

The hunt had begun.

Dante Venti stood at the top of the Spanish Steps, Rome spread out before him. The wind swirled around his body, carrying the noises and scents of the Eternal City.

He lifted one hand and waved toward the night-shrouded buildings. The wind hurried to obey his order, searching for any sign of the prey he hunted.

The wind was his to command. Like his father and grandfather before him, he was a WindKeeper, one of four brothers gifted with the power of the wind. Since the day he'd reached manhood and inherited his power, he'd been the Keeper of the South Wind.

His warm breeze brought back the blaring horns of the frantic Rome traffic, the laughter of late night diners, the exclamations of wandering tourists and the whispers of lovers.

It also brought him the taint of his foe.

*You're better than them.* The sly, nasty voice slid inside Dante's soul. *Why do you waste your time protecting them? Succumb and accept your true power.*

Dante pulled in a deep breath. "He's here."

"Find him. We don't have much time."

Dante turned to look at his brother. They could have been twins with their big muscled builds and dark curly hair. But Luca was a year older and Keeper of the North Wind.

"I'll find him." Dante looked back at the city. Luca was right. There wasn't much time. He felt it inside him, each beat of his heart like the ticking of a clock.

Three days ago, the *Venti Tempesta* had escaped their warden, Livia Cavalli. For three endless nights, Dante and his brothers had searched for the evil Tempest Winds. They'd gone without sleep and rest in order to find the Winds before they wreaked their havoc.

Now Dante was close to finding his adversary. Somewhere in the twists and turns of the city's streets lurked Africus—holder of the Southwest wind and its dark vice of pride.

He would waste no time infecting as many humans as possible. Dante eyed the group of tourists gathered at the bottom of the steps, eating gelato and snapping photos, unaware of the danger bearing down on them.

But humans weren't the only ones susceptible. Dante already felt the pull of pride, a vice he'd struggled with his entire life.

"Caecius has gone north." Luca turned, his blue eyes ice cold. "I must follow him."

Caecius was holder of the Northeast wind and keeper of anger. Dante studied his brother. Luca looked calm and controlled, until you looked at his hands. They were clenched into fists, his knuckles white.

Luca would never succumb to it. Dante knew his brother was as stubborn as he was strong. Still, Dante wouldn't burden Luca with the knowledge that pride was already seducing him, whispering to him like a deadly siren song.

Dante clasped his brother's shoulder. "I'll find Africus. How are Antonio and Soren going with the hunt?"

"Antonio knows his quarry in Florence. He's trying to flush him out." A muscle in Luca's jaw clenched. "Soren's gone north to Como on the trail of his wind."

"The Tempest Winds have never split up like this before." Worry nipped at Dante with sharp teeth. He carried the memories of his WindKeeper ancestors. He remembered all the times over the centuries their foe had escaped and what evil they'd spawned.

"Usually they like to hunt in a pack." Luca's frown deepened. "Brute force didn't work for them in the past. I think this time they'll be more cunning. Be careful, Dante."

"You too, *mio fratello*." He clasped Luca's arm. "Good hunting."

With a nod, Luca turned away and summoned his power. Dante felt the icy prickle of the cold North Wind. He watched his brother's big body dissolve, turning into the wind itself. Then Luca was gone.

Starting down the steps, Dante turned his focus to his prey. He would scour Rome until he found Africus and destroyed his human body. Once all four *Venti Tempesta* were released from their corporeal bodies, the WindKeepers could entrap them again.

Dante pushed through the throng of tourists. So many people with nothing better to do than eat, gawk and take photographs. They knew nothing of holding power, of keeping others safe.

*Dio*. He cut off the thoughts. It was pride speaking, not him. His hands flexed. The power

of the winds carried terrible vices: anger, lust, pride and greed. The wind itself was neither good nor evil, it was the Keeper who decided what to do with that power.

Dante and his brothers had warred all their lives to control the darkness. The *Venti Tempesta* however, embraced the vices, and when they were loose, the WindKeepers' control slashed very thin.

He slipped into an empty alleyway and pressed his back against the terracotta wall of a building. He *would* remain in control. Scraping a hand over his face, he closed his eyes.

Tiredness rode him hard. He hadn't slept in three days and it made the struggle against pride even more difficult.

He had to stop Africus before pride drove him to madness.

Stalking down the darkened street, he moved farther from the crowds. The quiet helped soothe his ragged nerves. He wished for the peace of his office in the shipyard at Naples. He much preferred the challenge of his job at Venti Shipping to the bustle of the city.

His wind came back to him, whispering of Africus's stench. His shoulders tensed and he followed, turning through the maze of city streets. It wasn't long before he realized his wind had led him to the Forum.

Once the heart of the Roman Empire, it was now an amazing collection of ruined temples and buildings. In his mind, he recalled the memory of a previous Keeper, saw what it had looked like in its heyday. Exquisite temples with rows of columns, travertine paving and crowds jostling to greet their emperor.

In modern times it still bustled with crowds, but tour groups rather than citizens. At this time of night it was empty and dark. The shadows hiding many secrets and sins.

He moved with silent steps, not wanting to alert his target. His warm southern wind brushed over him, warned him that someone lurked in the shadows.

But not the Tempest Wind. Someone else.

He tensed and waited. Seconds turned to minutes. Nothing.

The sense of danger melted away. With a frown, Dante moved forward. His wind was never wrong. But who would be stalking him other than his enemy?

He continued deeper into the Forum.

*Afraid of the shadows, Keeper? Why should you, someone so powerful, be afraid?*

Dante gritted his teeth and ignored the voice drifting on the wind. Ahead, he saw a flicker of movement in the darkness. For a second, a lithe figure moved in the shadows. When he looked again he saw nothing.

But the sense of danger returned.

He called the wind. It grew up around him, hot and scorching, disheveling his hair and catching at his clothes.

Then a body came out of nowhere and barreled into him. The momentum took him down. He smacked into the dirt, a slim figure kneeling on his chest.

Dante felt the sting of cool metal against his throat.