

Legend of the WindKeepers

IN THE TIME OF THE GODS, the terrible vices of lust, anger, pride and greed were assigned to the cardinal winds for safe-keeping. But the terrible monster, Typhon, wanted them free to plague the world. He created the *Venti Tempesta*, the Tempest Winds: evil, violent demon winds to infect the world with the vices.

The gods assigned four human brothers as WindKeepers to the cardinal winds, to give the wind form and to fight the *Venti Tempesta*. But the WindKeepers had a flaw: they were susceptible to the call of the vices. The gods, seeing the WindKeepers' struggle, created the *Aurae*. Women who were keepers of the seasonal breezes, women able to calm the greed, lust, pride and anger.

The WindKeepers succeeded in trapping the Tempest Winds in the bodies of horses, imprisoned in the stables of the immortal Keeper of the Winds. All was calm. The WindKeepers kept watch, the *Venti Tempesta* plotted from their prison and the *Aurae* died out.

But now the Tempest Winds have escaped and a new battle has begun...

Auster, Keeper of the South Wind battles Africus, the Southwest Wind and the vice of pride
Favonius, Keeper of the West Wind wrestles Corus, the Northwest Wind and the vice of lust
Aquilon, Keeper of the North Wind combats Caecius, the Northeast Wind and the vice of anger
Vulturnus, Keeper of the East Wind fights Apeliotus, the Southeast Wind and the vice of greed

Chapter One

“Everyone out.” Luca Aquilon Venti thrust his hand toward the door. “Now.”

At his sharp command, the employees sitting around the large boardroom table either froze or shifted uneasily. Luca scowled. His people at the head office of Venti Enterprises Rome were used to his fierce temper and abrupt orders, but the employees at Venti Enterprises Venice were not.

“Out.” He watched as looks of shock were quickly smothered. Folders were closers, papers shuffled, then they filed out.

All except one.

Steady, cool green eyes watched him. Her stylus was poised over her tablet. “Is there anything else you require today, Signor Venti?”

Even his new personal assistant’s voice was cool with the faintest tinge of an English accent. His fingers curled. Damn, Pietro for falling ill. Luca didn’t want to break in a new personal assistant. Especially one who inflamed his already stretched temper. He had enough problems without also wanting to mess up her sleek swing of chin-length red hair. Or to get some sort of reaction out of her. Any reaction.

He’d yelled at her plenty this week and she’d barely blinked.

Si, something about Rayne Santini rubbed him the wrong way. Although during the last six

weeks *everything* had rubbed him the wrong way.

Rayne crossed her long legs, the movement catching Luca's attention. Her gray suit was stylish but hardly provocative. Still, it fired something in his blood. Something he knew he didn't have time for right now. He shoved his chair back and stood. He grabbed his jacket and shrugged into the tailored garment. "No. I'm going for a walk."

"As you wish."

Dio, that frosty tone grated. What would it take to see a bit of fire in this woman? He huffed out a breath. Not something he should be worrying about.

He had bigger problems. Like tracking down the evil Keeper of the Northeast Wind. Damn it to hell, it had been over a month since the *Venti Tempesta* had escaped. Two of his brothers had succeeded in hunting and defeating their Tempest Winds.

But Luca's prey, Caecius, was cunning. He'd been lying very, very low like the snake he was.

Luca realized his hands were clenched so tight his knuckles were hurting. He forced them to relax. "Get the Rossi report to me in the morning." He stalked to the door, flexing his shoulders. He needed to feel the wind around him.

He had to get out of the confines of the office and do something physical. Anything to shake off the nasty vice of anger that was eating him alive from the inside. Caecius reveled in the anger, and Luca battled every day not to become the violent, furious man he knew lived inside him.

I will find you, Caecius. The Tempest Wind was here in Venice. Somewhere. He might be hidden but he was still stirring up anger in the locals. He was pushing tempers to breaking point, causing fights, brawls and domestic violence. Luca sensed the fury on the wind, scented it.

His jaw clenched. Air. He needed some air.

“Signor Venti?”

He frowned. “I’ve told you to call me Luca.”

She fell into step beside him, that green gaze on his face. “I asked if you wanted me to make the reservation at Da Fiore for the weekend...Signor Venti.”

His eyes narrowed. If he didn’t know better, he’d swear she was testing him...testing his patience.

She raised a brow. “For you and Signorina Barzini.”

Dio, he’d forgotten about the leggy model who’d refused to leave him alone at the last charity event he’d attended. “Call her and cancel. Send her flowers.”

“*Si.*” That icy-cool tone again.

For a second, Luca wanted to reach out and wrap a hand around her slim throat. Would he feel the tick of her pulse, hot and fast? Or would it be slow and even, unaffected by him?

Air hissed through his teeth. It was his vice biting at him. He needed to focus on finding Caecius, not thinking about tangling with his new assistant. “I’ll be at my suite at the Hotel Venti San Marco, if you need me.”

She gave him a brisk nod and turned.

Instead of immediately leaving and heading into the street to search for the scent of his prey, he stayed there and watched the sway of Rayne’s hips as she walked away.

Fuck. He forced himself to walk into the elevator. Moments later, he strode out of the building and onto the streets of Venice.

He followed the well-worn paths, ducked through alleys, walked alongside the canals. He loved the never-ending whirl of Rome but he also liked Venice. She was like a capricious lady

who kept you guessing. You could get lost in her twists and turns and always discover something new.

He crossed the *Ponte di Rialto*, the oldest bridge spanning the Grand Canal. He wondered what it's long-ago critics would think of it now—still standing after hundreds of years despite their predictions of ruin. He liked the idea that it had prevailed despite the odds.

Vaporetto waterbuses and gondolas crossed under the bridge while wide-eyed tourists and tired-looking Venetians walked over the top. Luca paused at the peak and stared down at the busy waterway beneath. Night was falling, shrouding the city in a murky, mysterious haze.

A cool natural breeze brushed over his face, ruffling his dark hair. Surreptitiously, he moved his hand, stirring the air.

The North Wind responded.

It was cold, carrying the chill of the northern countries with it. It brushed over him, cooling the anger that simmered under his skin like some warlock's evil potion.

But Luca knew very well that it could also drive him into an icy rage—one that could not be stopped.

The taint of something fetid teased his senses.

Caecius.

Turning, Luca descended from the bridge and melted into the shadows of a back alley. He commanded his wind to seek out his foe. *Show me his hiding place.*

The stench grew. Following the trail, Luca crossed a tiny bridge with wrought-iron railings. Now night held Venice in her silky grip and ornate lampposts lit his way. Here in the back alleys there were no tourists, no crowds.

He turned a corner. Heard the thud of flesh on flesh.

When he stepped into the small square, he saw two men pummeling each other without mercy. As Luca moved closer, he noticed three more men watching, cheering them on.

A wall of aggression slammed into Luca and he staggered under the weight of it.

His jaw tightened. This was not natural.

“Stop it!” He stepped into the circle of light from a lamppost. “You don’t want to do this.”

The two men fighting stopped. One’s white shirt was covered in a spray of blood from his broken nose. The other had a rapidly swelling eye.

The spectators moved and as Luca watched, all five men circled him.

Maldeizone. He flexed his hands. He was honest enough to admit that a part of him welcomed the fight. The other part of him knew it was dangerous for him to let his anger loose.

It was like a beast, hungry to slip its leash.

“We *do* want to do this,” one man said. He looked at his friends. “Don’t we, boys?”

As they grumbled their responses, Luca slipped out of his jacket and tossed it over a nearby bench.

The men charged.

Luca thrust a fist into the face of the first man, then spun and caught the next in the stomach.

Knuckles slammed into Luca’s kidneys and he grunted. He ducked under one man’s arm, dragging the man in front of him like a shield. One of his friend’s blows hit the man in the chest.

Luca pushed him away and kicked out at the next attacker. But then a weight hit him from behind.

He went down hard but he was already rolling, shoving his attacker off him. But two more were there, grabbing his arms, pinning him to the ground. A fist smashed into Luca’s face. Once. Twice. He tasted blood.

The fire in his system ignited. *Fight. Fight. Kill.*

He reared up and grabbed one man holding him. Using his superhuman strength, he tossed the man aside. The man crashed into a wall and slid to the ground.

Another attacker hit at Luca. He slammed the man to the ground and straddled him, slamming merciless fists into his face. The whisper of the wind dug into his brain. *Embrace your anger.*

Suddenly two other men yanked him off his victim. As they held him, the third man stepped into view, an evil grin on his face. He raised his hand and Luca saw the glint of brass on his knuckles.

The man thrust a fist into Luca's stomach, the pain stealing his breath. More blows. His side. His ribs.

Pain roared through him, mixing with the anger.

The other two men stumbled into view. "We want a turn with the bastard."

More brutal hits slammed into him. The arms holding him fell away and he dropped to the ground. His attackers started kicking.

He welcomed the pain. It fueled his anger but it also helped him control the rage.

The lamp nearby blinked off. The darkness left Luca blind for a second before his enhanced night vision kicked in. A movement to the left and suddenly one man flew through the air with a scream.

The others turned. One man moved into the darkness, fists raised. Then the sounds of fighting echoed through the square.

Ignoring the pain burning through his stomach and ribs, Luca pushed to his feet and punched the closest man. When he went down, Luca spun and dealt with the next one.

The last man backed away, then spun and ran.

Luca's breath sawed in and out of his lungs. Pain was a fierce thing, a lot like the simmer of anger in his system.

He turned to the shadow standing in the darkness, just beyond his vision. "I guess I should thank you."

His savior stepped forward.

Dark trousers slicked up long legs. A black tank showed off toned arms and dipped low enough to show a hint of high, firm breasts.

But when he looked at her face, all the churning emotion generated by the fight and his vice ignited to deadly rage. Like flame to oil.

"Rayne."

The look in Luca's eyes chilled Rayne's blood.

The men had been dangerous but Luca Venti was far more deadly. Still, she wasn't going to let an enraged WindKeeper intimidate her. She'd vowed a long time ago to never let violent men rule her life.

She strode forward. "What was your plan? Let them beat you to death?"

Luca moved so fast she didn't see him. His hand gripped her arm, tugging her so close their noses bumped. She tried to pull back but he held her tight.

"Who the hell are you?"

"Rayne Santini. Your new assistant, remember?"

"Right. Because mixed martial arts is standard training at personal assistant school." He pushed her backward until her back met brick. Then his big body pressed in close. "I want to

know who you are. Did they send you to kill me?”

His mouth brushed her ear, his lips hot. She swallowed. She could smell him. Some expensive cologne and warm flesh.

An icy wind swept over them, sending goose bumps over her skin. She stared at his eyes. Usually a beautiful vivid blue, they’d paled. Like they were frosting over.

She wasn’t stupid enough to think he was cooling down.

Rayne gripped his wrist, and used all her strength to pry his hand off her arm. She called on her own power. It may not be what he wielded but she knew how to use it.

As the warm, flirty breeze twined with his wind, dancing around them, his eyes widened. “It’s not possible.” He stared at her. “You’re Auraa.”