcello can look after everyone well enough. Should you have the need, come back home immediately."

"Should we require assistance, I will seek out Signore Fabrizio. He looks after us often and will be glad to guard the apprentices."

"Aye, that is good, Mary. Off with you now," Rhiannon said, more at ease.

Rhiannon was pleased to know Marcello was formidable enough to defend Mary and the younger apprentices if necessary and they would turn to Dante's friend if something difficult arose. She had to believe that they would be safe, and she could make amends to her husband before they returned to the house.

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Standing before his unfinished fresco, Dante knew his concentration was lost. Each time he reached for his tools, he stared at the plaster as though he were blind. Having given up trying to complete the lioness for the moment, he retreated and stared at what he'd accomplished.

In the background a lion crouched low in the green and yellow grasses of a plain. His mane was golden, fitting a beast in his prime, a perfect likeness to Orlando. He was proud of the lion, the grounds and the gray-blue sky. The cartoons scattered about the room depicted the painting's intent, but he had much work to do before it was complete. Rhiannon's image had yet to be started and would not until the lioness was finished. Only then would he bring Marcello and his apprentices into the room to add the final touches to the fresco.

As Dante stared at his masterpiece, he saw shadows and images. He could not see the whole, for his eyes were still blurred with tears. He'd wronged Rhiannon by turning from her earlier. She'd been crying and he'd allowed his pride to keep him from comforting her when she'd needed it.

"When a man looks as forlorn as you, there is trouble within his house," Eduardo interrupted, taking Dante unawares.

"How long have you been here?" Dante asked.

Eduardo shrugged and entered the room. "Long enough to know that something is amiss between you and Rhiannon," he said. "I've never known a time when you were

unaware of my presence, Dante. And you're not painting. Since I've come into the room, I noticed that your gaze returned again and again to the drawings of your wife."

"Truth be told, if I were to attempt working now I'd make a mess." Once again Dante stared at the fresco. His creativity would not return until he set things right with Rhiannon. "Why have you come?"

"Cosimo has sent me to summon you to the *Palazzo Pitti*. His messengers have returned from England. They have brought word from the Marquess of Raybourne."

"I shall go to Cosimo at once. Mayhap this will lift Rhiannon's spirits," Dante said, already setting aside his tools. The artist in him warned that he needed to take the time to clean his temporary workshop, but the man insisted that Rhiannon came first.

It was then that he heard footsteps outside. Curious as to who was arriving, he marched to the nearest window and looked down. Along with his apprentices, Serena and Mary came strolling into the *piazza*. Their arrival was what he needed, at just the right time.

"Marcello, I need you up here at once," Dante shouted to his eldest apprentice. "All of you," he amended when Mary and Serena stopped.

Soon after they'd arrived, Marcello led the ladies and the apprentices into the master's chamber. "Forgive us for the intrusion. We wanted to see how your fresco progresses," Marcello said.

Eduardo stood by the door as they entered, bowing to the ladies. "Word has come from England," Eduardo told them. "Dante is anxious to learn of it and share it with his wife."

Mary Baker stepped forward, her shrewd eyes narrowing for a moment on Dante. "You intend to make things right," she said in a whisper.

Dante nodded and smiled. "I will. This is good, *si?*"

"Aye, very good and it will be welcomed," Mary conspired. "She is sorry for your misunderstanding, Signore, pray believe her."

"You needn't think otherwise." Feeling as though the weight of the world had been lifted from his shoulders, Dante turned to Marcello. "Marcello, would you oversee the cleaning and preparation of this chamber for tomorrow's work? I shall not be back until then."

"It will be done," Marcello promised.

"Shall we go to the *Palazzo Pitti*?" Eduardo asked Dante.

"Si," Dante agreed.

When he reached the door, Mary said, "After the boys finish their work, we've supplies to purchase and a picnic in the country to attend. Do not expect us to return home until it is dark."

Dante inclined his head in gratitude and continued on, Eduardo close behind.

* * * * *

Rhiannon's best intentions were waylaid by the stirrings of a headache. Though it had been sennights since her previous bout, the slivers of pain and threat of sickness could not be ignored. She knew not why she felt this way but she sensed something was amiss.

More than likely she was concerned about Dante. Signora Casale had sent a spy into his home, used the knowledge she'd gained to steal a valuable painting and threatened his reputation as a trusted artist. She was also concerned about Sergio. She liked the boy. He'd stepped forth and admitted his duplicity and his attempts to thwart Signora Casale's plans. She hoped Dante would find it in his heart to forgive the boy and help assure that Sergio's parents were protected from the long arms of a powerful Florentine merchant.

Knowing what to do to conquer the headache now, Rhiannon went to a sideboard and poured herself a chalice of sustenance. Remembering to sip the remedy, she waited for the healing herbs to begin their magic and thought it best to lie down for a little while.

After emptying the chalice, she set the Venetian glass aside and headed to her bedchamber. Tired, though anxious for the sustenance to work its miracle, she stripped down to her chemise and snuggled beneath the warm, silk covers of her bed.

Dante's familiar scent soothed her far better than sustenance. Taking comfort in the essence of him, she grabbed his pillow and held it against her. Soon enough, her headache began to ease and her eyes drifted closed.

Chapter Fourteen

Rhiannon rushed down the hallway leading to her parents' bedchamber. Frightened, she knew she needed to warn her father of what she'd seen and heard moments ago. Careful not to awaken anyone in the manor, she proceeded on, still fearful that she would be caught.

Shadows and light from the torches on the walls flickered along the cold stone floor, her steps remaining as silent as a dormouse. It was good that her mother taught her to walk without making a sound, how to hunt and how to hide from their enemies.

On this night she didn't need to hide. She needed to reach her parents. Someone wicked resided within the walls of Wolcott Manor and they needed to know. Would they believe her? She prayed they would. She'd not been mistaken in what she had seen.

Finally, she came upon their door. It was always open during the day. When she found the door closed, she hesitated. Softly she knocked, for she was unwilling to disturb any servants. There was no need to alarm anyone save her father. He would set matters to rights.

Rhiannon knocked again when she heard mumbled growls within the chamber. "Mama, Papa," she whispered.

The growls grew louder, harsher. "Nay, the betrayer could not have come upon them without my knowledge," she said.

Drawing a breath, she tested the door and sighed in relief when it creaked open. "Papa," she murmured, looking about the chambers.

At first she saw only candles, but when her eyes found the shrouded bed, she spied the shadows of a man and a woman. They were thrashing about, growling and purring. The woman was on her hands and knees, her head thrown back, the man kneeling behind her thrusting his hips violently.

It took several breaths before Rhiannon realized the man and woman were her mother and father. But, what was Papa doing to Mama? Was he biting her? Why was Mama crying so?

"Papa, cease, anon, I beg you." She tried to shout, but her voice wavered and cracked. And her father lunged harder, making Mama cry out as though she were in agony.

Fury set her feet running. Her heart raced. "Leave Mama alone, don't hurt her," she warned, charging at the bed.

A froth of bed curtains restrained Rhiannon's arms and legs as she landed atop her father. He roared, arched his back and flung her from the bed.

Startled, she looked up to see her father looming over the bed. His face was contorted with a lion's rage, his jaws clenched and his hair in sweaty tangles. A trickle of blood fell from his lip.

"Papa, what have you done to Mama to make her cry?"

"God's teeth, girl, what are you doing here?" Gathering the tattered curtains and clasping them about his waist, her father sprang from the bed. "You are not permitted in this chamber when the door is closed."

That was true. "I wasn't thinking," she said. "I need to speak to you."

Papa did not relent. He was furious.

"Well I dare say you are thinking now. You must leave at once. We can talk in the morning." He tried to sound patient. Rhiannon knew he wasn't and she couldn't leave her mother. Not when her father was making her cry.

"I will not leave if you're hurting Mama."

Only then did Papa's anger fade. "I am not hurting your mother, Rhiannon. You've come upon us when we were...well, you witnessed something you are too young to understand."

"But I've come for good reason. You must listen and do something before anyone gets hurt."

"Rhiannon," he shouted, his impatient roar shaking the room. "Remove yourself from this room. I do not wish to see you again until morn, and only then when I have come to get you. Do you understand?"

Slowly she stood. "Nay, I do not. Papa, you need to listen. There are monsters here in Wolcott. You must defend the manor!"

"There are no monsters," he grumbled and marched toward her. "You know what we are. You needn't worry."

"Papa..."

"Rhiannon, everything is all right, do not argue with your father," Mama said from the bed. "Speak no more about monsters. There are none here in Wolcott."

Saddened that her parents wouldn't listen and shocked by the blood still dripping down Papa's chin, Rhiannon trembled. Wickedness was afoot in Wolcott and she had to find someone who would believe her.

Turning away, she stomped to the door, hesitating in the hallway. Looking back at her parents, her father still standing in the center of the room wearing bed curtains, she growled at him.

"Papa, if you ever hurt Mama again, I will never forgive you," she promised and stomped away.

"Bloody hell, Judith, what have I done? Rhiannon, wait... I..." her Papa called out when she was halfway down the hall. She refused to hear what he had to say.

Feeling alone, she ran toward the nursery. The servants were all abed. She tiptoed through the room, found a small canvas bag and stuffed it with a change of clothes. After donning a sturdy pair of shoes, she crept from the bedroom.

If her parents wouldn't listen, mayhap someone in Danford would. Aye, the Earl of Danford would listen and set Papa straight. Never again would he bite Mama and make her bleed. The Earl would rid Wolcott of the monster and all would be well. She was thankful that Angelica and Rachel were not visiting the manor. Her dearest friends would have been quite frightened.

Rhiannon was frightened enough for the people of Wolcott. It wasn't right. A betrayer, a monster, resided within their midst. She had to make someone listen to her and believe that everyone in Wolcott was in danger.

Gathering her courage, she fled outside, through the courtyard and into the night. The forest was dense and twisting, but she forged through it, using her keen sense of smell to guide her. As she ran, tears began to fall.

Lights flared from a distance. Thunder rumbled through the trees. Horses approached, sounding like dozens of them. Shouts followed the thunder of hooves. Angry shouts. Orders and accusations flung through the night, echoing through the forest.

Uncertain what to do, she hid behind a cluster of bushes and a fallen tree. Even though the shouts grew louder, more threatening, she couldn't move.

"Burn every home, every crop. Heretics abound in Wolcott. All must be destroyed." A man's voice carried through the night to spark the murderous shouts of soldiers marching through the forest toward Wolcott.

Heretics, Rhiannon thought. Dear God have mercy, the soldiers would destroy her home, the very home she'd been running away from to save it from a traitor.

Crying in fear, she whispered to no one but the night, "Papa, what have I done? I didn't mean to run away. I meant to get help. You wouldn't listen so I ran. I am sorry for my foolish pride. I will come back and save everyone."

She stood and began to run, stumbling over a stray root just as a sawing roar came from above her. "Nay, it is you," she cried, looking up. The leopard, the betrayer, hovered in a tree branch above her head.

She tried to regain her footing but she knew she'd never reach Wolcott. The leopard was upon her before she took her next step. His heavy body pounded her into the dirt. His jaws kept her still, piercing her skull. Her world went dark with pain and blood.

So much blood. So much pain and darkness. It was so very dark.

A man grabbed her hair and forced her to the ground. Briefly she looked into the eyes of a handsome soldier, puzzled as to why he looked down at her with hatred. He was speaking, daring to introduce himself while keeping her still with one hand and holding a dagger to her throat with the other. He would kill her and end her misery. She closed her eyes as he continued to speak in a voice that scraped her nerves raw and welcomed the darkness.

Darkness reigned. It was all around her. Nothing made sense. Nothing mattered but the darkness. In the darkness there was no pain. There was no blood. No pain. His voice was silent.

When it wasn't dark, pain abounded.

Pain. It was all around her. Pain consumed the darkness. Pain meant she was awake. Pain meant she might hear him. She would ignore the pain and sleep, thinking only of moonlight.

Where was she? Where was the light? Where was the moonlight that cast a silver glow about Wolcott? Something stabbed her left arm, forcing her away from searching for the moonlight.

"Owe," she whimpered. The pin prodded again. It was sharp. It wasn't a pin, it was teeth. He was biting her. It hurt. Something warm and wet trickled down her arm. "Papa, the blood. There's so much blood."

"Your father is gone, girl. What is your name?" he asked.

"Rhiannon."

"Do you know where I found you?"

"Wolcott Manor."

"Rhiannon of Wolcott, I have saved you from the fate of heretics. You are to forget them and obey me. I have saved your life, given you a future. You shall be grateful for it and go back to sleep."

Rhiannon did not fight the command. She slept. She slept for days, sennights, fortnights, she lost count. Ages went by, and still she slept.

When she didn't sleep there was pain. Her head pounded. She'd become ill, soiling her bed clothes, herself. He never cared. He always rebuked her for waking and commanded her to drink some vile concoction and to sleep.

Sleep was much better. If she slept, he wouldn't talk to her. He pretended to be her savior. She knew him to be her captor.

She opened her eyes once and saw his face. A fine face did not hide his evil and she went back to sleep. If she stayed awake, he would speak nonsense about monsters and dreams. Soon her dreams were filled with monsters too.

She woke again to chants, eerily mumbled through his hideously curled mouth. She didn't know his language. Didn't understand what he was summoning. She didn't care. If he dared speak English or French she would have understood.

Mayhap she would never understand. Was she English or French? Who was she?

When next she woke he hovered over her bed. "What is your name, girl?"

"Rhiannon."

"Where did you come from?"

She didn't know. She tried to think but her head began to hurt. She was too afraid to try. "I know not."

"Good, good, drink this. When you awaken next that is all you need remember. Your name. Just your name." He poured something down her throat. Mint lingered on her tongue to mock the foul taste. Then she floated free of the pain, free to soar toward the moonlight and then there was darkness.

A girl's tears cut through the darkness. Opening her eyes, Rhiannon tried to move. She couldn't. She was bound to the bed. Her head pounded and she was certain she was about to become sick. The girl's tears split through her head like lightning bolts.

"Nay," the girl cried. "Leave me be, Master. Pray, leave me be."

Across the room, Rhiannon spied a young maid wrestling with the beast. Again she struggled, thinking for a moment that she should have the strength to aid the girl. The binding on the bed refused to budge, made her weak.

"Silence, wench, do your bidding." He slapped the maid, propelling her across the room.

Rhiannon must have called out, causing the man to look over at her. The beast stared at her. Screams tore into her temples. He marched toward her with hands that had turned into unsheathed claws.

"Silence, girl," he ordered. "You there, make yourself useful. Fetch that pitcher. My ward needs her medicine."

Rhiannon did not want any more of his medicine. She hated the vile, mint-tasting brew that clogged her throat and made her dream. He knew how to hurt her in her dreams.

Struggling against her bindings, she watched the beast stalk toward her just as she managed to free one arm. She would not take his medicine. She would not!

She couldn't break free completely. He was soon upon her, holding her. With a roar, she twisted and bit his hand, piercing his skin.

"Rhiannon, enough, open your eyes!" Dante's archangel's voice silenced Rhiannon's dreams, awakening her to the memory of her past. She remembered. She knew who she was, knew why she'd forgotten. "Come back to me, cara mia."

Trusting Dante completely, Rhiannon rolled over in the bed she shared with him and opened her eyes. He stood beside the bed, looking tall and fine as he gazed down upon her with love and forgiveness.

She meant to say she was sorry. She truly did. Yet she was distracted by the way he held his hand close to his chest.

"Dante, what have I done?" she asked.

"It is nothing," he said with his hand kept out of sight.

"Show me," she demanded, for she knew what she'd done. She'd bitten him.

"Do not worry about this. It will heal." Dante lifted his left, dominant hand and revealed the angry welts marring his skin.

"I bit you," she whispered.

"You were defending yourself. It wasn't me you bit. It was the man in your dreams."

"I bit you," she said again, staring at his reddened hand. Pushing up from the mattress, she all but forgot her dream and grasped Dante's wrist. As gently as she could, she tugged him closer and pressed a kiss to his reddened palm. "I am sorry, Dante, for this, for everything."

"As am I, *bella*," he replied, allowing her to press his hand against her cheek. "You believe me now, Rhiannon? I have never lied to you about Signora Casale."

"I believed you before I walked away earlier. I would have told you so if I'd thought you'd listen."

"Pride caused me to send you away. It is the bane of most male panthera leo Abcynians. That and vanity," he said.

Rhiannon smiled. "You had every right to be angry with me for believing Emilia Casale even for a moment. She is an angry, jealous woman. I should have known better. Now that I've bitten you does that mean we've bonded in the way of our kind?"

Dante slid onto bed beside her and pulled her close. "It does not. For the bonding, we must exchange our essences. Abcynian essence is a gift. It must be given. It cannot be forced from you or taken in anger."

"If we were to bond would your hand heal faster than if you were to just drink sustenance?"

"It would, though it isn't necessary. My hand has already begun to heal." Dante offered his hand again and she saw that he spoke the truth. The welts had faded considerably. It wasn't until he rested back against the headboard that she realized she was trembling.

"Dante, I remember who I am," she revealed, lifting her eyes to his and without saying a word he reached for her and wrapped her into his arms.

"I thought so." Rubbing his bearded chin atop her head, he shifted just enough to kiss the scars hidden by her long hair.

Rhiannon struggled to sit up but Dante tightened his arms. "Stay as you are, *cara mia*. I cannot bear to let you go just yet."

"Hmm," she sighed, resting her head upon his strong shoulder and letting him hold her.

Taking courage in her husband's strength, she lifted her head to look into his golden eyes, eyes as heated as the sun, eyes that looked upon her with unquestionable, unshakable love. It was the headiest of sensations, she realized. Dante had confessed his love many times since they'd met and married, but now she could see it in his eyes, feel it in the depths of her heart. They were meant to be mated.

"*Si, bella*, we were meant to be mated. Tell me your dream," he encouraged.

"It was a nightmare, but because of it I think I know why I've resisted letting you take me from behind."

"I am listening," he assured, his right, uninjured hand beginning to comb through her long, pale blonde tresses. She did know that he was listening, with both his ears and his mind.

"Come now, Rhiannon. No more stalling, share with me what you know."

"You already know that I was very young the night I was taken from Wolcott," she said, feeling Dante nod. "On that night, I'd been testing my ability to stalk and I'd come upon Lady Jillian Forrester's solar. Lady Jillian was the widow of Colton Forrester, the previous Baron Wolcott who had been killed several years before I was born. I don't know how the Forresters had two baronies and an earldom in their family. It has been said that Garrick Forrester's father had considerable influence with the monarchy, as did Lucien Hunter's father. Regardless, when Colton died he did not have an heir and

Garrick Forrester, the Earl of Danford, arranged for my father to be given the barony in exchange for some heroic deed he had done for the Crown."

Rhiannon paused, remembering for a moment. Dante remained patient as she gathered her thoughts before continuing. "Lady Jillian was not happy with this arrangement but came to accept the change. She often visited Wolcott and became betrothed to a panthera pardus Abcynian who had been Colton Forrester's steward. All were pleased in Wolcott, for she seemed happy again. The night Wolcott fell, I heard her betrothed suggesting that they betray the Abcynians to the Saturians. She refused, of course, but this man, he was a monster. He promised to make Wolcott Manor better than it had been before Colton died. He'd once been the steward and upon Colton Forrester's death had been relegated to being a Guard. He wanted the right to run the manor as he saw fit. I knew then and there that he intended to betray my father, Sir Brandon Mathews, the new Baron Wolcott in order to possess the land. Knowing I had to warn my father, I rushed from the corridor and headed for my parents' bedchamber." Rhiannon stalled, struggling to pull her thoughts together and reveal everything without growing angry or afraid or deeply embarrassed.

"You came upon them while they were mating," Dante said.

Rhiannon inclined her head, her cheeks growing warm. "I did and I was too young to understand what was happening. I thought my father was hurting my mother. He was taking her from behind and it looked violent. He'd bitten her," she revealed while Dante soothed her with another stroke of his hand through her hair. "Without forethought, I charged their bed and landed atop my father."

"You took him by surprise," Dante surmised. "His preoccupation with his mate kept him from sensing you."

"Aye, due to his greater strength, I was tossed away like a feather. He was so furious with me that night. I'd tried to tell him about Lady Jillian's fiancé. But Papa wouldn't listen. Both he and my mother sent me away. Fearing that no one would listen, I ran away from Wolcott with the intention of going to Danford. I'd thought to seek the Earl of Danford's help. He and my father were very close. If my memories are right, my father served as one of Lord Danford's Abcynian Guards long before he'd been given the Barony. I reached the forest when soldiers came to attack Wolcott, but Robert Tucker found me and attacked in leopard form before I could take a single step."

"It makes sense. I wish I'd realized it before now. I knew who your father was, Rhiannon, but only by name. I'd been told that he was an Abcynian Guard; an Englishman who'd learned of our race and vowed to protect it. I confess, I'd lost touch with much of the happenings in England for a time," he went on, still combing her hair with his artist's fingers. "Valiant sent word about Wolcott's demise, though I didn't receive it until months later. Most of the missives I've received from him since have been short, for fear of what could happen if they were to fall into the wrong hands, and he did not tell me your father had become Baron Wolcott. To protect the identities of Abcynians throughout England and Europe, messages do not contain any names unless the message is sent by a trusted Guard."

Rhiannon tensed in Dante's arms, sensing his concern in not knowing more about her family before now. Wanting to reassure him, she scooted about until she knelt before him. "Dante, are you angry?"

He placed his still healing hand on her chin and lifted her face. "I am angry that I'd not known a little girl had been lost fifty years ago. I am angry that I'd not known more about your father until now. I am angry that you ran from Wolcott to seek help and fell prey to one of our kind." With trembling fingers, he traced her chin, her jaw, her nose and brows. "I am not angry with you. You need not speak more of your dream, Rhiannon. I know what you've dreamt."

Raising a brow, Rhiannon leaned closer and peered into his eyes. "So you know of the beast?"

Dante nodded. "When I first came into the room, I realized you were dreaming and wished not to disturb you. It wasn't until I'd sat upon the bed and touched your shoulder that I felt your fear. I tried to awaken you then but you wouldn't respond," he said, grimacing. "For a time, you thrashed about, pushing me away, refusing to return to me. I was frightened," he murmured, his throat convulsing as he swallowed hard. "Through it all I was watching your dream as if I were there. I felt your pain, your anguish and your need to reclaim your identity. The man who spared you from certain death at the jaws of an Abcynian leopard was the one who stole your past." As Dante spoke, he shifted closer, wrapping one arm about her waist as his left hand continued to paint her face with soft, gentle strokes. "Do you know who it was, Rhiannon, do you know how long it took him?"

"Aye, as do you," she whispered, awed by how perceptive and right Dante had been. He knew her mind, her dreams, whether good or bad, and all the while he remained at her side, patient and strong. "It was the Earl of Cliffton, only he was not an earl back then and there were times when he became like a monster, ugly, ferocious, half-man, half-lion and full of malice. Both of us knew Cliffton had much to do with what happened to me. It took him the better part of thirty years to steal my memory and I'm starting to think he took my blood to become converted. It didn't work the way he'd hoped. Once he'd succeeded in removing my past, he sent me to Linwood Castle and had me educated to become his wife."

Dante shuddered hard, his hatred for Cliffton apparent in the clench of his jaw, but his love for her was so much stronger than hate. Respecting him and needing him more than her next breath, Rhiannon breached the small gap separating them and snuggled against his chest, her ear pressed close to his heart.

"Now that we know about the past, Dante, mayhap we can make plans for the future."

"*Si*, it must be fortuitous that I received word from Valiant before coming home."

"What did he say?"

"His message was brief and succinct," Dante warned, shifting her until she was seated on his lap. "He gave your father's name and said that your parents are very

much alive, then insisted that the two of us remain in Florence until he could ascertain whether it was safe for you to return to England. He promised to either arrive with a guard or send another missive advising what to do next. Until then, I'm afraid we shall have to wait here a little longer."

Disappointed yet feeling as though they were taking a step toward the future, Rhiannon sighed. "As much as I am anxious to see my parents again, I think it is right for us to stay. You have a fresco to complete. I wouldn't want you to disappoint Cosimo de Medici by leaving it unfinished."

"I plan to see to its completion." Dante turned his head and whispered a kiss to Rhiannon's temple, his lips coaxing as the brush of his beard and mustache abraded her skin. "For now, *cara*, I think I shall concentrate on you."

"You cannot mean to seduce me in the middle of the day," Rhiannon rebuked, grinning.

"I mean to do so for the remainder of the day, into the night and tomorrow morning as well." Turning her with consummate speed and skill until she lay beneath him, his mouth descended upon hers.

Rhiannon breathed in all that was her husband, her mate, her lover. Reveling in his scent, in his tongue parting her sensitive lips, she entwined her tongue with his and drew him closer. This was where she belonged. Her past may be hers again, but Dante was her present and her future.

Loving the tempting abrasion of his bearded chin and the flavor of Dante, of man and of Abcynian on her tongue, Rhiannon almost forgot to tell him about Sergio. Reluctantly, she pulled away, holding him at bay with her hands.

"Dante, wait," she warned, shaking her head when he tried to wrestle her arms above her head. "There's something you should know before we continue."

"Rhiannon, *bella*, I hear the worry in your voice, yet I cannot think of anything other than making love to you. Can this not wait for a little longer?"

She kept her hands against his chest and pushed, using her increased strength to keep him still. "You must know. Sergio...though he's been your apprentice for two years, was brought to Florence by Emilia Casale. It was he that spied your lion's mark and told her of it. Again I confess how sorry I am to have believed her," she professed.

With his head arched back and his magnificent brown and mahogany hair having grown to his collarbone over the previous two months, he resembled the lion she'd seen once before. He was proud, handsome and willing to defend her, his mate.

"Dante," she whispered, taken by the beauty of her husband. "Please know with all my heart, I believed your word long before Sergio told me what he'd done. That poor boy has lived here as a spy and though he knew your painting was going to be stolen by Emilia Casale, who'd sent it to England, there was no true malice in his actions."

"I've never sensed malice in him," Dante said. "Sergio has never seemed to want to be an artist. Now I know why."

"Aye, he's remained here because his parents are indebted to Signore Casale." Rhiannon watched Dante shudder, the remorse for failing to realize Sergio's duplicity etched across his brow. "Do not be angry with him, my love. He bears the burden of guilt. I suspect he will for a very long time. He wanted to protect his family. I might have done the same."

Dante's fierce expression eased into a smile. "Ah, *la mia bella*, you are all that is good and right in my life. *Dio* be praised that I found you in the *Piazza della Signoria*. Without you I might have punished the boy."

"What will you do?"

"I cannot say. I shall need you beside me when I talk to him."

"You needn't ask. I will always stand beside you, Dante Luciano." Lifting her hand from his hard muscular chest, she rested her palm against his face. Finding him handsome and princely, she offered a smile as she caressed his bearded jaw. "I love you, my husband, so very much."

"*Ti amo*," he replied, capturing her hand and holding it against his face. There was so much intricacy and masculinity to his features that she longed to possess Dante's talent with a paintbrush. If only she could immortalize him on canvas.

"Dante, will you take me, please?"

"You know I will." Heated promise darkened his archangel's voice. "Someday, Rhiannon, I shall teach you to paint," he said, proving he had heard her thoughts. "If it is your wish, I shall be your model."

"I'd much rather watch you work. Your skill with a paintbrush is simply breathtaking," she proclaimed. "I am awed by you, Dante."

"As I am humbled by you," he claimed, gently pushing Rhiannon aside and untangling himself from the bed.

"You cannot mean to leave now!" Hoping to catch him before he turned away, she managed to snag his wrist.

"I shall return to you with all due haste. I've an idea that I believe you will enjoy."

Relieved, she settled back on the bed and watched him walk away. Her husband had a very fine backside, even covered in breeches and a tunic. Although she wasn't pleased that he left the room and rushed down the stairs. Growing curious, she wondered what Dante was doing and gaped when he returned carrying an array of paintbrushes.

A little nervous and intrigued, she stared, waiting for some explanation as he strode forward with the power and precision of a full grown male lion in his walk. His panthera leo dominance had come to the fore in his brief absence. With his longer hair, the prideful lift of his chin and his molten gold eyes, he was masculine and beautiful.

"What do you intend, Dante?"

"Don't you know?" Dante reached the bed and sat on the edge while arranging his brushes on the bedside table. "I intend to have my way with you, Rhiannon Luciano. Many, many times and if you are ready, we shall bond in the way of our kind."

Swallowing hard with need and a sliver of worry, Rhiannon knew it was time to ease her fears. Dante loved her as much as she loved him. Though her faith had been tested by Emilia Casale's lies, she'd emerged stronger.

Now she knew who she was. Now she knew what happened fifty years ago. When it was safe, she and Dante would travel to England and she'd be reunited with her family.

"Dante, mate with me, completely," she invited and offered her heart and soul as she offered her hand.

Reverently, he took her hand and brought it to his lips. "Ease your mind, *cara mia*. I will not hurt you."

Breathing deep, Rhiannon shivered with delight as he worshiped her hand with kisses. "I know."

"Then lie down and let me love you." Coaxing her back against the soft, soft sheets, he smiled as the bed gave beneath her weight.

Once she'd settled into the plush bed clothes, he stood, tugged his tunic over his head and removed his boots and breeches. Naked and glorious, he reclaimed his place on the bed and propped himself up on his elbow. The last of her horrid nightmares faded in the light of Dante's princely handsomeness and she relaxed beside him, ready to become his true heart's mate.

For the longest time Dante stared at her face, his eyes roaming over the arch of her brow, the tilt of her chin. She knew by his intensity that he studied her as a master artist studied a new canvas for his first brushstrokes. Seduced by his reverence, she waited, giving him time to proceed as he desired.

Dante desired her. He'd proven it time and time again with his body and his kisses. Now she knew he would prove it with his skillful artist's touch.

When she thought he'd remained silent long enough, she felt herself smile, granting permission for him to do whatever he wished. Dante growled, low and deep. Then he began to speak in her mind.

In an archangel's baritone, he whispered in the language of his heart, the language of Florence. While she'd only begun to understand it, she realized it mattered not. Her heart knew he was adorning her with praise and love, reclaiming their vows.

To her pleasure, Dante bent toward her and stole a kiss, claiming her mouth with his teeth, his tongue and his continuous words now being spoken in her temples. *Ha catturato il mio cuore. Once again, Rhiannon, you have captured my heart.* His admission made her heart pound and she wrapped her arms about his neck, holding him against her.

After a moment Dante withdrew. He smiled, moving with the quiet, lazy ease of a male panthera leo Abcynian while reaching for the first of his brushes.

Curiosity had her glancing at the brush he'd chosen. It was the smallest and most delicate of the brushes. As he used his right hand to sweep some of her hair aside, she arched her face upward. Soft bristles feathered across her forehead, her temple, sweeping left to right.

"Close your eyes, *cara mia*," he said aloud, the brush tapping her brows. Though the brush was dry, she imagined the cool wetness of fresh paint being smoothed down her nose, upward along her cheekbones and along her jaw line.

Dante's touch was reverent, coaxing, gentle yet full of the knowledge and skill required for a master artist. With her eyes still closed, she felt his gaze upon her, studying and creating with each sweep of the brush.

"Dante, I know not if I can take this much longer," she whispered, growing hoarse as the first vibrations of a purr emanated through her body.

"You can, Rhiannon, you can," he said before casting the smallest brush aside. She heard its quiet ping on the chamber floor, but kept her eyes closed when Dante's weight shifted on the bed. "Many times I've loved your body, Rhiannon. Now I shall paint you with my love," he promised, the warmth of his body pressing closer with the dip of the mattress.

"Hmm," she murmured, unable to speak for the trembling of want and need deep within her womb.

Already her body was preparing itself for Dante's seduction. She hummed with pleasure as a fatter, coarser brush whispered down her throat to her collarbone. With loving skill, Dante painted her with the brush, making her feel weightless, boneless, enticing her to believe that each patch of skin became a new creation beneath his brush. His clever touch missed nothing. Sometimes the brush swept through her hair, teased the whorls of her ear, the lobe, the gentle slope of her shoulder, the subtle curve of her forearm.

Another soft brush painted her fingertips, etched the thin lines of her palms. The blunt wooden head of the paintbrush dipped beneath her chemise and teased the crease where her hips met thighs. His thumb skimmed the same, precise path, as if blending the colors into her skin.

Dante stopped and Rhiannon opened her eyes. As she'd known, he hovered above her, heat and male longing reflected in his golden eyes. His nostrils flared, revealing that he'd drawn the scent of her arousal into his lungs.

With little preamble, he grasped the bodice in his left hand and tugged, shredding the cloth and tossing it aside with little notice. Naked now, she waited, anticipating the touch of bristles against her skin.

Rhiannon swallowed, closing her eyes with his next brushstroke. This one etched the lioness' mark on her left breast and rib cage. The coarse bristles scorched the mark, the luminescent heat radiating waves and waves of sensation to her womb, making her

weep with need. Her inner thighs were damp with her feminine moisture, all from the play of his paintbrushes.

The brush was exchanged for another, the fattest of brushes painting her left nipple. "Oh, mercy, pray do not stop, do not," she cried out, arching her spine and seeking more and more of Dante's clever brush. He teased, he circled, he painted and stroked, sometimes fast, sometimes slow, making reverent love to her breasts.

Dante's weight shifted and his mouth descended upon her right nipple, engulfing the whole of her areola and much of her breast. He drew hard, sucking her nipple against the roof of his mouth, the wet heat sparking a fire throughout her body. Offering loving attention to her left breast, his brush swept across the damp, pointed nipple he'd just so thoroughly loved.

Lost in sensation, Rhiannon arched in an age-old rhythm as the fat paintbrush caressed between her thighs, stroking the plump, moistened petals of her femininity before centering on the tiny jewel of flesh that sent pleasure from her womb and straight to her heart.

At a point she couldn't recall, he lost the paintbrush and caressed with his bare fingers. She'd thought she imagined the tremble of his fingertips until one of his hands swept down her side to her hip and she once again opened her eyes to stare up at his handsome face.

"Rhiannon, we're going to mate soon. I will be as gentle as I can," he promised, settling atop her body and she accepted the full of his weight.

She loved that he was so heavy and big, for she was strong enough to handle his hard, purposeful thrusts. "Take me," she invited, urging him closer.

"I am, *cara*. First I mean for our essences to join, which will further increase your pleasure."

Rhiannon stiffened. Dante would bite her. He wanted her to bite him. Feeling a little timid, she fought for courage and won. She nodded.

"I'll not hurt you, believe in that," he said.

"I believe in you, Dante. I give myself to you, all of myself, to you now." Ready to mate in the way of their kind, she hugged her arms about his waist and bared her neck.

She was surprised when he shook his head. "Not yet, I'll not bite your throat until you understand the biting ritual."

Rhiannon almost declared that he could bite her however he wished. Many times he'd worshiped her throat and collarbone with nipping little kisses, stinging a delightful path. She loved it but he was right to go slow. She was still coming to terms with what she'd seen fifty years ago. She'd thought her father was hurting her mother. Dante was trying to ease the last of her fears.

"Then where will you bite...and how should I bite you?"

"Follow your Abcynian instinct and bite as I do, all will come to you the moment your essence flows into me." Hoping she understood, Rhiannon lifted her head and kissed him.

Their kiss soon became urgent, their tongues mating, their teeth nipping. Playfully, he nuzzled her neck and throat with his lips, his bearded chin and soft wavy hair. Their torsos met, hips arched and circled, thrusting and begging, their lions marks brushing against one another. The brush of his soft chest hair stimulated her already sensitive, erect nipples.

Needing more, Rhiannon's purrs joined Dante's while his lips stung a path down her throat to her shoulder. There, she knew he would bite. Offering her shoulder, she waited. Dante's tongue twirled and twirled, his white teeth scraped, pinched a little, scraped. Then with a deep, muffled roar of possession, he bit.

Stunned by the sting of sharp catlike fangs piercing her skin, Rhiannon roared, thinking for certain she'd not know how to respond. Her lioness' need to mate sprang to life within, guiding her mouth to his forearm. Her canines lengthened into pointed fangs, pricking his skin and sinking deep. In an instant something warm and spicy flowed from the point of her bite, essence entwining their souls as she felt an answering heat in her shoulder muscle.

Feeling much stronger from the rush of Dante's essence into her body, Rhiannon gave and gave, knowing that her essence flowed to his pounding heart and his groin, just as his was doing to her. Everything good and right in the world centered on their joining, a mating so primitive and pure she wanted Dante's body to meld with hers.

With a swipe of his tongue, Dante lifted his head, breaking Rhiannon's hold on his forearm. "Now we are truly mated. You are mine."

"I think you should prove it. I cannot bear the feel of you pressed so close to my womb, yet so far away."

"Welcome me into you, *bella*," he said and she shifted until his heavy, throbbing shaft nudged her opening. At last he roared and thrust as she did, her body accepting him deep, deep inside.

He settled, remaining still, silent, allowing both of them to revel in the feel of penetration and being penetrated. With the suddenness of a dam bursting, their loving became fierce, primitive, all thought of playfulness and paintbrushes gone.

For they were joined, mated in the way of panthera Abcynians. Even now Rhiannon marveled in the rightness of belonging to Dante in such a spiritual way and knew in her heart of hearts that he belonged to her too.

Crying with need and pleasure, she clamped her legs around her husband's waist and met him thrust for thrust, demanding and taking, giving and seeking, his long, powerful strokes sending her careening into oblivion.

Dante carried her through the release and reawakened her need for another. Offering herself to his mercy, Rhiannon allowed him to turn her on to her hands and

knees and accepted him from behind, knowing all the while that he would bite her again. This time, she would offer her throat.

Chapter Fifteen

Sated but wanting more of his wife, Dante pressed against Rhiannon's back and sweetly curved rear, wrapping her in his arms. "I love you, Rhiannon," he said, kissing her shoulder where he'd first bitten her.

"As I love you, Dante, so very much," she sighed, contented for the moment. "You are an amazing, wonderful lover. I cannot imagine how it is possible but I want you again."

Dante smiled against her shoulder and nipped her. "If I take you now, I fear you'll be too sore later this eve. After all, four times since you woke from your dream is tiring, even for me. At some point we both need to rest."

"Aye and I thank you for distracting me so...passionately. But if we mate now we could rest until morning," she said.

Laughing, he swiped her hair aside and turned her to face him. "I'd like nothing more than to possess you, right now, forever." To emphasize his need, Dante ran his hand down her hip and thrust his hardening shaft between the damp, petal softness of her mons. "I want you. I shall always want you, *cara mia*. I should warn you that I'll not be able to wait until morning before having you again."

"Nor I," she answered, sounding as disappointed as he felt. "As I recall you did promise we'd stay in bed well into the night and into the morning."

"*Si*, I did. Only we'll have to be a little quieter when Mary and Selena return with my apprentices. You also need sustenance, Rhiannon, as do I."

"Aye, I had taken some earlier when I felt the beginnings of a headache, I could use more."

Dante watched her tongue trace her full lips, as if searching for the elusive flavor of sustenance. "I'd sensed you were unwell," he admitted. "I'd have come to you sooner if Cosimo had not decided to talk."

"I'm glad you came when you did, Dante. Something nagged at my temples, worrying me. I needed to rest and heal and I needed to have that dream. Because of it I remembered my family. Now we can look forward to going to England without that shadow."

Proud of her courage, Dante kissed her. "You are such a brave woman, Rhiannon Luciano. Something bothers you still?"

She nodded, her amber eyes softening with concern. "Mayhap I am concerned for Sergio. I know not what will happen to him and I sense trouble approaching Florence."

"I have sensed the same." Until Rhiannon spoke the words, he'd not wanted to give voice to the ripple of evil breaching the walls of his beloved city. "Rhiannon, you

should know that I have asked Eduardo to arrange a guard to follow our friends about Florence. I do not want anyone in this household to feel threatened. When Eduardo and the guards bring them home, we shall insist that the guards remain until any threat is gone."

"Do...do you think Cliffton has come to Florence?"

"If he hasn't, I think it is possible he'll be here soon. We must be prepared. From this day forth this household will be protected, you will be protected."

His wife lifted her brow. "And you've a fresco to complete. Will you accept a guard?"

"Eduardo will remain near," he assured. "You needn't worry so. I can defend myself against a Saturian earl. We'll discuss this over a chalice of sustenance."

"Very wise," she agreed.

He meant to say more but his attention was caught by the sound of booted footfalls nearing the house.

"Dante?" she whispered, hearing the steps too.

"Remain silent for a moment." He hoped the visitor meant to veer toward another house. The footfalls belonged to a heavy, determined man and he continued in his path to Dante's door.

Pounding commenced, signaling the visitor's arrival. "Dante Luciano, open this door at once. If I enter and find you harmed in any way, the wrath of God will not be more severe than mine."

"*Madre del Dio*," Dante grumbled. "It cannot be."

Rhiannon sat up now, her face turned toward the door. "Who is it? Why is that man shouting? He sounds quite determined to speak with you."

"It's Lucien," he said.

Rhiannon gasped. "Lucien Hunter?" A pretty flush crossed her cheeks, spreading down her neck and bare breasts. "Dear God in heaven!" she shouted when they heard the door crash open.

"Dante, I can smell you here and a woman. Her scent is panthera but vaguely familiar, bring her to me." Lucien issued commands with the authority of being the oldest living Abcynian and monarch of their kind.

"I shall join you in a moment, Lucien. Wait below stairs," Dante called out, wanting to stop Lucien from reaching the bedchamber.

"I'll not wait for anyone," Lucien argued.

"Do not enter." Prepared to defend Rhiannon's dignity, Dante tucked a bed cover up to her shoulders and moved to protect her from being seen from the door.

"Pray tell me what is amiss, Dante. Why you haven't greeted me properly?" his adoptive father demanded as he burst through the chamber door. "I see now," he

answered his own question, his clever eyes taking in Rhiannon hiding behind Dante's back.

"Forgive my interruption, my lady," he bid, bowing. Dante knew she could not see Lucien. "I'd been concerned for Dante and sought to assure myself that he was well. I can see that he is."

"Lucien, might we speak of this downstairs? Rhiannon wishes for privacy."

Lucien stared at him, his mouth falling open in an uncharacteristic display of surprise. "I know of one Rhiannon amongst our kind. She was taken from us long ago. Who are you to claim such a name, woman?"

Dante felt Rhiannon stiffen in temper, her concern for modesty fled. "How dare you question me so?" she rebuked, shifting about until she met Lucien face to face. "I am Rhiannon Mathews. The one you claim was taken long ago. I did not know who I was for a very long time."

Lucien's wise, knowing eyes studied Rhiannon's face and his chest rose and fell as he drew her scent into him. "God's teeth, we believed you dead. How could we have been so wrong?"

"There is much to tell," Dante said. "This is not the place for confessions, Lucien. You know this. We'll join you soon."

Lucien inclined his head and turned to leave. Dante waited, certain Lucien would stop in the hall. "Dante, is Rhiannon your mate?"

"She is mine," Dante answered with pride.

"Then you'd better have married her or I will tan your hide."

Behind him, Rhiannon smothered her laughter with a palm. "That I'd like to see," she whispered.

To Lucien, Dante said, "Rhiannon has been my wife for four *la settimana's*."

Lucien swung about, a broad, proud smile on his face. "My blessings upon both of you," he granted. "Dress and meet me downstairs at once." With that, he walked away, leaving them alone.

Dante knew it was only temporary. If he and Rhiannon did not present themselves straightaway, Lucien would return.

"My goodness, he does look like a lion," Rhiannon muttered, thinking she'd whispered.

Laughter echoed through the house, bouncing off stone walls. "Aye, you are Rhiannon Mathews," Lucien bellowed. "You told me that when you were still a babe."

Scrambling from the bed, Dante marched across the room and sought a clean pair of breeches. Rhiannon joined him soon after and it wasn't long before they were properly attired. He was proud to take his wife's elbow and escort her from the bedchamber.

* * * * *

Rhiannon hovered beyond the doorway leading to the great room and spied on Lucien Hunter. Dante waited beside her, his arm at her waist.

Lucien will not harm you, Rhiannon.

I know. I'm just watching him for a moment. Studying Lucien while he lounged in the most comfortable of Dante's chairs, she believed him to be deadly if provoked. He reminded her much of Orlando who did not snarl and roar as much as Raffaello, but left her to know that he was the king of his pride.

"Rhiannon, come and let me look at you," Lucien invited from his chosen throne. "Lingering in the hallway is unbecoming of a woman born of royal blood."

Rhiannon let Dante guide her into the room. She'd always thought Dante to be a tall, princely looking man. Seated as he was, she could see Lucien Hunter topped Dante's considerable height by at least a span and weighed a burthen or more. He was a giant and power rolled off his broad, broad shoulders in waves, warning all who neared that this was a man to be reckoned with. In the days when mythology was born, Lucien could have challenged the Titans, or even the Roman god, Jupiter, and won.

Lucien possessed a complex, chiseled face with his long, aquiline nose and a full, wide mouth. His tawny hair was clipped at his nape with a leather strap, though it fell almost to his waist, giving credence to the vanity, confidence, and pride that clung to him like a cloak.

"What mean you by referring to royal blood, my lord?" she asked. "I've recently discovered that I am the daughter of a baron, which would make me of noble and not of royal descent."

"Before I can explain your lineage, come and tell me how you've only recently learned who you are? Where have you been these last fifty years?"

Lifting her chin, Rhiannon met the Abcynian monarch's eyes. "During the raid on Wolcott Manor, I was attacked by a panthera pardus Abcynian. Lady Jillian's betrothed. I was gravely injured and saved by a man I now know was Edgar Wynthrop, Earl of Cliffton. While I was with him, I suffered terrible headaches and he stole my memory. Twenty years ago, I was placed under the guardianship of Garfield Parker, Baron Linwood, being prepared to become the Earl of Cliffton's countess. I knew nothing of myself until I managed to run away from England and reached Dante." As she continued to speak, revealing all that had happened to her, Lucien listened with a lion's keen senses. Dante remained near, his presence and his love protecting her from the brutal memories of the isolated life she'd led until she came to Florence.

"God's teeth, had you not had the courage to leave Linwood, you'd have been lost to us forever. I shall thank God for that the rest of my days that you came here," Lucien confessed as he stood. "Come and stand before me and prove you are well. Should I find a lingering scar or still healing injury I will send Edgar Wynthrop to hell."

Dante braced his shoulders. "You'll have to wait until I have dealt with the Earl and Baron, Lucien. For now, we must be grateful that Rhiannon found her way to me."

"It is good that you wish to protect your heart's mate, Dante. I'll have you approach anyway, Rhiannon."

Rhiannon obeyed, wondering what Lucien meant by claiming she had royal blood. "You've not told me of my lineage."

"Didn't I? Something I shall have to amend," he said. "Before you were born, your mother suffered a near fatal injury and my eldest son, Valiant, converted her to save her life. I converted your father, for he had married Judith and the two were in love. Therefore child, you were born with royal panthera Abcynian blood." Rhiannon gaped but stood before the Abcynian monarch proudly, allowing him to peruse her from head to toe. "A long time ago your father and I spoke of pairing you with Dante. It was always our wish that the two of you would become mated."

"Really?" she asked.

"Aye, here you are in the home we'd have chosen for you. God has a way of bringing together those who are meant to be."

Rhiannon intended to respond but she was surrounded by Lucien's big, muscular arms and swept into the air. Had her Abcynian strength not been so considerable, he'd have crushed her. Much like a father, Lucien hugged her tight and held her until he assured himself that she was indeed safe.

When he was appeased he set her back on the floor and Dante came to her side. "You're indeed beautiful, Signora Rhiannon Luciano, but the scars of your past remain," Lucien said. "I will seek retribution for what happened to you, I vow it."

"Let us talk of that," Dante suggested, pulling Rhiannon away and leading her to a chair. "There is still much you need know, Lucien."

"Sit and tell me everything." Lucien reclaimed his throne and listened as Rhiannon and Dante told them all that had happened since her arrival in Florence.

While they talked and planned, Rhiannon served Dante and Lucien sustenance and poured a chalice for herself. When a lull fell between them, she found herself curious to know more about Lucien Hunter. He was a man with many identities, some he still claimed and some he'd relinquished for the good of his sons. He was a good man, she thought, but crinkles of worry lined his knowing eyes.

"Lucien, may I inquire as to how you knew to come here?" Rhiannon asked while pouring him another drink. "When you'd pounded on the door you promised the wrath of God on anyone who might have harmed Dante, why?"

Lucien studied her for a moment and took a long pull of his wine. "I think I said my wrath would be worse than God's. He can be merciful. I would not be if anyone I loved came to harm."

"You can see I am unharmed," Dante said.

"I'm relieved more than I can say. You are not the son of my loins but I care for you as I do Adriano and Valiant. It was Adriano who alerted me to potential trouble in Florence."

Rhiannon knew little of Lucien's youngest son. Dante admitted he'd been closer to Valiant when he lived in Lucien's home. "Adriano sails for Spain, does he not?"

"He does." Lucien looked away, his eyes growing distant for a moment. "Of all my children, Adriano is the most secretive. It came as a great surprise when he sent word he intended to marry. I warned him against it yet he married Jacinta anyway and now they're expecting their first child. He was hesitant to leave her so soon after they'd wed so he asked his mother, Catarina, to come to Valencia and take Jacinta home until he returned from another expedition. Naturally I traveled with Catarina to meet my son's wife."

Rhiannon was pleased to learn more about Adriano. Lucien still hadn't explained why he'd come to Florence. "It is good to know Adriano has found his mate," she said, noticing Lucien's pursed lips.

"Something bothers you, Lucien?" Dante asked.

"It matters not at this point," Lucien answered, waving aside the concern.

"Then what has Adriano have to do with your being here?"

"He overheard a conversation between Spanish soldiers who'd sold their services to two English noblemen. He'd found it strange that Englishmen would hire the Spaniards. It sounded as though the men had a small guard traveling with them already." Lucien sipped from his chalice, measuring the wine and his next words. "Your name was mentioned, Dante. Those men were planning to find you. Adriano is many things. He is not given to alarm without just cause. I came at once."

"Did you come with Catarina's blessing?" Dante questioned.

Lucien sipped his wine and Rhiannon realized not all was well in Lucien's marriage. "She worries for you as well," he answered, for the first time since they'd met keeping his voice even, weighing what he said carefully.

Rhiannon wanted to offer reassurance. She sensed trouble but knew not how to deal with the eldest living Abcynian. He would be too proud to receive help from her anyway. "Pray know, Lucien, that I admire you for coming to our aid," she told him, reaching for Dante, who'd come to stand by her side. "Let us hope Cliffton and Linwood have not come to Florence and that you can return to Catarina and Adriano's wife very soon."

"I will not need to return to Valencia."

"Why?" Dante asked. "Catarina is waiting for you, isn't she?"

"I've arranged for my Guards to escort Catarina and Jacinta to Africa. Adriano plans to sail from Valencia very soon. He offered to come to Florence with me. I insisted he attend his duties."

Dante placed his hand on Lucien's shoulder. "It is what I'd want for him, Lucien."

Lucien set his empty chalice aside and stood. "I hear several young men and two maids approaching the *piazza*." It was then they heard Eduardo and Marcello's heavy footsteps nearing the house.

Marcello soon strolled into the great room, followed by Eduardo, two Florentine guards, Mary, Selena and the apprentices. Rhiannon frowned when she saw Sergio lingering at the back, his shoulders slumped.

Dante, we need to speak with Sergio. I fear the others have learned of his deeds. He needs your forgiveness.

He does, Rhiannon. Let us take him down to the workshop. Dante ignored the rest of his household and went to Sergio. He invited the boy to follow him below stairs and Rhiannon followed.

* * * * *

"Sergio, if you wear that sullen face much longer, I fear it shall remain permanently," Rhiannon warned her young friend as they meandered toward a baker's shop. The smell of freshly baked bread wafted through the narrow street, making her stomach rumble in appreciation.

"How can I smile?" Sergio questioned, having to rush to keep up with Rhiannon's assured, long-legged stride. "Few in the house consent to speak to me."

"Dante and I do, as well as Mary and Selena."

"I suppose," he murmured.

"You speak of Andrea," Rhiannon acknowledged. "You must give him time. The two of you were friends and your deeds shook his trust. When trust is tested it takes time for it to be restored."

Sergio slowed and tapped his hand to his mouth. "Rightfully so," he said.

Stopping a good bit away from the baker's, she faced the boy. "I'll not have you sounding so defeated, Sergio! What you did was wrong but you have realized your error and made amends. Your willingness to confess to Eduardo has prompted the questioning of Signore Casale's knowledge of the theft. He had to have known of his wife's doings and profited from them. You were not the first who'd been brought to Florence to spy on members of the painter's guild and merchant class."

Another heavy sigh escaped Sergio's lips. Rhiannon believed wholeheartedly that the boy should free himself of his guilt. "You are sorry aren't you, Sergio?"

"Si, Signora."

"Then I advise you to toss your guilt aside. You've been forgiven by the man you most wronged. Dante understands your reasons for spying."

"We still do not know what is to become of me. I do not think I can return to my family until I've proved myself honorable."

"You'll remain with us until we leave for England. It is a shame you aren't passionate about art, my young friend. I've seen the drawings you sketched for Dante, you're very talented."

Sergio's frown vanished into a smile. "If I could earn my living drawing stories, I would be proud or even as an architect. I'm not much interested in fashioning armor, furniture or painting."

"Mayhap someday someone will be your benefactor. You could be the first to perfect making a story with pictures instead of words."

Sergio smirked, staring up at her as though she'd grown two heads. "How could a man earn his living by drawing small sketches meant to represent artistic masterpieces or literature? Michelangelo himself did not work on the Sistine Chapel from mere memory. He used sketches, as did Leonardo or so I'm told."

"You mentioned architecture," she replied. "Think of the Cathedral of *Santa Maria Del Fiore's* soaring dome. Had not a man designed it, it wouldn't have been built to its present mastery. All of the buildings of this great city were designed long before they were ever built. You, my young friend, would do well to try your hand at it."

Rhiannon could tell her words gave him pause, something to think about other than his continued guilt. The boy was contrite and she found that she liked Sergio Romano more now than she had before he confessed to spying.

From the distance of the *Piazza della Signoria*, Raffaello let out a terrifying roar. It wasn't uncommon to hear the lion's displeasure. But he wasn't being cantankerous, he was angry.

Since she was on adjoining street, she didn't know if she could communicate with the big beast. Still, she offered waves of calm and reassurance. Raffaello roared louder.

"*Mio Dio*, that lion's roar would be deafening if one stood close enough."

"I don't think it would be wise for anyone to approach him this morn," Rhiannon replied, worried for the lion.

Something was not right. The stench of evil enveloped the city. Rhiannon pulled Sergio behind her and waited.

"Signora, what disturbs you?"

"The lions," she whispered. She knew it even as she said it. Animals could sense danger long before people did. Raffaello was paying heed.

Murmurs stirred the air, lending to her worry. Men and women began shouting in Italian. "Sergio, what's happening?"

"They're afraid of the lions in the *Piazza della Signoria*. The male has escaped."

"Oh, nay, how can that have happened?" Ignoring the baker's shop, she started toward the *Piazza della Signoria* but halted in mid-stride. She couldn't leave Sergio.

The Florentine soldier who'd been appointed Rhiannon's guard marched closer. "Signora Luciano, I insist the two of you return home."

"The lions have escaped, Signore. It seems you've more pressing concerns than remaining with us."

"Were I to leave your husband would send me to the dungeons."

"Nonsense," she argued.

Unease tapped Rhiannon's temple and she looked about. Someone approached from the *Piazza della Signoria*, someone deep in their cups. Wrinkling her nose, she trained her eyes on the street. Soured wine was soon joined by a sweet, musty smell. Baron Linwood had once given her a flask of ambergris perfume and she'd nearly retched. She had read that ambergris came from the intestines of whales.

But the origin of expensive perfume mattered not as she spied the familiar, petite frame of Signora Emilia Casale striding toward her. At the same time, she realized Raffaello had stopped roaring. The shouts from the *Piazza della Signoria* had quieted. It seemed as though the *piazza* was emptying.

"Bloody hell," Rhiannon cursed, flinching at her own words. "Forgive me, Sergio, Signore Donatelli. I've no desire to speak with Signora Casale."

"I shall tell her to go," the guard offered, moving to do so.

Proving a man of his word, the soldier stepped into Emilia's path and put up his hand. "It is best you return home, Signora. It isn't safe for you to be about while the lion is out of his cage."

"Stand aside," Emilia Casale ordered, pushing her hands into the voluminous folds of her pale green gown. "I must speak with you, Signora Luciano."

"I think not," Rhiannon denied, already backing Sergio toward the baker's shop. "Sergio and I will take ourselves home. Signore Donatelli, will you escort us?"

A wild, hideous screech wrenched the narrow street, startling the people rushing by.

"How dare you ignore me, Signora Luciano?" Emilia shouted, revealing the screech had come from her. "If it weren't for you my husband would not be threatening to banish me from Florence. I'll not be ruined for a simple-minded boy's lies."

Rhiannon forgot her worry for Raffaello and stared back at her foe. "How dare you threaten the livelihood of this boy's family if he didn't do your bidding? I'll not feel badly for you, Signora Casale. Do what is right, return home."

Emilia laughed, spewing more of her drunken breath. Rhiannon recoiled. Ambergris and vinegar-soured wine were not suitable companions. "My husband is a member of the *Arti della Lana*. I'll not be spoken to with such disrespect. Most assuredly not from an adulterous woman," she sneered. Her pretty countenance turned ugly with hate.

"Your accusations have no merit, Signora. I am devoted to my husband. Leave me be, you might be able to leave Florence with a modicum of dignity."

"You claim devotion to Dante Luciano and yet you ran away from your English betrothed. Why would such a lowly woman flee from marrying an earl?"

Drawing back from the assuredness of Emilia's words, Rhiannon stared. Dear God she and Dante had separated their problems with the Casales and their worries over the Earl of Cliffton's imminent arrival in Florence. There had been a time or two that Dante

and Lucien thought he was already here. Now she knew Cliffton could have been hiding in the country with Emilia's husband. It all made startling, frightening sense. They'd all been blind.

Emilia pushed slightly closer. "Have you no shame that you can violate a legally binding betrothal?"

"I've been betrothed to none save Dante Luciano while our banns were read before the Church," Rhiannon stated, hoping all who listened could hear. "If you've been housing the Earl of Cliffton, I suggest you send him as far from you as England is from Florence." As she spoke, a stark, vicious pain ripped down her spine, forcing her to brace her knees to keep from falling.

"You'd like to have your betrothed sent back to England, wouldn't you? He seems a fit and fine man, one who's vowed to have your marriage annulled! The Earl has already begun appealing to the Church over the rushed circumstances of your marriage." Emilia knew too much, threatened too much and Rhiannon listened as the pain sharpened and throbbed throughout her body. It took all her strength to stand in place.

"This is nonsense," Rhiannon rebuked, intending on leaving when she was able to walk. "Come, Sergio, Signore, I've need of your assistance," she implored. She didn't think she could stomach Emilia's offensive stench much longer.

"You'll not leave until you promise to speak with Dante. He must make amends with my husband. If he doesn't, much will be ruined." Emilia pressed forward even more.

Worried for reasons she didn't understand, Rhiannon tried to spin away only to falter and stumble. Like a calm breeze, warmth flowed through her, easing her pain to a dull ache. An archangel's voice whispered in her temples. *It is all right, cara mia. Your pain should ease very soon.*

Casting her eyes about, she sought to find her husband. Though she couldn't see him she was certain he was near. *Dante, are you here?* More warmth flowed through her, answering as she hoped.

"Did you hear me, Signora Luciano? Will you speak with your husband?"

"I'll not," Rhiannon said. Able to leave, she straightened and walked away.

A shuffle of cloth lifted the tiny hairs at the back of Rhiannon's neck just as a flurry of movement caught the corner of her eye. Swinging back, she found Emilia charging.

"I'll not be made a fool by an English whore!" Emilia shouted.

Signore Donatelli had rushed to catch Emilia but madness had her kneeing him in the groin, leaving him curled on the ground moaning in agony. Rhiannon belatedly noticed Sergio moving to stand in front of her.

"Nay, Sergio, stay back," she warned, grasping the boy by the hips and lifting him high in the air.

Another ear-piercing roar shook the narrow street and a big, familiar form leapt from the shadows. Someone shouted. Emilia crashed into Sergio and Rhiannon.

Rhiannon caught her balance and held Sergio against her body. Unmistakable, guttural cries rendered the crowd silent. At first she thought Emilia was crying. She was lying sprawled beneath a large male lion, his full mane mahogany and brown, much like Raffaello's.

Nay, Dante, you cannot harm her. Rhiannon warned him, knowing that the lion was not Raffaello. Dante sat back on his haunches, allowing Emilia to sit up.

More guards converged on Emilia. A metallic clank brought all eyes to the flat gray knife lying on the street, the faint smell of copper wafting from the drops of blood staining the blade. At first Rhiannon thought Emilia had stabbed herself during her attack, the woman had blood running down her hand and wrist.

Several men approached from the *Piazza della Signoria*, Eduardo and Lucien amongst them. The *Palazzo Vecchio's* lion keeper stepped forward. "Return to your shops, your homes," he advised. "We will cage the lion."

When an eerie calm flooded the street, Rhiannon noticed the warm wetness seeping into her tunic and onto her arms, bringing her eyes to her young friend. The copper scent of blood grew stronger, filling her nostrils. As understanding dawned, she felt foolish for worrying over Emilia Casale's sliced hand when it was Sergio who was suffering.

"Sergio, pray do not let this be." Scooping the boy into her arms, she shouted to Eduardo.

"Signore Fabrizio, Sergio has been hurt." Aware that Dante could hear, she continued, "When you see Dante, tell him to come home at once."

Ignoring all else, Rhiannon ran home, Sergio's agonized groans quickening her steps. She would not let this boy die, not if she could prevent it.

Finally home, she rushed inside. "Mary, we need a physician," Rhiannon called as she took the stairs to the master's chambers. She heard the other apprentices nearing the room, but slammed the door closed. "No one save Dante, Mary or a physician should come in here," she told the boys.

"Signora, I'm scared," Sergio stammered as she rested him on the big, soft bed.

"I know, Sergio, hold my hand." Weakly, he took her hand and groaned. Color had leached from his skin, leaving him pale, deathly pale. Thinking to check his wound, she grasped his tunic with one hand and tore it from his torso.

Rhiannon winced. Emilia's knife had sunk deep into Sergio's belly. She wasn't a healer but she feared such wounds were fatal. Judging by his bluing lips, he did not have long.

"So...sorry, tell...Andrea...he was my friend."

Tears in her eyes, Rhiannon used Sergio's tunic to stanch the wound. "You'll tell him yourself, Sergio. I vow it. I will not let you die, you're far too young. Besides," she

said, realizing what she needed to do. There was no choice. "You've cathedrals to design and stories to draw, remember?"

Sergio smiled faintly and breathed deep. "No one...would...read."

"I would if you were the artist. Sergio, close your eyes for me." When the boy obeyed, she leaned forward. "I'll not mince my words, my young friend. Your wound is very deep. I think, nay, I know I can aid you. If I do, your life will be quite different afterward. Will you trust me?"

"Always liked you," he said, nodding.

Rhiannon lifted Sergio's hand to her mouth and breathed long and deep, recalling all that Dante had taught her. For healing, an Abcynian needed to bite into an injured person's vein, preferably three times. Because she was not a full-blooded Abcynian, Sergio's conversion would be partial, allotting minor traits of the panthera. But he would age slower and he would grow much stronger like an Abcynian. A bite from a full-blooded panthera in lion form would complete his conversion, making the boy like her. If Sergio wished, Dante would convert him.

Scenting the slowing throb of Sergio's pulse, Rhiannon found the vein and bit deep, refusing to let go when the boy struggled. Her instinct proved to be right. Life-giving essence flowed from her lengthened catlike fangs into Sergio's arm.

With all her heart, she prayed for Sergio's soul, for his healing, for his family and gave. Three times, she gave. When she lifted her head, Sergio had fallen to sleep, a sleep she knew he desperately needed.

To her relief, she heard Dante enter the house. How he'd managed to outwit the lion keeper was a question for another day. All that mattered was Sergio's healing, and her husband was approaching their chamber. She and Dante would face Cliffton's apparent arrival in Florence once Sergio was better.

* * * * *

"Rhiannon," Dante whispered when he found his wife lowering Sergio Romano's arm to the bed.

Lifting her head, Rhiannon nodded, confirming that she'd offered Sergio the gift of Abcynian healing. "Pray do not be angry with me, Dante. I could not wait for the physician to come. Sergio would not have lasted that long."

Rushing to the bedside, he knelt on the floor and wrapped his arm about her waist.

"You did what was right," he reassured.

"Will you help me explain to him what we are? I'm certain he'll be frightened when he awakens...if he awakens. He's still so pale. What if my gifts are not strong enough to sustain him?"

"He'll awaken *cara mia*." Dante maneuvered closer and studied Sergio's face. "He sleeps because it is what his body needs most while your essence mends his wound. He

may sleep for a few *il giornos*. This is good. He will heal and when he does I'll tell him of the Abcynians. He's always been curious to learn Abcynian mythology."

Rhiannon shuddered, more from relief than worry. "If he desires complete conversion, will you offer it?"

"I will and he'll become like your parents."

"And me," she said.

"Actually, *bella*, because we've mated, you will become more like me." Dante watched Rhiannon closely, worried she may balk at learning that someday she'd change form.

"You mean I will change into my panthera half?"

"You will. You are one hundred yet your traits are stronger than most full-blooded Abcynians I've known. That may be so because of Lucien's part in your parents' conversion. His blood is strong and he changed earlier than most of our kind. You now have my essence flowing through you, strengthening your muscles, changing your bones so that you may one day change into the lioness etched upon your breast. Look at me, Rhiannon," he insisted before answering. She lifted her chin, meeting his eyes. "Does it worry you to know this?"

Rhiannon gazed back, her amber eyes wide and sweetly tempting. "I'm not worried for myself. I'd felt you change, Dante. As painful as it was for you, I felt it too. If I were to change, you'd feel the same, right?"

"If we were close, I would feel your discomfort. You needn't worry," he promised and reached to brush a lock of pale blonde hair behind her ear. "I'll be beside you, Rhiannon Luciano. I'll not let you face your first turning alone."

"When will I change?"

"Your body will age as a full-blooded Abcynian now. I suspect, much like Lucien, you will change earlier than most of our kind. But I cannot say when it will happen. I first changed when the lion's mark became visible on my chest at age two hundred. It was the same for my parents and for all Abcynians with panthera pardus blood. I do not know about the panthera tigris, we do not know enough about them."

Rhiannon shook her head then turned her attention back to Sergio. "I should be terrified hearing these things. Knowing I will be with you enables me to believe that all will turn out right when I change. I love you, Dante, I wouldn't want to embrace the lioness without you."

"You'll not have to," he vowed, leaning close enough to place a delicate kiss on the curve of her neck. "I love you, *cara mia*. Ease your worries for Sergio, he'll be all right."

"I believe it now. Dante, how was it that you came to that courtyard in lion form?"

Worry weighted Dante's shoulders, forcing him to wrap her closer. "Lucien was with me while I was painting and we detected the presence of evil nearby. We were certain Cliffton and Linwood had entered the city. We went to look for them and I spotted Cliffton passing Raffaello's cage."

"Cliffton freed Raffaello, didn't he?"

"*Si*, he is a sly devil, Rhiannon. I've no idea how he managed it, but he may have had assistance from Signore Casale. He was also in the *Piazza della Signoria*."

"Signore Casale would have the authority to give the Earl a key and Emilia Casale admitted to me earlier that she and her husband have been aiding Cliffton and Linwood. Although, Dante, why would they release an angry lion?"

"We believe they did it to distract attention from you. I've no idea how Cliffton managed to form an alliance with Casale, but he came to Florence today with the intention of finding you. The lion's release was just a means of distracting the crowd so that Cliffton could get to you. Unfortunately for Cliffton, Casale had already decided to have his wife banished from Florence for sending a boy to spy on me and she fell into madness. I doubt either man suspected she would attack you."

Rhiannon seemed to understand, the tightness of her jaw revealing her anger over what happened to Sergio. "She hurt Sergio because of that madness. I still don't know how you managed to change form and make it seem as though you were Raffaello."

"Lucien created another diversion. Raffaello obeyed Lucien's more dominant, silent commands and followed him until he was out of sight. I found a place to change and came to you."

"It is a blessing that you and Raffaello have similar manes."

"I wish I could have reached you sooner, Rhiannon. Mayhap Sergio wouldn't have been injured."

Rhiannon looked at him, love and pride shining in her eyes. "You were there, Dante. You came because you knew I needed you. Thank you."

From the floor below Dante heard Eduardo arrive with the physician. "I'll go and speak with our guest," he told Rhiannon, kissing her brow and rising.

At the door, he hesitated. "Rhiannon, you'll become like a mother to the boy. I can think of no other who could guide him better."

"Mayhap when we've dealt with Cliffton, we can try to have a child of our own?"

Desire filled Dante's entire being. *Madre del Dio*, he always desired bedding his wife, but at that moment, he'd never desired anything more than seeing Rhiannon grow heavy with their child.

"I love you, Rhiannon, and I look forward to having a child with you."

Rhiannon's wistful smile followed him as he strode out the door and down the hall. There were matters to attend and the Earl of Cliffton to deal with. It was time to plan, and pray.

* * * * *

Edgar Wynthrop was angry. The beast within him squirmed for supremacy each time he thought of Emilia Casale's debacle. Had she listened to his suggestions, she'd

not have succumbed to her rage and allowed Rhiannon to know of his presence in Florence or of his intention to declare her marriage to Dante Luciano unlawful. While he and Linwood resided in Signore Casale's Florentine villa, Edgar had summoned a priest to initiate the proceedings for an annulment.

Lucien Hunter's unexpected arrival delayed further actions. Earlier this morn, Ancile Casale agreed to escort them back into Florence, with Emilia set to lure Rhiannon into a trap before she was banished from the city. Instead of doing as she was told, Emilia disappeared, leaving Edgar and Ancile searching for her and turning to the lion in the courtyard to distract the public eye. They'd hoped to find Emilia and capture Rhiannon. Their hopes were dashed by Emilia's maddened behavior. Neither of them thought she would attack Rhiannon.

Edgar had to plan again. He'd come too far, had spent fifty years planning for Rhiannon to become his countess. She'd be his or hell would come down on her head, and Dante Luciano's too.

"Ancile, might I suggest a glass of wine?" he offered, stalking toward his prominent host. At least his plan to convert Ancile had come to fruition. Ancile would do his bidding. "Linwood, serve us."

Linwood stood and lumbered to a sideboard. "We've failed, Cliffton. Mayhap we should return to England. Rhiannon is not worth all the time and expense of continuing our pursuit."

"I'll not have you disparaging my betrothed," Edgar warned with a glare. "This is all a terrible misunderstanding, Signore Casale. Pray forgive our shortened tempers."

"I'm aware of troublesome women," Ancile said. "My wife is imprisoned for attempting to kill Dante Luciano's wife. I know not what madness has befallen Emilia."

"Jealousy, my good man, Emilia desired a liaison with Luciano and Rhiannon interfered, surely you knew that? I'm a jealous man, myself. I advise you to avoid referring to my fiancée as another man's wife. That so-called marriage will be annulled, I vow it."

Ancile accepted the glass of wine Linwood offered and drank it in one long pull. "Emilia has always had an eye for men she cannot have." Casale's eyes glazed for a moment, a result of the Saturian wine. "Our marriage was one of alliances and substantial dowry, not of love."

"Most marriages of note begin in such a way."

Ancile inclined his head, staring into his empty glass. "Another, my lord," he requested of Linwood, who poured more wine.

Edgar leaned forward in his decorative, uncomfortable chair. "Signore Casale, your wife's troubles could prove useful to us. You've said she is jailed. Might you know where?"

Ancile nodded, accepting his second glass of wine.

“Emilia made an unfortunate mistake, one that could ruin your reputation and livelihood. She stabbed a troubled boy and arranged the theft of a painting commissioned by Cosimo de Medici. She must be made to account for her atrocities, wouldn’t you agree?”

“Florentine authorities will see to her punishment. I’ll not interfere.”

“Mayhap there is a way we both could benefit from her punishment. I need to take Rhiannon back to England and you need vengeance against Luciano for stealing your reputation as a fair and just man.” Edgar was careful to speak softly, keeping his eyes trained on Ancile, who’d never be called a docile man. His shrewdness would be an asset to Saturians. His pension for placing spies amongst various members of the merchant guilds of Florence would benefit them even more. “If you are willing to listen and heed my words we shall have what we want.”

Ancile blinked and sipped his wine. “What would I have to do?”

“Why, nothing directly,” Edgar said. “Linwood, I’ll need you to send two of those Spaniards to watch over Luciano’s home.”

“It is as good as done,” Linwood replied.

“Signore, I’ve a plan that may seem offensive to you.”

Ancile agreed with a nod. “Proceed, Lord Cliffton.”

With Ancile Casale’s acceptance, the beast within Edgar calmed. He would have Rhiannon in his grasp very soon.

Chapter Sixteen

"At last, it is finished!" Rhiannon rejoiced. Taking pride in what Dante had accomplished, she smiled up at him. "You've made me so proud!"

Dante grinned down at her and tucked her into the crook of his arm. "Your praise means much, Rhiannon. I am humbled."

"Humbled you say? I believe you are as proud of the fresco as I."

Behind them, Lucien entered the bedchamber and crossed to Dante's masterpiece. "You've acquitted yourself well. I cannot say I've seen the like in Florence. Knowing our beautiful Rhiannon is the prominent feature of your work makes it all the more priceless."

"I am fortunate Cosimo desired such a fresco, giving me liberty to create without interference. I believe he'll like it."

"Of course he will," Rhiannon insisted.

For a moment of silence she enjoyed studying the fresco. While she was honored to have her image depicted on the stone wall, she was amazed to know the story behind the painting was quite true. And though her image had been used, Dante was telling all that Abcynian mythology began with a woman.

Staring at her likeness adorned in a beautiful blue and silver gown, bearing a bow and quiver of arrows, she saw the huntress of legend standing proud and erect amongst a pride of lions, young and old. A lioness sat at the huntress' side, a fattened calf in her powerful jaws. The mighty Orlando stood behind the pair, ready and willing to defend against an unforeseen enemy. Younger lions lay in wait. Freckled cubs pounced on their mother's bellies or tails. Some males bore the scraggly mane of youth. Yet though the painting was a combination of plaster and paints, the scene was real. Rhiannon knew it in her Abcynian soul. Dante depicted it from what he'd known about the past.

Amazingly it wasn't the male Abcynian Elders who first learned of their ability to communicate with the giant panthers and animals of their world. It was a woman. A woman who'd become known as a huntress because a lioness taught her to hunt, thus saving many Abcynians from starvation.

"You look much like her, Rhiannon," Lucien informed her, standing near enough that she could smell his lion's musk. It was an enticing scent, one she was certain could lure a woman to his bed whenever he chose. Despite that she believed he remained faithful to his jealous wife.

"Did you know Sabine?" she asked Lucien.

Lucien laughed. "I fear not, Rhiannon."

"Then how do you know?"

"I know of her. She was my great-great grandmother. My grandfather told me of Sabine's beauty. You possess it in abundance."

Heat stole into Rhiannon's cheeks. "You're a kind man, Lucien Hunter. It is little wonder as to why Dante liked living in your home when he was younger."

"Lucien is as much my father as my own was," Dante intervened, offering a kiss to her temple. "I am grateful you are here, Lucien. I feared Cliffton would try to take Rhiannon before I could finish my work. Now we can look forward to England."

"We do not know that he's gone," Lucien warned. "It's been a sennight since the incident in the *Piazza della Signoria*. I believe he is near. I just haven't found him yet."

"Have you sent anyone to Signore Casale's home in the country?" Rhiannon questioned.

"Both Eduardo and I have gone there. We found nothing of him or Linwood. But the stench of Saturian wine lingered in the house. Cliffton had been there recently."

"Stench, what mean you?" Rhiannon asked.

"Saturian wine is tainted with their blood," Lucien said. "It is their method of converting and controlling those who believe Saturian schemes and lies." The very thought of the blood-tainted wine repelled Rhiannon, forcing her to swallow hard.

"Nay," she grimaced. "What if Cliffton fed that wine to me while I was with him?" Rhiannon had told Lucien everything she knew of that time. Even though much of her memory had returned there were still dark, terrifying pockets of emptiness from the time she'd been taken from Wolcott and the day she was sent to Linwood. "Whatever he forced down my throat was vile."

"Dante believes he was giving you nepeta cataria. I'm inclined to think he's right. Cliffton wanted to take your memories. He did not want to change you into what he is. You told us of your dream and that you believe Cliffton had tried to take your blood on occasion. Saturians are unaware that Abcynian blood is not the means of conversion as theirs is. Mayhap he'd been trying to convert himself into an Abcynian."

Rhiannon swung away from the fresco and took Dante's hands. "Whatever he'd done didn't work the way he'd hoped. Dante, could I keep your drawings? I'd love to share them with Sergio and Angelica when we go to England. She'd love them."

Lucien tensed beside her and frowned. "You don't know," he murmured, his proud shoulders slumping a bit.

"What...what is it I do not know?" Seeking an answer, Rhiannon freed Dante's hands and faced Lucien. The eldest of their kind had tears in his eyes. Spying the tears, she knew what he intended to say. "Lucien...nay...tell me I'll see my dearest friend again, please!"

Lucien straightened his shoulders, making no attempt to wipe his eyes. He was not worried that his tears would weaken him. If anything they made him seem more like a man. "My dear, sweet Rhiannon, I wish with all that I am that I could tell you so."

Rhiannon shuddered. "Angelica...she's gone?" she whimpered, feeling Dante press against her from behind and wrap his arms about her waist, tightening his hold enough to offer whatever support she needed. "She was my friend. She was good, kind and gentle. Her parents are panthera Abcynian, couldn't they have converted her?"

"Garrick and Aisley gave her the Abcynian half of their nature. They rescued her from a brute and gave her much love and happiness. As much as they may have wanted to help her, Angelica would not have adapted well to the changes the panthera essence would have brought. Essence healed her to some extent, allowing her to learn to read and write. It could not completely ease the misfortunes of her birth."

"She wasn't unfortunate!" Rhiannon defended, remembering the brightness of Angelica Forrester's smile and the kindness of her eyes.

Lucien shook his tawny head. "She was an angel and Aisley feared full conversion would cause her harm. Be assured, Angelica was loved and she is missed by all of us. Your mother was her nurse. It was because of Judith's patience and Aisley's Abcynian healing that Angelica lived to be sixty years old, far older than most children who are born with her illness. To this day I'm confident Angelica is looking down upon us all from heaven, laughing when we laugh, crying when we do. Always there as the guardian angel of Abcynians."

Rhiannon's sadness lessened at such knowledge. Mayhap her mother could tell her all of Angelica's accomplishments, for she'd love to learn more. "I think I shall never forgive Clifton and Linwood for keeping me from Angelica. She was my friend and I was never able to see her grow into a woman." Tears threatened to fall, crushing her throat with aching hardness. "It wasn't fair. I didn't even get to cry for her!"

"Cry for her now, *cara mia*," Dante said as he tightened his hands at her waist and turned her into his arms. "Cry for as long as you need to."

Needing Dante's embrace, Rhiannon rested her head on his shoulder and cried, his arms keeping her safe as he bore each and every tear. A teardrop dripped on her cheek from above, coming from her husband as he wept with her. Movement stirred the scent of drying paint. To her amazement, Lucien had stepped closer, his arms encircling both her and the man he reared as his son.

Rhiannon had little notion as to how long they embraced. When her tears finally dried, it was Dante who pulled back and wiped the remaining dampness from her cheeks.

"Are you all right, Rhiannon?" he asked.

"I'm better," she answered. "It will be a while before I'm all right."

"I am sorry, *cara mia*. I know you loved Angelica. She was the first of your memories to return."

"Aye and she wouldn't want us to stand here crying. You've finished your masterpiece and Cosimo must see it."

"We sent Eduardo to the *Palazzo Pitti*. He should return soon."

"Mayhap I should go. I'm so taken with the fresco I might inadvertently say something in front of a de Medici," Rhiannon said.

"You wouldn't but Sergio would like to see you," Dante advised. "He's healing well. You were right in offering him your gift."

Rhiannon was pleased with Sergio's progress as well. The scar of his injury had faded into a puckered area of skin. Most of his strength had returned. Unfortunately he had to remain in bed to keep suspicions of his rapid healing at bay.

"I'll go to him," she decided, reluctant to withdraw, yet doing so anyway. She needed to return home. "Shall I send Marcello with the apprentices? There's cleaning to do."

"Aye," Dante said.

She nodded and turned to leave until Lucien stepped in her path.

"Rhiannon, I am sorry to have been the bearer of bad tidings."

"You needn't apologize, Lucien. I'd rather know the truth than be falsely led. You told me as gently as you knew how. I shall always be grateful." Lifting her chin, she met Lucien's eyes, pleased to see them soften and his shoulders returning to their usual royal bearing. "I must go. After visiting with Sergio I will have Mary prepare a succulent meal in celebration of Dante's success." Lifting to her toes, she boldly kissed Lucien on the cheek, smiling when he gaped and Dante growled. To assure her husband, she offered him all her love with just her eyes, knowing he could see it as well as feel it.

Rhiannon moved on, relieved to hear Dante order Signore Donatelli to follow her home. He'd long since healed from the melee in the *piazza* a sennight ago and had pledged assistance to make amends for failing to halt Emilia's charge. She certainly did not hold the guard accountable for Emilia's madness. No one could have foreseen that the small wool merchant's wife would wield a knife!

With a grieving heart, Rhiannon walked out of the de Medici guesthouse with Donatelli close on her heels. How she missed her childhood friend! It truly wasn't fair that she hadn't known of Angelica's triumphs, her frustrations when she simply could not do what others her age could and even her rare moments of ill temper.

Recalling Lucien's insistence that Angelica watched over them from heaven, she increased her stride. Aye, there was no doubt that Angelica was safe in the arms of God and His angels, protected from life's cruelties and harsh judgments. In heaven, Angelica was at peace.

"Signora Luciano, I do not know all that was spoken in the bedchamber," Signore Donatelli said. "I noticed the dampness on your cheeks and must assume you're grieving for someone. If I may, might I offer my condolences."

"Aye, Signore, and thank you," Rhiannon replied. "Let us talk of other matters. What did you think of the fresco?" Curious to know his reaction, she cast her eyes over to the Florentine guard.

She liked Signore Gian Donatelli. It had been Signore Donatelli who had come to the house earlier to inform her that Dante's fresco was completed. While she'd already been preparing to go to Dante when the guard came in, she appreciated his effort to protect her. The guard had also understood Rhiannon's need to share her first viewing of the fresco with only Dante and Lucien Hunter. He'd waited at the base of the spiral staircase until Dante ordered him to accompany her home.

"I think he is worthy of belonging in the painter's guild," Donatelli replied. "I've not seen a work like it. Regrettably I know very little of Abcynian mythology. Many in Florence believe Dante Luciano is a descendant of the Abcynians."

"Do you believe that?"

"Si," he nodded. "When I was young my mother often told stories of Roman mythology and I developed a keen liking for the tales. They're only tales but one can imagine that such stories have been passed down to Dante Luciano's generation as well."

"A very interesting comment, Signore Donatelli," she said and left the conversation at that.

With her Florentine guard at her side, she strode on, turning for home. In the street leading to the *piazza* adjoining her home, Rhiannon suddenly sensed the cloying taint of darkness, of evil. A hint of malevolence clung to the stone houses and shops. Cringing, she grasped Signore Donatelli's wrist.

"Signore, we shouldn't proceed down this path. Let us try a different street. We must get home." Thinking Mary or the others could be threatened, she rushed to find another street, only she didn't know of one. "Mayhap we should go back to Dante and Lucien? I do not think we are safe."

"I'll not let anyone harm you, Signora Luciano." Her guard attempted to reassure her and placed his hand on the hilt of his long, sharp sword. "I'll not fail you twice."

"Cease, Gian, you didn't fail me." Forgetting formality, she tugged his wrist. "Come with me, please. I've friends we need to care for."

A man's deep laugh came toward them, making the dry, dusty air tremble. Fearing it was Cliffton, Rhiannon whirled, ready for a fight. It was a man, a soldier...a Spanish soldier.

"Senor, let us pass," she implored.

The Spaniard shook his head, a malicious grin making his youthful countenance look ancient. As he approached, another soldier flanked his right, a third, his left. Two Englishmen followed. Rhiannon trembled, for she recognized the English soldiers. They were in Baron Linwood's guard.

"What is this about?" Signore Donatelli demanded, drawing his sword.

"We've come to take the lady to her betrothed, the Earl of Cliffton. He awaits their reunion," an English guard replied. "Should you fail to come with us of your own accord, we will take you by force."

"I was never betrothed to Cliffton."

The Englishman sneered. "Ah, that is not what we've been told. You've broken a betrothal agreement to the Earl. Your legal guardian possesses the proof of your betrothal."

"Lies," Rhiannon growled. "Be gone with you, before I summon my husband, Signore Dante Luciano."

"Luciano can do nothing for you now," one of the soldiers smirked, his heavily Spanish accent sending chills of dread down her spine. "He's already being taken into custody."

She punched her fists at her sides. "Dante has done nothing wrong." Even as she said it dread was replaced with unmistakable fear. In her temples, a headache loomed, warning that Dante was in danger. "Gian, we must get back to Dante and Lucien," she urged, dragging her guard backward with little effort. Her strength was thrice that of his.

An Englishmen's shout trailed after them. "Hold or face the consequences."

Rhiannon and Gian fled until his big foot entangled with hers and they stumbled. By the time they righted themselves, Gian was facing the soldiers, sword drawn, ready to defend. A Spaniard whom she now recognized from the wool merchant's shop, responded by drawing his own and rushed forward. Steel met steel, Gian's sure-handed grip forcing his opponent back.

"The paint," someone called out in English.

Before she could blink, the Englishmen marched in front of the Spaniards, revealing a large pail. Then she smelled it, the metallic mixture of gold leaf and oil.

"Nay, stand back! *Aiuto!*" she shouted, hoping a neighbor could hear her call for help.

"Signora, go now," Gian begged, bashing his sword against his foe's gray blade.

Rhiannon didn't want to leave him. Signore Donatelli couldn't handle five armed soldiers. Too late to aid the guard, she realized her hesitation had been a terrible mistake. Before she could run, gold paint was thrown onto her back and hair, seeping through fabric and into her skin.

"Dante, hear me!" she bellowed, her voice as loud as a lioness' roar.

Weakness invaded her limbs. The soldiers fell upon her a moment later, tackling her to the hard ground and further drenching her in gold.

* * * * *

The clink of armor and cringe of leather warned Dante and Lucien that they were about to have company. Expecting Cosimo and Eduardo, they faced the door.

"There are too many footsteps," Dante said.

The guards approaching numbered a dozen, the scuffle of a merchant's shoes amongst them.

"One smells of wool," Lucien said.

Trouble loomed. In his mind Dante heard Rhiannon scream his name. Before he could respond, weakness flooded through him as though he'd touched gold.

As he struggled to ascertain what was happening, Florentine guards marched into the room, led by Signore Ancile Casale. "That's the man who killed my wife. It was Dante Luciano."

"Sir, you are mistaken," Lucien defended.

"Stand aside, Signore, or be imprisoned with him."

Twelve swords sliced through the air, ready to strike. "Take them both," a guard ordered.

Lucien positioned himself for a fight. Dante had not the strength to best even one of the men, much less twelve. "Lucien, I cannot fight with you. It's Rhiannon, she's weak and I can feel it."

"I stand beside you, my son." Lucien nodded to him and stood his ground.

The guards converged, shackling Dante and Lucien's wrists and escorting them out. Lucien could have broken the chains. Dante could only walk. Rhiannon grew weaker, she was defenseless. He knew as surely as he breathed that Cliffton had taken Rhiannon.

Chapter Seventeen

In a jail below the *Palazzo Vecchio* Lucien stalked with a slow, predatory stride. Unable to do little more than stand, Dante watched, feeling as helpless as Rhiannon. And, still Lucien stalked. The lion in him demanded release from the iron cage as he fought the need to tear the bars from the stone walls.

"Lucien you needn't remain here," Dante said in an attempt to calm the alpha panthera that rose within Lucien Hunter.

Both his age and his lineage gave Lucien strength and the right to be considered the monarch of their kind. Dante did not envy the man for having such a dominant, aggressive panthera half. It took hundreds of years to master such a beast, even more for Lucien to feign nonchalance and ease. Now Lucien paced only when trouble was afoot.

"Go if you can. I'll handle the guards."

"I cannot leave you when you're weak, Dante," Lucien growled, fury darkening his face.

"You can find Rhiannon," Dante said.

The guards neared before Lucien could respond. A dozen men filled the narrow corridor adjacent to their cell.

The highest ranking guard stepped forward and approached the door. "You have been summoned to stand before Cosimo de Medici."

Dante held his stance. "Am I expected to answer to a murder I did not commit?"

Ancile Casale's woolen tunic signaled his imminent arrival. "It is I who shall tell of your foul deeds, Luciano. You'll answer to what you've done."

"Signore, I can speak on behalf of this man," Lucien interrupted, becoming calm and steady the moment the guards arrived. "How did you conclude Dante Luciano had a hand in your wife's death?"

"My wife was strangled and mauled during the night. It is believed she was dragged into the dungeons with the lions. All in Florence know Dante has a fondness for them. One of the guards spied him visiting last eve."

Dante bowed his head. That was true. He'd taken a reprieve from finishing his fresco to visit the lions. He had wanted to see them one more time before he left for England.

"The guard did nothing to assist your wife?" Dante asked on his behalf. "You are mistaken, Signore Casale. I did not see or harm her."

"Take him to the *Palazzo Pitti*," Casale ordered, marching away.

With swords at the ready, the soldiers converged on the cage. They needn't have taken such measures. Dante realized his greatest chance of escaping the accusation of murder was to appeal to Cosimo de Medici.

Lucien remained at his side. His determination and presence enabled Dante to believe that they'd save Rhiannon.

Offering assurances to his mate and hoping she could hear or feel them, Dante walked on. He'd not show fear or anger or Rhiannon would suffer the consequences. Lucien whispered in their ancient Abcynian tongue, the tones reminiscent of Latin as he prayed to their Creator. Dante prayed with him.

By the time they'd reached the *Palazzo Pitti* the sun was edging west. He and Lucien had wasted the morning as they sat in an iron cage, and Rhiannon was in danger. His only solace at the moment was his pervasive weakness. As much as he hated it, he felt it because Rhiannon was weak, telling him that she was not that far away.

Surrounded by Florentine guards, Dante and Lucien were led into the de Medici family palace and into the elaborate chamber where Cosimo held court. The powerful leader stood proud and erect, with two advisors behind him. Dante normally would have looked about to study the new and various artwork that abounded. He didn't. He kept his posture, waiting to be addressed.

"Must we have swords drawn? These men will not harm me," the de Medici ruler stated in the language of Florence, flicking his wrist. "Signore Casale, what say you regarding the death of your wife?"

Ancile Casale stepped forward, seeming surprised that he was to speak first. "I believe Dante Luciano is responsible for killing Emilia."

Cosimo de Medici responded. "To what purpose would he do this? He is not prone to violence."

"He sought revenge. Emilia attempted to harm his wife."

"I have been told by Signore Eduardo Fabrizio that your wife arranged the theft of a painting I had commissioned. This was a great offense to me and to Signore Luciano."

"My wife was guilty of that and arranging a spy to enter Signore Luciano's home," Ancile said.

Dante and Lucien remained silent. They'd speak when invited.

"Dante Luciano had reason to kill my wife," Ancile Casale added after a pause.

"Signore Dante Luciano, what say you to these accusations?"

"I did not kill Signora Casale. I have not seen her since the day she attacked my wife and apprentice in the *piazza*. It is a miracle that Sergio Romano did not die."

Cosimo de Medici frowned as his clever eyes studied Dante. "A day you were missing for a time, as I was told."

"Regrettably I was delayed in reaching Rhiannon because of Raffaello, the lion that had escaped. I prepared the dungeon for his capture while Signore Lucien Hunter and the lion keeper caged him and brought him to the *palazzo*."

"Might I speak on Dante's behalf?" Lucien offered, stepping forward.

Cosimo's attention turned to Lucien with narrowed eyes. "Who are you to speak for him?" he questioned as he studied Lucien's finery, which bespoke a man of means and privilege.

"The man who reared him from a boy," Lucien said.

"I'll have your name."

"Signore Lucien Hunter."

Cosimo inclined his head, his robes rippling with the subtle movement. "You've the dignity of royalty, Signore, speak as you will."

Lucien inclined his head in gratitude then straightened. "Because Dante believed his wife was in danger, he hired guards to watch over her. They have also been in your guest home while Dante completed the fresco. There has been little chance for him to slip away and enter Signora Casale's prison cell and drag her to the dungeon with the lions."

"A guard can attest otherwise," Ancile interrupted.

"Silence. Continue, my lord," Cosimo urged of Lucien.

"These charges are false. Signore Casale's loss is unfortunate but Dante is not responsible for his wife's death. He'd not harm a woman, not even one that threatened his wife." Lucien held his ground. "Might I inquire as to how Signora Casale died?"

Ancile Casale stomped closer to Lucien, never realizing the danger he was in by challenging a panthera leo Abcynian in his prime. "Dante Luciano fed her to the lions. I've already attested to this."

One of the de Medici advisors stepped forward. "Signore Eduardo Fabrizio found Signora Casale with the lions. He waits in the neighboring chamber and wishes to speak."

"Bring him in," Cosimo de Medici said.

Eduardo was soon escorted into the chamber. "May I speak?" he asked of the court, his manner respectful of the de Medici who could deny his servant the right to say his piece.

"You may," Cosimo decided.

"Neither Signore Dante Luciano nor the Florentine lions killed Emilia Casale," Eduardo declared. "It was I who found her in the dungeon. She'd been mangled and her throat crushed by a right-handed man. The blood I found on her was still fresh. There was none on the lions."

"That does not mean Dante Luciano didn't kill her," Ancile argued. "He must have killed her and dragged her to the cage for the lions to feed upon."

Eduardo smiled in eminent victory. "Dante Luciano is dominantly left-handed. I admitted Dante to the dungeons last eve. Signora Emilia Casale was not detained in the *Palazzo Vecchio*, at least not while we were there."

Cosimo nodded. "Signore Dante Luciano, step forward."

With sheer will, Dante obeyed, hating the weakness that made further movement impossible. "I await your command."

"I declare these charges false. Signore Luciano and Signore Hunter are to be freed at once. Guards, remove the shackles. Do you need anything from me, Signore Luciano?"

"As you've been told, my wife came to Florence seeking refuge from the Earl of Cliffton," Dante said as a man knelt to release Lucien's shackles.

"I recall sending word to the Marquess of Raybourne and Earl of Danford on her behalf."

"She is in danger again. Signore Hunter and I believe Edgar Wynthrop, known as the Earl of Cliffton, has made his way to Florence and plans to take her back to England."

Cosimo de Medici nodded. He did not seem surprised to know of Cliffton's presence. "The priest that performed your marriage ceremony came to me several days ago. He bore documents claiming Rhiannon was betrothed to him by the authority of her legal guardian Garfield Parker, Baron Linwood. Lord Cliffton plans to petition the Church for the annulment of your marriage."

"Much like the charge of murder, the document is a false," Dante assured, praying he'd remain patient. "I beg you to believe Rhiannon is in danger. I must get to her soon or I fear she will be lost."

"Do you know for certain she was not legally bound to the Earl of Cliffton?"

Dante lifted his head. "I've nothing save Rhiannon's word. I do not doubt my wife's honor."

"The priest will be the one to determine the rightness of your claim," Cosimo decided.

Beyond the outer doors to the *Palazzo Pitti* angry shouts reached Cosimo de Medici's court. Four men neared, three of which ignored the protests of the guards. The fourth was being dragged.

"Stand aside. Or face the sword of Valiant Montgomery, Marquess of Raybourne."

"Our prayers have been answered," Lucien whispered, bringing Dante's eyes away from the doors. Lucien was smiling.

"Allow us entrance. We've come to seek audience with Cosimo de Medici," grumbled the deep, sawing voice of a panthera pardus Abcynian.

"Open the doors," Cosimo granted with a flourish.

By then both Lucien's and Dante's shackles had been removed, permitting them to face the entranceway with dignity. Two servants shoved the doors wide and stepped back just as swiftly or risk being trampled by Valiant Montgomery, the Marquess of Raybourne, and a man Dante had never met but assumed to be Garrick Forrester, the Earl of Danford.

Lord Danford dragged another man with him, sending his foe sprawling to the ground. "Tell them, Linwood!" Danford planted his foot on Linwood's chest and unsheathed his sword. "I'll not repeat myself, speak!"

"Signore Dante Luciano did not kill Emilia Casale," Linwood squeaked.

"We've already determined that," Cosimo announced.

Danford shook his head and pressed the tip of his sword against the Baron's throat. He coughed and sputtered. "The Earl of Cliffton killed her. Ancile Casale arranged for Cliffton to enter Emilia's holding cell and paid a guard to turn a blind eye."

"You are to be commended, Linwood. Mayhap I'll let you live another day," Lord Danford pondered, the rusty saw of his voice warning he'd prefer to run his sword through the converted Saturian's throat.

"Guards, come forward, place shackles upon Signore Casale and Baron Linwood." Cosimo's direction was followed, much to Linwood and Casale's livid protests.

All the while, Dante waited for his chance to leave. They could not leave the de Medici ruler without permission. When silence came, he made his request, bowing low at the waist. "I beseech you. I need to find my wife. May we go?"

"You may, Signore Luciano, but not without consequence. I charge you with apprehending the Earl of Cliffton and bringing him to me. You have my word as a de Medici he will answer to the death of Emilia Casale and the wrongs he's committed against you. I shall also pray Rhiannon is found unharmed and for the sanctity of your marriage. Lord Cliffton must be brought to justice. But she'll have to refute his claim to the Church."

The more subtle fragrance of a converted panthera leo Abcynian reached Dante's nostrils. "Lucien, Rhiannon's father comes," he said quietly.

"Aye," Lucien agreed.

Valiant moved to the side. A man of average height and bulging muscle stepped to the fore. "Dante and Rhiannon Luciano need not worry over the validity of their marriage," the man said, and Dante knew it was Brandon Mathews.

"What gives you such authority over the Church?" Cosimo inquired.

Brandon bowed in respect. "I am Sir Brandon Mathews. I would never dare place myself above the Church. I speak as Rhiannon's father. She has never been betrothed to the Earl of Cliffton. Do I not speak true, Linwood?" he demanded of the Baron, who struggled against his bindings and guards.

"Linwood, attest to the truth," Valiant warned.

Linwood slumped against the stone wall with the assistance of a Florentine guard and a glare from Lord Danford. Rightfully so, Danford was a muscular, powerful man with a voice that frightened as much as it fascinated.

"He speaks true," Linwood confessed.

Dante lost his patience. "We must go. Rhiannon needs us, we cannot delay much longer." His worry compounded for though he remained weak, feeling had begun to

return to his feet and hands. A small measure of strength was returning. Rhiannon was either too far for him to feel or she'd figured out how to escape.

"Go with my blessing." Cosimo waved his hand to send them away.

"Valiant, we'll need your assistance," Lucien requested softly as he moved closer to Dante.

Valiant sheathed his sword and moved to flank Dante's left side. "It is good to see you, my friend."

"*Si l'amico*, as it is good to see you."

With Garrick Forrester at the fore and Sir Brandon Mathews at the back, Dante was led from the chamber with Lucien and Valiant guiding him through the doors.

Well out of Cosimo's hearing, Eduardo Fabrizio called out. "What would you have me do, Dante? I cannot remain here if your wife is in danger."

"Go to my house. If anyone is harmed or missing alert every man at your disposal and search for them."

"I shall," Eduardo promised. "How will you find Rhiannon?"

"You needn't worry, Eduardo. I can find her."

Eduardo said nothing more, leaving the five Abcynians alone. Outside, Garrick whistled to his English guards and five horses were led toward them, one being the horse Dante had given to Rhiannon the day they'd married. He didn't question how his friends captured Linwood, though knew they chose the horse by using their Abcynian gifts.

Dante was assisted into his horse's saddle. Lucien reined his horse beside him. "You know her scent better than all of us, Dante. Guide us to her."

"I'll not let Rhiannon down. She will be in my arms before *il tramonto*." Spurring his mount, he led the charge to save his wife.

Chapter Eighteen

Rhiannon remained helpless while Cliffton's minions took her from the city. Since she'd been blindfolded by the cowards, she used her lioness' senses to determine where they intended to go. The scents and sounds of workshops and crowds had fallen away to the sweetness of grass, the ripeness of olive trees and wool. She had been brought to the home of Ancile Casale.

Now she was free of the blindfold, but trapped in a large bedchamber awaiting Cliffton's arrival. Exasperated to know that her hands and feet were unbound and the door only a few steps away from where she rested against a stone wall, she growled and wiped ineffectually at the oiled gold that clung to her skin and hair.

"Pray hear my voice, Dante," she whispered, fearing the gold paint would stifle her Abcynian ability to speak with him mind-to-mind. Each time she tried to reach him her head pounded, making her retreat for fear of causing one of her debilitating headaches.

Slumping back, she tried a different tactic. Rather than fighting her weakness, she breathed in and out, calming her rapid heartbeat and hoping to cool her burning, aching muscles. Then she remembered, while she'd lived at Linwood Castle she'd unknowingly dealt with the effects of gold and had learned to walk and move with a measure of pride.

She could do it again. She had to.

Closing her eyes in concentration, Rhiannon prayed, shuffling her feet. The brush of her dry underdress and chemise brought her to full alertness. The bottom half of her clothing was dry, but a few droplets of oily paint clung to her bare feet. She hadn't a clue where her shoes had gone, but inspiration had struck!

Ignoring the protest of her muscles, she reached beneath her surcoat and caught the hem of her linen chemise. It took several weakened attempts until the fabric gave and she tore, leaving half her chemise in shreds. Once she finished with the strips, she'd tear the undertunic and surcoat if she needed to.

Satisfied with her work, she gathered a strip of cloth and dabbed it at the spots on her feet, wiping it away. A trickle of feeling returned. Encouraged even more she wiped her hands, arms, elbows and her neck. Anywhere she could reach, she wiped at the paint.

She became hindered when she discovered the oily concoction was entangled in her hair. The cloth would not be enough to remove it. Even the lightest traces of gold would render her too weak to fight the Earl.

But Rhiannon used the only weapon she had. All the while praying Dante was safe, that he could hear her and he was coming for her. One of Cliffton's men had hinted that

something had befallen her husband and she feared it was true. At least Lucien Hunter was with Dante. If trouble had occurred, Dante wasn't alone.

Then she became aware of a tainted male scent, warning that Cliffton approached. Though she was worried, Rhiannon kept her attention on her task. She would not let him think she'd been defeated or that she was afraid. He'd already taken too much from her. He would not take her pride!

The chamber door opened and the Earl walked in, smugness in his gait and his deliberate chuckle. "My dulcet darling, at last I have you in my keeping. To find you are resourceful leads one to believe you'll make a suitable countess."

Rhiannon fought a shiver and continued to wipe at the paint.

"Silence is unbecoming. Address me with the voice of an educated woman."

Still wiping, she sighed as if bored. "You refer to me as a future countess. That's most impossible. As you are aware, I am married to Dante Luciano."

Cliffton loomed closer. "Your marriage is a trifling concern, one that will be annulled while Dante Luciano is imprisoned for the murder of Emilia Casale."

"Nonsense," she said. Finally she reared her head, hoping to show her faith in Dante's honor. "Dante would never harm a woman."

"I've several witnesses to attest otherwise."

"Witnesses you paid or converted," she accused.

Cliffton's pale blue eyes narrowed, sending a tremor of fear through her spine. For a moment it seemed as if his blue eyes had gotten paler since she saw him last.

"You know nothing of what you speak," he hissed.

"You're wrong. I know many things about you. Given the putrid scent of blood-tainted wine being kept in the trunk across the room, it was easy to deduce how you convert your minions."

Cliffton glared at her, his fists tightening into the dark green richness of his barrel tunic. "Dante or Lucien told you how Saturians convert."

"I'll not deny it." Turning her eyes away, she worked at the paint on her elbow. "I must say your men know nothing about the proper mixture of gold leaf."

"They didn't need to mix it well. The paint worked."

It did. As it still did, she grimaced regardless of her efforts to wipe it away.

Above her, Cliffton snickered. "Do cease what you're doing. I will bring in the maid I acquired for you. She will help prepare you for our journey."

Taken aback, she looked up at him. How was it that a man could be handsome and look so vile at the same time? The panther in her knew why. Whenever she looked at Cliffton, the lioness's predatory instincts saw the beast of Rhiannon's nightmares, not the man.

"You'd allow me to bathe?" she asked.

“Quickly, darling,” he answered, offering a ghost of a smile. “We haven’t much time. The moment Baron Linwood returns we shall depart.”

Suspicious, Rhiannon lifted her brow. “Aren’t you afraid I would maim innocents or eat small children if the gold is gone?”

“Why would you think such a thing?”

“Is it possible you do not remember your lies, Cliffton?” she pondered as she dropped her hands to the floor. She was tired. The minimal of chores proved quite taxing. “While you were at Linwood Castle you implied that the wearing of gold jewelry was for the benefit and well-being of others. Mayhap you were concerned that I’d become like you?”

With alarming swiftness, Cliffton jolted forward and caught her hair, pulling it until she was forced to meet him eye to eye. “You speak in riddles, woman. If you do not hold your tongue I will have you gagged during our journey.”

“You will not. You’ll allow me to travel free of gold and unbound because you would not want anyone who happened to meet us to question you. I’ve long since realized Saturians and Abcynians must utilize the circumstances and people around them to fight one another, rather than risk being known for whom and what they are. Whether it is wars, plagues or political alliances both of our kinds will find a way to remain enemies. Fifty years ago you sold your services as a mercenary to the Church. Has your elevation to an earldom changed you in any way or do you hope to use your status as an earl to harm more Abcynians?”

Cliffton sneered at her accuracy as his fingers dug into her nape. “Fifty years ago I routed heretics.”

Fighting for calm, Rhiannon stared back at him. “You led massacres. Many innocent people died because of you. Based upon your response, I must assume that you now use your impressive title and fortune to aid the Queen by exposing Protestants. Only a few years ago, I’m certain you’d have done the same against Catholics.”

“I do what I must, Rhiannon. A title comes with expectations. As my countess, you’ll come to understand that.”

“I will not become your wife. You stole fifty years of my life, you dastard,” she accused. “Mayhap you do not realize it but I remember you. You even introduced yourself to me while holding a knife to my throat.” Holding herself as still as possible, she refused to flinch when Cliffton’s eyes narrowed and his lips thinned to an ugly straight line. “You are Sir Norman Fitzwater. You are not the true Earl of Cliffton.”

“You know nothing!” Cliffton’s fingers punched further into her scalp, finding the scars left behind by an Abcynian traitor. “You have little idea what I sacrificed for you, Rhiannon. I could have left you to die in the jaws of a panthera. I took you to my home. I was your savior.”

She attempted to shake her head. “You are a beast. A beast created because you stole my memories and you stole my blood.” Ignoring his tightening fingers, she pressed on.

"Enough!" he commanded, placing his opposite hand against her vulnerable throat. "I should kill you for showing such disrespect." To prove he could, he squeezed enough to catch her next breath. "I am now the Earl of Cliffton and you will become my countess." He jerked her toward him then slammed her back against the stone wall, sending shards of pain through her shoulders and spine.

Breathing hard, she thought of Dante, making her feel braver. "I'll never become your wife. Should you drain every drop of blood in my body, I vow I'll not convert you." Relieved Cliffton did not know how Abcynian conversion occurred she kept her shoulders pressed against the wall and her chin high.

"My darling, I do not have to harm you to make you acquiesce." Cliffton pointed his chin toward the bedchamber door. "Carlos, bring in the maid," he bellowed.

Tense with worry and weakness, Rhiannon followed Cliffton's gaze. His minion opened the door and shoved Mary Baker inside.

"You really are a beast," Rhiannon accused, aghast at seeing Mary's battered and swollen face. A brutal fist had blackened her friend's eye and left it swollen shut.

"Do you think me the kind of man who would beat a woman? I will not have Mary harmed further if you promise obedience to me."

"I hope Dante sends your rotting soul to hell when he comes for me!"

Carlos made the error of laughing but was silenced by a snap of Cliffton's fingers. A flick of his wrist sent the Spaniard away.

"Luciano can do little while he's imprisoned," Cliffton said. "Were I a compassionate man, I might consent to speak on his behalf and have him rot in the foulest prison imaginable rather than allow Ancile Casale to demand his immediate execution."

As weak as Rhiannon was, her panthera leo senses had not been dulled. Even closeted in a bedchamber she could hear the thunder of horses nearing the villa. Immediately Edgar's eyes slanted sideways, the pale blue irises widening until they appeared ghostly white.

"A wise man would know when to admit defeat," Rhiannon said, knowing in her heart of hearts that Dante was nearing. "A foolish one would remain to face the wrath of Dante Luciano and Lucien Hunter. You hear them just as I do. They are coming for you."

The man she remembered as Norman Fitzwater but now called himself the Earl of Cliffton withdrew several paces and stomped toward Mary. As he moved, his body began to shake. Spittle and blood dribbled from his chin. His teeth had grown, punching through his lower and upper lip.

"Dear God have mercy!" Mary screamed.

The beast was emerging. Rhiannon had seen him the night she'd awakened and found him beating and raping a servant girl. After he'd finished with the girl he'd come

to her and poured vile brew down her throat to send her back to sleep, a sleep that silenced her memories until just a few short months ago.

"Mary, you need to leave," Rhiannon warned.

"I'll not leave you with him," Mary protested.

"You must. It'll take him a few moments to become the beast. Until then he is unable to see." Dante had told her of the temporary blindness that came while changing form. "Go."

Mary stood and wobbled toward Rhiannon, bringing Cliffton's attention to them. Though he was blind he could move. With a terrible roar he lunged, catching Mary in his grasp and tossing her aside. She lay in frightening silence, bleeding.

"I'll have to kill you now," the beast roared, his eyes white in a face frozen between a lion and a man. His muscles bulged and popped through his tunic and sleeves. His hands curled into vicious claws.

Pushing with her listless feet, Rhiannon scooted down the wall, awaiting rescue.

"Dante, I'm here. Come now!" Rhiannon shouted, praying her voice would reach her mate.

Murmurs stirred deep within her temples. Familiar sounds but she could not understand and to try became painful. Sudden pain sliced down her spine, warning of Dante's turning into the lion but two beastly paws grasped her shoulders and hoisted her high into the air.

"Don't," she whimpered.

The beast snarled and wrapped a grotesque hand around her bruised throat. Her breath faltered. Her heart slammed in her chest.

Soldiers shouted, Spanish and English. Horses neighed. A fight ensued. And Cliffton squeezed as something crashed through the bedchamber door and she was freed.

Carlos lay still and silent on the floor. Dante stood in the doorway, still as a statue in lion form. Leaping from his prey, he slammed into Cliffton, snarling and growling. Rhiannon watched in horror as the beast fought Dante, unable land a single blow or scratch to Dante's massive form. The lion kept his claws retracted, using only the pounding force of muscle and brawn to render his foe helpless.

Dante, Rhiannon called, hoping to bring him back from his rage. You cannot continue or you'll kill a defenseless man.

He deserves to die for what he did to you.

He isn't worth it. Doing all she could to remain upright she shuffled toward her hero, her mate. We deserve happiness together, Dante Luciano. Should you kill him now, you'll have to answer for it.

The groaning, bleeding Earl made an attempt to grab Rhiannon's skirts. The same hand was halted by Dante's jaws. Terrible screams wrenched the chamber as Dante crushed and severed Cliffton's hand.

Lucien's voice thundered in the hallway. "Tell me you've punished him, Dante, or I'll have my turn. I'll not be merciful."

Rhiannon grinned when she saw Lucien's familiar face. "I think the Earl of Cliffton is finished," she said, somehow managing to crawl to Mary. Mary was still unconscious, blood oozed from a gash in her forehead.

Dante roared, leaving Cliffton to Lucien. Another sharp ache down her spine caught her unawares, forcing her to brace herself. Her mate was about to change back to his Abcynian form. By miracle the pain was far less than usual, her marked weakness easing the worst of her discomfort.

At last her husband stood before her, all lean, princely and naked. "Come here, *cara mia*, let me hold you."

Dante reached for the woolen cover on the bed and wrapped it about his waist before scooping her into his arms and leaning back against the wall, holding her close. Beyond them, fighting continued but she needn't be worried. The victors would soon emerge. She knew beyond a doubt that they'd be her husband's men.

"I knew you'd come," Rhiannon cried the moment she rested her head on his shoulder. "You shouldn't hold me long, Dante. I'm covered in gold leaf and Mary needs assistance."

"As much as I'm concerned for Mary, I cannot let you go, Rhiannon. Just rest," he demanded, hugging her close.

Uncertain how Dante managed to overcome the weakness they would have shared as Abcynian mates, Rhiannon remained in his arms. He'd explain soon enough. For now, Dante was safe and so was she.

After Lucien removed Cliffton from the chamber and returned to carry Mary out of the room to attend her injuries, Dante collapsed to the floor, taking Rhiannon with him.

"Dante," she cried, worried he'd been injured in the fall.

"I'm unharmed," he assured, shifting until he could pull her into the crook of his arm. "I should have killed him. There are scratches and bruises on your throat. Had I been a moment later he'd have strangled you." Rhiannon shuddered when he ceased being able to speak.

"I will heal. You needn't worry."

Dante rested his forehead against her temples and breathed deep. "Please tell me he did not harm you in any other way."

Rhiannon shook her head. "He did not. I vow it."

"I will let Cosimo de Medici decide what is to become of Cliffton."

"You know his name is actually Norman Fitzwater."

"That may be true. To the Queen and English nobility he's Cliffton. She will not favor him once a de Medici rules against him."

"That is a relief." Rhiannon drew in Dante's familiar panthera leo scent and knew that it was over. Never again would she have to worry about the Earl of Cliffton. "Dante, how is it you defeated him so easily? You...are as weak as I."

Dante grinned against her temple. "I found my strength through you, *cara*. As I was not truly covered in gold I could always change form. To do so when one's mate is weakened can be dangerous." Rhiannon tugged away and looked up at his princely handsomeness. "I know not how to explain my recovery, but I noticed the rags of gold paint on the floor. You did not allow your weakness to control you. You fought it by wiping it away and gave me enough strength to change and defeat him. It is fortunate for Abcynians that though gold renders us weak and unable to speak mind-to-mind, our panthera senses remain strong. My lion half sought yours and that was enough for me to find you."

"It is a miracle," Rhiannon said.

Humming, she breathed in and found that the true miracle of her life was Dante Luciano. He'd been there for her from the moment they'd met. He would continue to love her until they were visiting their great-grandchildren.

"You are my pride and my joy, Dante. I shall thank God nightly for seeing us through this. Although I am worried about Cliffton's attempt to question the validity of our marriage. I wasn't betrothed to him."

Dante kissed her. The gentlest of kisses stirring her as it had the first time he'd ever kissed her. "Ease your worry. I never doubted you. We had an ally come to our rescue."

"Might I ask whom?"

For a moment Dante did not answer and he deliberately kept her from reading his thoughts. "What are you keeping from me?"

"I've been asked to hold my tongue. Will you trust me to do so a little longer?" he asked.

"I will," she said. He held her heart. She could trust his reasons for remaining mum. "What of Emilia Casale? Was she killed?"

Dante nodded. "She was."

"Who did it, Cliffton or her husband?" It wouldn't surprise her if Ancile Casale had been responsible. The wool merchant was as corrupt as the Earl and Baron Linwood.

"Linwood claims it was Cliffton, with Ancile Casale's assistance."

Surprised to hear Linwood's name, she gaped at her husband. "Linwood confessed against Cliffton?"

At that precise moment a familiar sawing growl reached Rhiannon's ears. "Linwood wouldn't risk his life for another Saturian." The gruff voice she remembered as Garrick Forrester's spoke with conviction, bringing her head around in a flourish

"Lord Danford?" Rhiannon whispered and stared at the door until a big, brawny man sauntered into the bedchamber.

"Aye, Rhiannon," Garrick Forrester, the Earl of Danford replied, standing tall and proud in the center of the room. The broadness of his muscular shoulders and arms bespoke his preference to being an Abcynian warrior over a man with a lofty title.

Like Lucien Hunter, the beginnings of age marked Lord Danford's rugged countenance and his glossy shoulder-length black hair was sprinkled intermittently with gray.

"You are as beautiful as I remember, kitten," he teased. "Dante is a fortunate man."

"You are gracious, my lord." Rhiannon wished she weren't so weak so that she could greet him properly. Garrick Forrester made her nervous, as if she were still the child who'd adored him.

"Nay, not gracious, I am grateful you have come back to us," he claimed.

"Lord Danford, Lucien carried Mary Baker outside to attend her. Would you check to see if she's all right? You've no idea what she's done for me and I've been thinking only of myself these past few minutes."

"I've already done so, kitten," Lord Danford promised, kneeling before Rhiannon and Dante. "She is bruised and battered but nothing is broken. I will take her back to the city on my horse."

Rhiannon inclined her head. "Thank you."

He nodded and stood, striding out of the room with the same determined purpose as when he came in.

"We should make an effort to stand," Rhiannon said to Dante.

"Si, I think we might need assistance."

"Mayhap I can be of help?" Valiant Montgomery walked into the room, filling it with the aggressive scent of a panthera leo Abcynian in his prime. Rhiannon frowned. She'd not realized another lion was near other than Lucien.

You needn't concern yourself as to why you didn't sense him. Valiant's recipe for sustenance and liking of sandalwood masks his scent from both Abcynians and Saturians.

Rhiannon drew a breath. Indeed she'd been so taken with Garrick Forrester that she hadn't smelled cloves and sandalwood.

"Valiant Montgomery, you've become finer than I remember." Valiant was a breathtakingly beautiful man. His face was sharper and leaner than his father's, though he possessed the same aquiline nose and deep golden brown eyes. Unbound tawny hair fell in thick waves to his waist.

"What is this I hear?" Valiant chided with a devilish grin. "You address an earl with respect but not a marquess? I outrank Danford now."

Rhiannon smiled back, overjoyed to see Valiant again. Remembering something she'd seen when she was a child, she laughed. "The last time I saw you, you were chasing a pretty maid into the stables only to have your face slapped for your efforts. I remember that bright red handprint on your cheek."

Valiant's eyes widened. "God's wounds, you must have been spying on me, minx."

"You needn't worry. I've tremendous respect for you and I am grateful you are here." But she had to ask one thing. "Did you ever chase the girl again?"

"I cannot say," he admitted, a narrow flush heating his high, chiseled cheekbones.

"Valiant, we should have a bath drawn for Rhiannon and Dante," Lucien interrupted from the hallway. "Cliffton is almost conscious. He'll stand before Cosimo de Medici with a broken jaw and a severed hand."

"What a pity," Valiant remarked, moving off.

"I'm worried about the boys. If Cliffton's minions grabbed Mary, what might have happened to the apprentices?" Rhiannon asked.

"All is well at home. Eduardo took men to our house and found it secure. He reached us just before we arrived and reported his find."

"Amen to that," she said. "Does he know what you are?" she asked, relieved when Dante shook his head. "It is good to know we've an ally amongst the de Medici court while our secrets remain safe. Do we have Valiant and Lord Danford to thank for validating the legitimacy of our marriage as well?"

Dante hesitated as he shifted about and framed her face with his long artist's fingers. "Valiant and Garrick did not come to Florence alone, Rhiannon."

"I fear I do not understand. Who would speak for us?" By the look in Dante's eyes and the depth of his love and his compassion, she knew who it was.

"I did, Rhiannon," her father answered, his familiar shadow nearing the bedchamber.

"Papa," Rhiannon whispered, uncertain she'd heard his voice.

Her father, Sir Brandon Mathews, stood in the doorway. He'd come for her.

"Papa!" she cried again, wondering why he didn't approach. "You're here. You came for me."

"Of course I came for you, Rhiannon. The moment I heard you were alive, I came." Her Papa's warm, fatherly tone wrapped her in warmth as he rushed across the room.

In an instant she was swept out of Dante's grasp and gathered in her father's arms, where they wept and wept. As father and daughter, they wept until their tears soaked their clothing, still they wept for all the years lost.

Finally his stricken voice could be heard over their tears. "Your mother and I searched for you for a very long time. We lost faith in ever finding you. Pray forgive us."

"You didn't know," Rhiannon attempted to soothe. "If there's forgiveness needed it is I who should seek it."

Her father pulled back, noticing the gold paint marking his skin. Weakened along with her and Dante, he was forced to kneel. "You did nothing wrong, Rhiannon."

Ashamed to admit her cowardice in the years she'd spent under Linwood's guard, Rhiannon lifted her chin. "I forgot, Papa. I forgot my family, my identity. For a time, I

feared learning who I was because I thought I'd been forgotten. Since meeting Dante my faith in my family has been restored. I've little doubt that regardless of believing I'd died, you never forgot me."

Sir Brandon Mathews remained kneeling in front of her, his big, calloused hands combing through her hair, over her face. "There wasn't a day that went by that your name was not on our tongues or in our hearts. You've always been our daughter. We lost you for a long time but our love never changed."

"I should have known," she murmured.

"I'll not let you denigrate yourself in such a manner," Dante gently rebuked, crawling closer until he knelt at her side. "Blame should be placed where it belongs. Clifton and Linwood held you prisoner. For that they'll pay."

"He speaks true, sweetheart," her father coaxed.

Relieved of her guilt, Rhiannon rested her head against Dante's shoulder while her father grinned with pride. "Papa, Lady Jillian's betrothed...he was..." Faltering, she trembled until Dante nuzzled her temple, his soft, calming purr warming her face.

"I know what he did to you," Brandon told her, withdrawing. "I avenged you years ago."

"Lady Jillian must have been devastated," she said.

Garrick strode back into the room, deliberate purpose in his gait. "Jillian wavers between melancholy and happiness. She's remained troubled since Colton died."

"It is little wonder as to why," Rhiannon commented.

Beyond the doorway, Valiant spoke. "Your bath awaits, my lady minx. As does yours, Dante," he said upon entering the room.

"My father will need a bath as well."

"That he will, Rhiannon," Lucien agreed. "I'll have water prepared while you and Dante bathe."

Lucien backed out of the bedchamber and shouted for more water. Valiant escorted Rhiannon out of the room, deftly managing to be gallant while avoiding gold paint.

* * * * *

Dante washed as soon as he was able and felt better for it. His strength returned before the last of the gold was gone. Relieved, he found himself testing his muscles, his legs and arms.

When he finished, he heard Valiant coming toward the room with Rhiannon's father and fresh pails of warm water. Sir Brandon Mathews lingered just behind Valiant, allowing Valiant to carry the water since he wasn't affected by the gold paint.

"Are you all right, Dante? I know what it could have cost you to change while feeling Rhiannon's weakness," Valiant said.

"I'm fine. The panthera leo within me was strong enough to resist the weakness of my Abcynian half," Dante replied. Looking at Valiant, he lifted his chin. "There is nothing I wouldn't do for Rhiannon."

"For that I am in your debt," Sir Brandon said, offering his hand.

"I'd lay down my life for your daughter again." Their handshake was firm, that of a man to his son-in-law. "I presume Rhiannon and I have your blessing?"

Sir Brandon bowed his head, pride remaining in his shoulders. "You've had it long before we reached Florence. You sent word about Rhiannon, giving her back to us. A lesser man might have done differently."

Dante felt humbled by Sir Brandon's gratitude. "It would have been dishonorable to keep Rhiannon from you. Do not forget, I come with her, my lord."

Rhiannon's father maintained his grip and smiled. "You needn't use formality with me, Dante. I relinquished my title after Wolcott fell. As the dominant authority for Abcynians in England, Garrick has kept the land as one of his holdings."

"Wolcott was a prosperous land. It can be again," Garrick said as he entered the room carrying another pail of water. "More water for your bath, Brandon." Garrick turned to face Dante. "Follow me."

Recognizing an order when it was given, Dante tried to rearrange his borrowed tunic, failing to do more than make it more uncomfortable. Forgetting the tunic, he trailed after Garrick.

Outside, Dante broke his silence. "What would you have of me, Lord Danford?"

Garrick faced him. Here was a man who protected Abcynians in England and Dante did not doubt authority came naturally to the panthera pardus Elder.

"How long do you and Rhiannon plan to stay in England?"

"I'd have to discuss it with her. She will want to reacquaint herself with her family and then rediscover friends. I support her in this, realizing it could take years for her to feel comfortable leaving England again. We're also bringing an apprentice, a boy Rhiannon converted to save his life. Mary will return to England with us as well."

"The four of you will be welcomed at Danford, Somerton—"

"And Raybourne," Valiant interrupted, his sandalwood scent reaching them before he stepped outside to join them.

"I am grateful. We'll need a place to call home," Dante said.

"Would you like to call Wolcott home?" Garrick offered, stunning both Dante and Valiant. "Brandon and Judith prefer to live in Danford so there's little left of Wolcott. But our families can build a house for you and your mate. The land has always been fruitful if you are willing to oversee the tenants that would be invited to come."

Dante believed Wolcott would make a fine home. "If it is all right, I would like for Rhiannon to decide what she wants. Pray remember I'm an artist. I know little of farming."

"You'll learn and Rhiannon will remember what is required to run a household," Valiant commented. Dante did not doubt it.

Lucien stepped outside, pride in his step. "Lucien, I cannot tell you how much it has meant to have had you here these last *la settimanas*. I am certain your presence delayed Cliffton's intentions long enough for our allies to aid us."

"It is a relief to know Rhiannon is well and safe. Cliffton will never threaten her again. I shall see to it."

"Will you travel with us to England, Father?" Valiant asked.

"Nay, my son, I cannot. I'll remain in Florence to make certain justice is dealt to Cliffton and Linwood then return to Africa. My home is there." Falling silent, Lucien inclined his head and walked away, talking for a moment with Garrick Forrester.

Dante watched Lucien, suspecting trouble lived in Lucien's home. Sensing Valiant was about to touch him, he looked over as a big hand landed on his shoulder.

"There is trouble between him and Catarina, *si*? He's not spoken of her often."

"He'll be all right, Dante. He and my mother love each other. You needn't think otherwise."

"I shall pray for their happiness. Lucien will be a grandfather soon. He'll be quite proud of Adriano."

"Let's hope so. He worries for Adriano far more than he worries about you and me."

"Your brother did not marry his mate, did he?"

Valiant drew a deep breath, revealing his worry for his youngest brother. "We may never know why Adriano chose to marry Jacinta. I suspect it's because the sea is Adriano's mistress. It would be difficult to find one's mate while exploring new worlds. We shall have to see what becomes of his marriage. Until then we'll concern ourselves with establishing you and Rhiannon in England. You've proven yourself fortunate where she is concerned, Dante. As much as I admire you as a brother, should you ever hurt her or disappoint her, you'll answer to me."

"I'd expected such warnings from her father," Dante said.

Looking about, he noticed Garrick heading to the horses and taking the reins of Dante's horse.

Garrick led the horse closer, his green eyes narrowed in warning. "You've me to answer to as well," he said, offering the reins.

Dante nodded, feeling pleased to know Rhiannon was loved. By fortune and miracle, she'd never again be plagued by memory loss. But she would still need patience in the future. Fifty years lost was a heavy burden to carry, and she'd not easily shed her nightmares. But because he loved her more than life itself, he would be there, offering his unconditional support. Daily, he would offer his love by supporting her and their future children with his artwork. Nightly, he would offer his love with his body and his essence.

Mayhap when they reached England they could begin their family. He realized there was one thing they needed to do before she carried his first child. Smiling as he stroked the stallion's neck, he made his decision and conferred with Garrick on the matter.

Chapter Nineteen

In a separate room, Rhiannon was given ample time to scrub the remaining traces of gold from her hair and body. The soap was basic, but it worked its magic, leaving her free of weakness by the time she rinsed with a pail of clean water.

Someone knocked on the chamber door as she reached for a towel. "Rhiannon, we've found a surcoat and underdress for you to wear," her father said, the shuffle of silk telling her he'd dropped it by the door and left her to her privacy. Amazed that he was really there, that he was alive and well and prospering had been a balm to her soul.

By the time Rhiannon dressed and made her way outside, she was eager to see both Dante and her father. Much to her pleasure, Dante waited beside their favored stallion, looking princely even in borrowed ill-fitting breeches and tunic.

"You managed to bring our horse," she said.

"The praise belongs to Lord Danford," Dante replied, inclining his head to where Garrick Forrester awaited in his saddle with Mary sitting in front of him.

"I am grateful, my lord, especially for caring for Mary," Rhiannon said to the Earl, scanning Mary's battered face and noticing a slight smile. "I'm sorry you were hurt."

Mary grinned as much as her swollen mouth allowed. "I'll be all right. We've much to be thankful for this day, Rhiannon. You are safe and have reclaimed much of your past. Dante was freed of false charges."

"This is good, *si?*" Rhiannon teased.

"It is, *cara mia*, come and join me." Dante lowered to his knee and entwined his hands to offer her a boost into the saddle, joining her as soon as she found her seat. "You still have scratches, Rhiannon. We'll need to tend to them at home."

"Aye, though you needn't be concerned."

For a little while they waited and spoke quietly until her father emerged from the house with his hair still damp. "Thank you, Lucien, for seeing to our needs," he said.

"It was the least I could do for the three of you. Valiant assisted in filling the tubs. He should be commended."

"I am pleased to receive some credit in rescuing Rhiannon," Valiant said.

"My son, I've always been proud of you. Dante likewise," Lucien assured. Valiant grinned.

Her father mounted his palfrey and looked about for a moment. "Valiant, has someone gone for the women?"

"I sent guards to Judith and Aisley. They should be in the city by now."

Rhiannon almost vaulted from the saddle. "Mama's here?"

“Neither she nor Aisley consented to remain at home,” Sir Brandon admitted. “We thought it best to have them remain outside of Florence until we ascertained if it was safe for them to enter. It was by mere chance that we arrived at Dante’s and scented a wounded guard nearby.”

“Signore Gian Donatelli,” Rhiannon said. “Was he badly injured?”

“He will mend,” Valiant answered. “I took him to a physician and Garrick caught Linwood’s scent and found him. He’s always been the best hunter amongst us.”

“All of you are my heroes,” she pronounced, even as she leaned back against Dante knowing she was secure in his arms. “Let us return home, Dante. Assure me that we’re still going to England. There is much I need to know.”

Dante’s left arm tightened at her waist, holding her close. “You’ve family there, Rhiannon. I’d not keep you from them.” Kissing the top of her head, he rubbed his nose into her scalp and whispered a kiss to one of her scars. “Sergio will still go with us. We’ve already sent word to his parents. Our plans remain as they were this morn when I finished the fresco.”

Satisfied with that, Rhiannon breathed in the scent of her mate, reveling in the feel of him pressed against her back. She was free. Free to return to England, to rediscover her family. And she was finally free to love Dante without guilt or worry or fear of the past. Should her nightmares or headaches come again, he’d be there beside her, chasing them away with his kisses and his artist’s fingers.

“Let us go,” Lucien insisted, urging his horse forward.

Rhiannon noticed the array of guards riding at a slight distance. Eduardo Fabrizio was among them, leading a trussed and wounded Cliffton back to Florence.

When the guards were out of sight, the Abcynians spurred their horses into a canter and were soon in full gallop. The riders slowed while crossing the bridge that led them into the heart of Florence and stabled the horses very near the *Piazza del il leone*.

Once the horses were tended to, Dante gathered Rhiannon against his side to guide her to their Florentine home. She’d miss it but looked forward to seeing England without the ugliness she’d known for so long.

“I am looking forward to it as well, cara mia,” Dante said, hearing her thoughts.

They were now at the fore of the others, their smiles meant for one another until sudden movement from the house caught their attention. Together they looked at the entranceway. Rhiannon gasped in delight. Her Mama stood at the threshold, waiting for her daughter to come home.

“Mama, Mama,” Rhiannon called out when Dante stepped back, allowing her to run.

Her mother looked smaller than Rhiannon remembered. But she was beautiful all the same with her straight brown hair and heart-shaped face. An instant later they collided, Rhiannon in tears while her mother clung, her hold promising she’d never again let go.

"Sweet, sweet Rhiannon," Mama whispered. "Weep no more, my darling child, I've got you. I've cried for fifty years, enough tears have been shed. Let us rejoice in the gift of what we will share from this day forward."

"Mama, I would like for you to meet my husband, Dante Luciano," Rhiannon said, gesturing for Dante to step closer.

"It would be an honor to meet the man who brought you back to us," Judith Mathews claimed, offering her hand to Dante, who'd taken only a few steps before reaching them. "Thank you for all that you've done, you are welcome into this family."

"Thank you for your blessing, my lady," Dante said.

"You are welcome at Danford as well," Aisley Forrester, Countess of Danford, pronounced from nearby.

Smiling into her mother's hair, Rhiannon laughed and faced Angelica's mother. "Lady Danford, it is good to see you."

"It is far better to see you, Rhiannon." Lady Danford walked closer, assuredness in her stride. Some would look upon her freckles and red hair with disdain. Rhiannon thought she was a lovely woman with her long tresses falling free about her shoulders. "Having you back is a miracle."

Rhiannon withdrew from her mother to face Aisley. "I've learned that miracles can happen daily, especially since meeting my husband."

"I do believe you've found yourself a proud, fine man," Aisley commented, eyeing Dante. "Aye, you are a fine-looking devil, Dante Luciano. It is good to meet the man Lucien spoke of so often when he visited."

Dante bowed low, offering a grin. "You are gracious, my lady. Might we venture inside for some wine?"

"That seems an excellent idea," Valiant praised.

"Then by all means, proceed." Dante swept his hand toward the entrance and waited for Lucien, Sir Garrick and Valiant to make their way inside.

"Dante, Mama, will you give me a moment alone with Lady Danford?"

"As you wish, *cara mia*," Dante agreed, politely escorting her mother into the house.

"Lady Danford, I suppose you're wondering why I asked to speak with you."

To her amazement, Aisley had moved so swiftly Rhiannon had failed to detect the change. As only a mother could, she grasped Rhiannon's hands, compassion in her pretty brown eyes.

"You've learned about Angelica," she said, speaking plainly. Rhiannon felt Aisley's heartache.

"Only recently, my lady," Rhiannon admitted. "She was my dearest friend before I was taken from Wolcott. I remembered Angelica before anyone or anything else of significance. Because of her, I remembered you and Lord Danford and your children. It must have been difficult to lose your eldest daughter. Pray know I shall never forget her."

"You are sweet," Aisley replied. "I miss her every day. I am heartened to know that my daughter was happy and loved by all who knew her. She still lives in our hearts and prayers."

"Lucien said something quite similar."

"He would," Aisley claimed. She leaned closer and whispered, "Lucien believes Angelica has become our guardian angel."

"He's a good man, as good as Dante, Lord Danford and Valiant. I am fortunate to know them. And he is right, she is. Mayhap she was even guarding me until I was strong enough to fend for myself."

"Hmm," Aisley hummed. "Do you remember taking a fancy to Garrick when you were young?" Rhiannon flushed. Aisley grinned and took her elbow. "You wanted to grow up and marry him."

Laughing with joy, Rhiannon couldn't refute it. "I liked his voice. I still do."

"He does have an unusual, intriguing voice. Enough of that, from now on I insist that you cease referring to us as lord and lady. We are Aisley and Garrick to you," Aisley replied, leading her to the house.

Once inside, Dante met them before they took another step. "Do you think we could avoid speaking of my wife's fondness for another man?"

"Worry not, Dante, my heart belongs to Aisley." Garrick had arranged his brawny body at the table near the hearth. A Venetian glass filled with sustenance was in his hands.

Glancing about, Rhiannon did not see Dante's apprentices. Catching her thoughts, Dante leaned closer. "Marcello took Paolo and Andrea to purchase new art supplies. It seems he will take both boys on as his apprentices when we depart."

"And Sergio?" she wondered.

Before she saw him, she heard Sergio's footsteps running up from the workshop. "I'm here." He approached with emerging sure footedness and hugged Rhiannon. "I'd have aided in your rescue if I'd been asked."

"It is enough to know you would have," she told him, proud of the young man he'd become in such a short time. "Have you packed your belongings?"

"Aye, Signora Luciano."

"Good, then go have your sustenance and see that Mary is comfortable."

"I shall." Sergio withdrew to see to his tasks.

Standing near Dante, Rhiannon found herself momentarily lost in what to do or say next. Her parents were seated on a bench facing her, their eagerness in seeing her obvious. Part of her wanted to talk to them for a while. The other half wanted to take Dante's hand and retire to their bedchamber. It felt as though it had been ages since she'd last been alone with him.

"It's all right, Rhiannon," Dante whispered. "Go to your family. I'll join you."

Inclining her head, she did so. Valiant, Garrick and Lucien joined them at the table, and sustenance was drunk as they regaled Aisley and Judith with tales of their heroic rescue. Though her father remained quiet, he enjoyed the tales and looked upon Rhiannon and Dante with pride.

Darkness had settled over the city before the conversation quieted and Dante nudged her arm. It was time to go to bed. With a nod, Rhiannon agreed.

"Will you all excuse us?" Dante asked as he stood and assisted Rhiannon to her feet. "Rhiannon and I will see you in the morn," he assured, guiding her from the table without delay.

Conversation continued as they went, laughter reigning supreme. Pleased to know that her family sat before the hearth, Rhiannon followed her husband to their chamber.

The instant they were alone, she turned into Dante's embrace. "It's been ages since you've held me."

"It's been but a few moments," Dante replied, tightening his hold until her toes lifted from the floor.

Rhiannon breathed him into her lungs, her senses rejoicing in the knowledge that they were safe. "You were my true hero this day, Dante. I never once doubted you'd come for me."

"As always, I am humbled by your faith." He nuzzled her hair aside and bestowed tiny, biting kisses to the side of her neck, licking the healing scratches. "I've something important to ask, *cara mia*."

Puzzled by his request, Rhiannon stepped back. "Why have you become nervous, Dante?"

"Because I love you," he hedged before dropping to one knee and capturing her hand to bring it to his lips. "Rhiannon, will you do me the great honor of marrying me?"

It took several heartbeats to assure herself that she'd heard him right. "We're already married." Recalling the conversation they'd shared on their wedding night, she understood his intent. "We needn't do so again."

"We're about to go to England and begin a new life. Garrick has offered us land and a home in Wolcott. If you'd like we can open the manor house to artists who wish to apprentice with me and assist Sergio in becoming an architect or work on stories and sketches, whatever he wishes. Before that happens, I believe it would be good for both of us to stand before God and pledge our lives anew, paving the way for a new and bright future." Dante pressed a kiss to her palm. "Marry me again, Rhiannon Luciano. Before God, before our family, before all of England if it would please you, simply do not say nay."

Peace and happiness flooded Rhiannon's entire being. "Dante Luciano, you are my pride, my joy, the essence of my soul. It would be an honor to marry you twice, although I'll say nay if you wish to claim celibacy until our vows are renewed."

Dante stood, his elegance befitting his princely features. "I'd go mad if I tried."

"Then mayhap we should consider practicing for the children we plan to create?" she tempted, lifting her brow and tugging him closer to their bed. "Or we could discuss your next painting. What will you do, I wonder, another fresco, a portrait? Dante!" she gulped when he lifted her into his arms and stalked to the bed.

"My next masterpiece shall be a painting of you, *bella*," he hinted.

"As I recall, you've developed clever uses for paintbrushes. Do with me what you will, my husband. Know that I love you."

Dante laughed along with her as they fell into bed. "*Ti amo, cara*, always and forever I will love you." Capturing her mouth in a deep, passionate kiss, he silenced all thought save the rightness of his kiss as her lioness's mark grew hot and sparked his to do likewise.

Their kiss merged into another and another, soon replacing the worries of the day with the triumphs they would share in the future. A future that would never again be plagued by the past, for her past was found, and the love of her life pressed her further into the mattress.

At a point she couldn't recall Dante removed their borrowed clothing and settled between her thighs. "We'll take the night slow, Rhiannon," he whispered between deep, deep kisses, their tongues dancing. "I plan to pleasure you many times before *il sorgere del sole*. Even at sunrise, I wouldn't expect to leave this bed."

"We need not ever rush," she purred in agreement, loving the answering response from Dante's throat. "We've a lifetime to love one another."

"*Si*, we do, a lifetime that I vow will be filled with happiness."

"I've been happy since the day you convinced me to marry you. You gave back my life, Dante, my pride." Holding him against her heart, she rejoiced in the steady thud of his heartbeat. "Now love me as only you know how."

"As you wish," Dante assured, reclaiming her lips in a kiss that promised sunrise was still a night away.

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, experienced heartbreaking losses and, yes, 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 e-mail address on her author bio page at www.cerridwenpress.com.

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