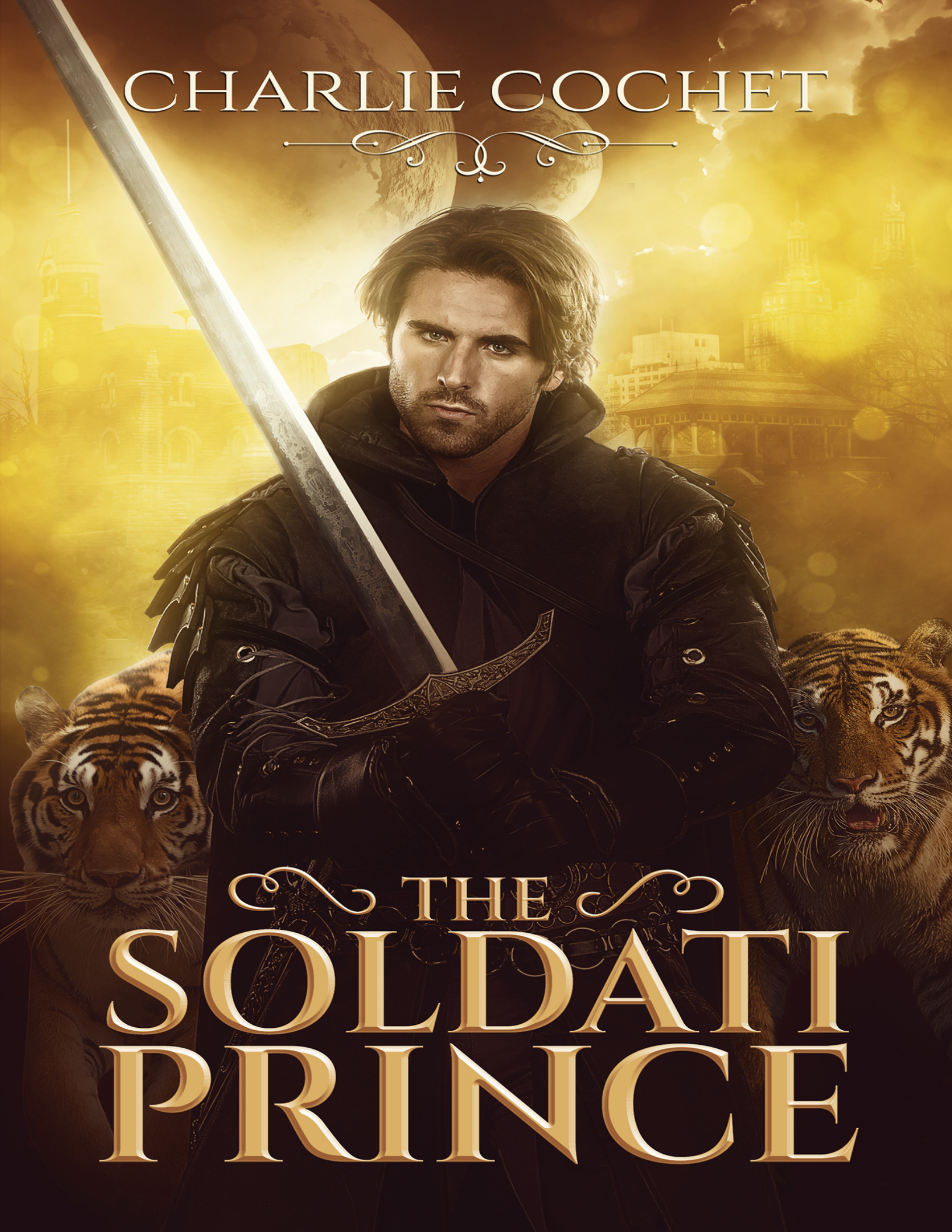


CHARLIE COCHET



THE
SOLDATI
PRINCE

The Soldati Prince

By Charlie Cochet

One moment Riley Murrough is living a normal life working in a coffee shop, and the next he's running for his life from demons, learns he bears the mark of a shape-shifter king from a magical realm, and—worst of all—he's destined to become the mated prince to the arrogant tiger shifter he would rather strangle.

Khalon, the shifter king, is equally distraught at the idea of being bound to a human prince, and along with his Soldati warriors, he sets out to return Riley to his own world where he belongs. On their journey they might discover why the priestess brought them together—if they can escape the demons and make it to her alive.

Chapter One

WHO WOULD be slaughtered next?

Riley studied his prey, his eyes narrowed and focused on his first potential victim before he moved his gaze on to the next one. He had to choose. Or did he? He curled his lips into a wicked grin. Who said he couldn't have both?

"Sorry, fellas. Looks like you're out of luck."

Riley stuffed the remaining slice of lemon cake into his mouth, moaning in delight as the frosting melted on his tongue. God, these were so freaking good. He washed it down with the frothy cappuccino he'd made himself while cashing out the register. Once the lemon cake was no more, he moved on to the old-fashioned glazed donut. He could never choose between the two.

The café's front doors opened and Riley swallowed the remainder of his donut. He took a quick sip of coffee before addressing the two men in dark jackets and jeans.

"Hey, guys. I'm real sorry but we're closed." Hadn't he locked the door? He was pretty sure he'd locked the door. Maybe he should've been paying more attention to his closing duties and less to stuffing his face. It wasn't like his manager, Clara, minded if he took the leftovers home. Getting rid of the remaining stock at the end of the day was one of his many responsibilities at Tiger Tails Café. If he had to eat a few tasty cakes in order to perform his duty, well, that was a sacrifice he was willing to make.

The men came toward the counter and Riley straightened. Maybe they were tourists and didn't understand English very well. Riley motioned politely to the door.

"I'm sorry, we're closed. Tomorrow. We open tomorrow."

"Are you Riley Murrough?"

So much for not understanding him. Riley eyed them warily. "Um, yeah. Can I help you guys with something?" His gut twisted and he casually removed his orange-and-black apron. The taller of the two smiled, his lips

spreading and curling freakishly far up the sides of his face before they opened wide, releasing a horrific, gurgling shriek.

“Holy fuck!” Riley reeled. What the hell? The glass display case shattered, followed by the shop’s windows and doors. The shriek intensified, forcing Riley to cover his ears, the noise piercing his skull. A black tar-like goo leaked from the men’s eyes and ears, their faces elongating and contorting, their skin growing veiny and ashen. Riley had no idea what he was seeing, but he wasn’t sticking around to find out. He’d watched enough horror movies in his lifetime to know not hauling ass when freaky stuff happened got you dead.

He tossed the apron at their faces and bolted into the back end of the café, forgetting about the trash bags he was supposed to have taken out half an hour ago. He tripped over a bag and hit the linoleum tiles hard. Oh my God, he was *that* guy. Behind him the men—or whatever the hell they were—appeared, their eyes nothing but hollow sockets.

The putrid smell of decay and filth made Riley gag, and he scrambled to his feet, covering his mouth to keep himself from throwing up. The smell made his eyes water and he tried his best to breathe through his mouth as he threw open the side door. The alley was plunged into near darkness. The lights were working just fine last night when he closed. What the hell was going on?

Riley’s attempt to make it to the street was quickly thwarted by the appearance of another shadowy figure. Maybe it was a regular guy and not some decomposing monster. Riley considered asking the man for help when he began oozing the same black tar-like substance as the others. *Nope*. Riley spun on his heels and bolted down the alley, hoping to make it to the other side of the street. He was halfway there when he made the mistake of looking up.

“Oh Jesus.” He came skidding to a halt, his heart leaping into his throat as terrifying creatures that resembled corpses in various stages of putrefaction scurried down the sides of the brick buildings like roaches. What the hell where they? Besides disgusting.

They came out from the shadows, from trash cans, and from the very ground itself, shrieking and hissing, fangs dripping with tar, eye sockets empty voids, and long mouths emitting a rancid stench. Riley turned but they were closing in on him from every direction.

This couldn’t be happening.

Riley snatched up a discarded trash can lid, and held it out in front of him. It seemed like an absurd move, but there was nothing normal about this whole situation. Where were all the people? At this time of night, there was plenty of foot traffic, people heading home from work, or on their way to dinner. Riley hadn't seen one person walk by. He was on his own.

Slowly he backed away from the closest mass of screeching creatures and swung the lid in front of him in hopes of staying out of their reach a little longer. By the looks of them, he would hazard a guess being touched by one of these things would lead to unpleasant results. He screamed for help but a ferocious roar that echoed through the alley drowned out his voice, scaring the hell out of Riley.

What in the...? *Did I just hear a tiger roar?*

From out of the depths of who knew where, four huge tigers appeared ahead of him. They bared their fangs and roared. Now there were tigers? Had they escaped from a zoo somewhere? Was he losing his ever-loving mind? He inched away from the huge cats lined up across the alley, their eyes on him. Gingerly he crouched down and attempted to hide as best he could behind the trash can lid.

Wait, tigers had a really good sense of smell, didn't they? Crap. He was a dead man. Not like they didn't know he was there. Another roar froze him to the spot. Holy shit, their roars were terrifying! He peeked around the trash can lid, and his eyes widened as he stared, helpless as the largest of the four tigers broke into a run, heading right for him. Riley screamed, brandishing the trash can lid like a shield as the tiger leaped. To Riley's disbelief the tiger soared over him instead of at him.

Dumbly Riley turned. The tiger jumped into a throng of screaming creatures, its fangs bared as it slashed with razor-sharp claws. Holy shit, they were fighting! Before another genius revelation crossed Riley's mind, the other three tigers joined the battle. They fought viciously, tearing and clawing at the dripping, rotting corpses. Their claws left behind strange colored lights as they tore gashes into their enemies. Riley had never seen anything like it, not during any number of late-night *National Geographic* marathons or any of his favorite geeky TV shows. Man, he really needed to get out more.

Riley gingerly moved away from the battle, hoping to slip away unnoticed. Maybe he could make a break for it now that everyone was busy. There was a good chance the lemon cake he ate was somehow laced with

LSD and he was high as a fucking kite, grinning like an idiot and sitting on the café counter stuffing baked goods into his mouth. One could only hope.

The alley darkened and Riley gasped. More creatures emerged from the shadows, scurrying toward the tigers. How the hell were four supposed to fend off hundreds, maybe more? For every one that was dispatched, ten more appeared. The tigers roared and leaped. They twisted their muscular bodies to lash out at their attackers with massive paws, their ears flattened back against their big furry heads. It was both mesmerizing and terrifying.

Riley breathed through his mouth to avoid smelling the creatures, and as he slowly retreated, one foul creature turned its empty eyeholes in his direction. How the hell did they know he was there?

“Shit.” Riley took off, glancing behind him as the monster shrieked, calling to the others.

A mob of the things abandoned the fight to chase after him, several blocking the end of the alley and bringing him to a halt. Something solid slammed into him from behind and he hit the ground hard, but it didn’t hurt as much as the burn that seared his flesh when one of the foul things grabbed his arm. Riley cried out at the pain, a tiger roar soon joining his shout. He rolled onto his back as a shadow moved over him. This was it. It was all over. Riley shut his eyes tight. He regretted not having been able to clear his browser history. *Sorry, Mom. I wasn’t disturbed, I swear. Okay, maybe a little.*

The burn disappeared from his arm and he felt the heat of a heavy mass over him. His eyes flew open and he was met with orange, white, and black fur. The larger of the tigers stood over him, fighting off the approaching creatures. Its green eyes vanished, replaced by a glowing white light. It snarled and opened its jaws, a blinding light burst out, forcing Riley to squint. The light flared, exploding through the alley before fading. Then silence.

The tiger stepped away and Riley sat up, stunned. The alley was empty. Every last foul-smelling creature was gone. The tiger turned its large head in his direction and Riley gave a start. Its eyes were once again green. It stared intensely at him, as if it could see into his very soul. It was weird and a little bit creepy. With a series of roars and mewls, the tiger began to contort itself, its fur drawing inward and its body changing. *Now what?* This wasn’t possible. Not outside of Hollywood, anyway. Several heartbeats

later the tiger was gone and Riley found himself staring into the intense green eyes of a man.

The man's muscles twitched and flexed as he slowly stood. His jaw was chiseled, his brows thick and as pitch black as his hair. There were several nicks on his tanned skin. Riley had no idea where the black boots, black leather pants, and tight black T-shirt came from, but they made him look even bigger, more menacing. Both arms were covered in tribal tattoos, from the patterned bands around his wrists and forearms to the more intricate designs disappearing under his shirtsleeves.

"Please don't kill me."

The man's eyes widened. "You see me?"

Shit. "Um, no. Didn't see a thing." Riley got up and held a hand up in front of him. Two equally muscular men and Wonder Woman joined their friend. The others had changed too. This was crazy. Riley backed away slowly. "I'm, uh, I'm gonna go check myself into a hospital about my, uh, not seeing you guys. Excuse me."

"Khalon, look!" The fair-haired man pointed to Riley's arm. Riley followed the man's gaze and cursed under his breath. There were four bands of tribal tattoos around his left forearm where the creature had grabbed him. Had it somehow marked him? If it had, why did the marks look like a tattoo? Wait, the patterns looked just like the ones on this Khalon dude's arms.

"What is this?" Riley looked up and nearly jumped out of his skin. The one they called Khalon towered over Riley. He took hold of Riley's wrist and held his arm up to inspect it.

"It can't be."

Just when Riley thought this night couldn't get any weirder. Khalon shook his head before releasing Riley. His jaw muscles clenched as he grew pensive, narrowing his eyes.

"We're taking him with us."

"What?" *Hell no.* He hadn't just survived whatever the hell that was back there to get kidnapped. Riley tried to make a break for it, but Khalon threw his arm around Riley's waist and pulled him up against him. "What the fuck? Who the hell do you think—"

"Sleep, human."

Khalon waved his hand over Riley's face and everything went black.

Chapter Two

“IT CANNOT be.”

Khalon paced his study. He refused to believe it. There had to be a mistake.

“He has the mark. *Your* mark,” Rayner said. Beside him Adira nodded her agreement. Ezra was silent as usual.

“I’m aware,” Khalon snarled.

He stepped up to the Eye and placed his hand on its smooth golden surface. Was that why the orb had led them to Riley Murrough? It would explain why the human could see Khalon and his warriors. The all-seeing Eye had never steered him wrong, but this? It didn’t explain this... *insult*. A human? For centuries he’d waited patiently for his prince to be revealed to him, only to be ridiculed with this farce. How could the priestess mock him so? No Soldati king had ever mated with a human. He’d be ridiculed across the realms.

A knock at the door brought him out of his vexing thoughts. Toka entered the room and bowed. “Your prince awakens, Your Majesty.”

“He is *not* my prince,” Khalon growled, causing the young servant to start.

“Khalon,” Rayner warned. “There is no need to take your displeasure out on Toka. He’s merely doing his duty.” Rayner shook his head in disapproval before meeting young Toka at the doorway. He spoke softly. “Forgive His Majesty. It has been a trying day.” He placed his hand to Toka’s cheek and smiled warmly. “Return to the prince. Our king will be in shortly.”

Toka smiled and nodded before hurrying off. Rayner rejoined his brethren, receiving a scowl from Adira, and rightfully so.

“You shouldn’t encourage his sentiments. He is a servant, Rayner. Bed him if you wish, but do not fill his heart with false hopes.”

Rayner rolled his eyes. “Yes, Mother.”

“Could we perhaps focus on the problem at hand and not the delusional desires of a foxling servant?” Khalon grumbled. He was in a foul mood and

had no time for Rayner's dalliances.

"Very well." Rayner smiled sweetly. "Your warrior prince awaits."

Khalon marched toward the door, stopping to thrust a menacing finger in Rayner's face. "You are an insufferable bastard."

Rayner bowed graciously. "Surpassed only by my glorious king."

"Bite me." Khalon stormed off to the laughter of his second-in-command. Why did he put up with such insolence? *Because he's your fiercest warrior, trusted confidant, and your best friend.* Khalon let out a scoff. Friendship was terribly overrated.

Khalon entered the royal bedchamber and scowled at the sight before him. The shackled human was up and brandishing an iron poker, swinging it at the servants.

"So help me, if you touch me again, I'll skewer you like marshmallows!"

With a growl Khalon marched over to the puny human and snatched hold of the poker. He jerked it away and grabbed him by the collar of his neck.

"Get your hands off me, asshole!"

The human twisted and attempted to land a punch, but Khalon made certain to keep him out of arm's reach. He shoved the human down into the wingback chair and tossed the poker at one of the servants, who caught it and returned it to its rightful place beside the stone hearth.

"Leave us," Khalon barked, waiting for the last servants to dart out of the expansive room. He turned his glare on Riley Murrough. The man dared to scowl at him? Khalon tried his best to summon patience. They had, after all, taken Riley from his world. "You have questions."

Riley fumed, watching Khalon's every move with his indignant hazel eyes. "Damned right I have questions. How about we start with what those things were and why they were trying to kill me?"

"Those *demons* were trying to kill you to get to me." Khalon clasped his hands behind his back and paced slowly before Riley. Just the sight of him was enough to boil Khalon's blood. Madness. Absolute madness.

"Why? We've never met before today. I don't even know who the hell you are."

"I am Khalon, king of the Soldati, and I am your mate." Saying the words alone pained him greatly.

“Hey, if you want to be friends, that’s cool, but friends don’t kidnap each other or chain each other up. Okay, maybe some do, but why don’t we start small? Maybe grab a cup of coffee instead?”

Khalon stopped pacing. “What?”

“You said you were my mate. Are you British, a little Australian, maybe? I can’t make out the accent.”

“I am neither. Why would you assume as much?” Khalon waved a hand in dismissal. “Never mind.” It was quite possible the man was an idiot. “I meant mate as in lover. Partner. You are fated to rule and hunt at my side as my prince.”

“Whoa.” Riley let out a laugh and held his shackled wrists up before him. “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves. You chain up all your dates? On second thought, don’t answer that.”

“The great priestess has made a mistake. A terrible, horrible mistake.” Khalon was certain of it. He was king of the Soldati. His destiny was to be united with a great prince, a warrior like himself who possessed remarkable skill and a force of magic rivaled only by his own. Not some frail human with wispy hair. Khalon’s frown deepened. He stopped before Riley and crouched down, his head cocked as he studied him.

“Finally we agree on something. So why don’t you let me go and you can square things off with the... great priestess, is it? Square things off with her, and we’ll just pretend this never happened. I won’t press charges. I’ll go back to my ordinary life serving up scones and lattes, and you go back to... whatever it is you do, and we’re good. I’m good. You’re good.”

“Be quiet.”

Khalon reached out to take a lock of Riley’s hair between his fingers. It was golden like the sun. Not entirely unpleasant. For a human. It was also soft and reached his brow. His lashes were somewhat long and there were faint freckles strewn across his nose and cheeks. There were flecks of amber and green in his eyes. His lips were pink and full. Not an entirely displeasing exterior. Pretty, for a human male. He was rather small, but then most humans were, compared to Soldati.

“What are you doing?” Riley sank back into the chair, squirming in the seat. Khalon ignored him. He took hold of Riley’s arm and pushed up his sleeve. Not as scrawny as he expected.

Taking a handful of Riley’s shirt, he then attempted to push it up, only to get his hand smacked away. Khalon narrowed his eyes.

“I don’t give a shit who you are,” Riley ground out through his teeth. “Don’t touch me.”

Khalon threw a hand out, wrapping it around Riley’s slender neck. “You are mine until otherwise released.” He brushed his thumb across soft skin, the stir it caused in Khalon’s stomach unsettling. If something wasn’t done and quickly, the connection between them might grow. Khalon couldn’t have that. The last thing he needed was to form some false sense of attachment to this creature.

“Screw you! I’m not scared of you.”

Khalon leaned in, his fangs growing as he grinned at the all but trembling *prince*. “Then why do you reek of fear?”

Riley lifted his chin in defiance. “I reek of a guy who got chased by a bunch of demons down a piss-stained alley.”

Khalon let out a snort of disgust and released the incorrigible human. Unbelievable. How could he be expected to mate with this... this impudent pixie? Riley was about as fierce as a newborn fawn, all wide-eyed and fluffy tailed. It was humiliating, to say the least. Besides the insult there was the profound threat the human posed to Khalon and his Soldati warriors. Khalon could not risk his people on such a frail and fickle creature.

Riley rubbed at his neck, his glower on Khalon. “You have some serious anger issues.”

With a frustrated grunt, Khalon tugged on the golden rope near his wardrobe, ringing the bell to summon the servants. Toka was promptly at his door.

“Get him out of my sight before I finish what those bastard demons started. Clean him up and feed him. I need time to think of my next course of action without him and his incessant babbling.”

Riley gasped. “And you’re still single? How is this injustice possible?”

What sounded like a giggle escaped Toka before he clamped a hand over his mouth. Was Khalon losing his touch? Now the servants were laughing at him!

“Forgive me, Your Majesty. I meant no offense.” Toka’s big amber eyes grew glassy and Khalon sighed. The last thing he needed was to make the foxling weep. Rayner would become irate with him, and Khalon had enough to deal with at the moment without one of his friend’s insufferable lectures.

“Just go.”

Riley pulled his arm from Toka's reach. "Now hold on a second. I demand—"

"Go!" Khalon roared, balling his hands at his sides before the urge to strangle Riley overpowered him.

"Going." Riley turned and fled from the room with several servants in tow. Toka excused himself when Khalon called out to him.

"Keep an eye on him."

"Yes, Your Majesty." Toka bowed before turning and leaving him alone to his thoughts, the room blissfully silent.

How could one human cause so much discourse? So much noise? With a sigh he dropped down into the chair Riley had vacated, curling his lip with a snarl. Now his chair smelled of the human. Something flowery. Lavender? Sandalwood? What the hell did it matter? He'd just closed his eyes when he heard Rayner's footsteps.

"Can I not have a moment's peace in my own chamber?" Khalon grumbled. "What do you want?" He opened his eyes and peered at his friend, who boldly took a seat on the footstool before Khalon without invitation.

Rayner's eyes filled with concern. "Do you truly believe the priestess has made a mistake?"

Khalon leaned forward, his hands clasped between his knees. "You saw him. I was to be mated to a fierce warrior. Not *that*." He sat back and ran a hand through his hair. "He's frail. I have swords taller than him."

"Strength does not lie with size alone."

Khalon narrowed his eyes, aware of Rayner's amused expression. "Remind me why I have yet to imprison you for your insolence?"

"Because the last time you imprisoned someone, humans were still defecating in holes inside those ridiculous little wooden sheds. Also because you love me."

Khalon scoffed. "You overestimate my attachment to your miserable carcass."

"I love you too," Rayner replied with a chuckle.

"Are you saying I'm growing soft?" Was it possible?

"I'm saying perhaps you're growing into your own skin." Rayner patted Khalon's knee, his eyes still alight with amusement.

Khalon would not dignify that with a response. He was not going soft. "The answer to your previous question is yes: I believe the priestess has

made a mistake. How could it not be? A human? You know very well there's more at risk here than my reputation."

Rayner nodded. "Then there is only one thing to do. We take Riley Murrough to the great priestess. Request she remove the mark along with his memories of us."

Khalon considered this. "It means a new mate will be revealed to me."

"Isn't that your wish?" Rayner asked as he stood. His expression turned guarded, and for once, Khalon could not decipher his thoughts.

Did Rayner not wish him to get rid of Riley? As soon as the thought crossed his mind, he quickly dismissed it. Ridiculous. Rayner was a Soldati, the most powerful next to Khalon himself. He understood the desire to have a warrior as great as him at his side, to share his life, his heart, and his bed. Rayner might be taken with the foxling servant, but it was merely another passing fancy of his. The idea a Soldati would take a servant as his mate was laughable, not to mention prohibited.

Khalon stood. "Inform Adira and Ezra. We leave for the temple of the great priestess in the morning."

Rayner bowed. "Yes, Your Majesty."

With that he turned and left the room. No jovial ribbing, no innuendos, or playful insults. Did Rayner not agree with his decision? Riley was a human. He was neither strong nor honorable enough to be a Soldati, much less a Soldati prince. As soon as they reached the temple of the great priestess, everything would be set to rights.

Chapter Three

“SO, UH, you guys just sit around waiting to bathe people?”

Riley felt a little self-conscious undressing in front of a bunch of strangers, but then again, it wasn't anything he hadn't done countless times in the locker room at the gym. Of course, the locker room hadn't resembled a palatial Turkish bath. He had to admit it was pretty impressive. The brown-and-gold tiles shaped into intricate designs and the mosaic tigers along the walls of the circular room were gorgeous. The glowing wall sconces gave the place a warm, cozy feel.

“We have served the Soldati for centuries. It's our honor,” one of the servants stated gently as he led a stark naked Riley to the expansive bath. He entered the steaming water and sighed. It felt damned good, and he did kind of stink. He would have preferred to be alone in the bath, but that was looking less likely with every servant that joined him. He'd had a dream like this once after watching a few too many episodes of Spartacus. Of course his dream had less to do with bathing, and more with enjoying a different type of steam.

One of the servants poured a nice-smelling substance on his hands before moving on to wash Riley's hair. A second servant lathered up Riley's right arm, another his left, while a third massaged Riley's shoulders.

“Do you... turn into things?” Riley asked a red-haired servant. He seemed to be the only one who talked, and when he spoke, the others jumped to it.

“I am a foxling, as are the rest of the servants. My animal form is a red fox. Foxlings vary in species.”

Cute. He kind of looked like a fox with his heart-shaped face and bright amber eyes. His eyes were outlined in dark kohl and his hands, wrists, and forearms were a dark smoky color that faded into his bronzed skin.

“Is that makeup on your hands?” Riley asked.

“No. That is my skin,” he replied with a smile. “As I said. I am a foxling.”

“Right. Sorry, still getting used to this whole not-human thing. What’s your name?”

“Toka.”

“Toka, where am I?”

“You are in the home of Khalon King, in the realm of the Soldati.”

“And where exactly is that?”

Toka smiled impishly. “Upstate New York.”

One of the servants moved his hand lower, and Riley gave a start. “Hey, whoa, I appreciate the assistance, but I can scrub my own nads, thanks.”

The servants giggled and Toka scolded them, though Riley noticed he wasn’t harsh or unkind. “You have a way with words, Riley Murrough.”

“You can call me Riley.” He finished washing himself and allowed the servants to escort him out of the bath, where he promptly took the towels from them. “Thanks, guys, but really. I can dry myself.”

As soon as he was done, he slipped his arms into the lush, ornate robe held out for him. He tied the sash and followed Toka to a different set of doors than he came in from. There was a large bedroom decorated in rich hues of red and gold, from the elaborate rug to the canopy of the giant four-poster bed. A delicious scent made his mouth water, and for a moment, he thought he’d died and gone to heaven. There was a carved wood table set with more food than Riley could eat in a week.

“Come. You must be hungry.”

Riley didn’t need to be asked twice. Had he wanted to refuse just on principle, his stomach would betray him. The need to inhale some of this tasty-looking food overtook any concerns regarding his current outlandish predicament. He tried not to talk with his mouth full, but he wanted to eat and get some answers. *Ooh, chicken!*

“So if we’re in New York, how come I’ve never heard of this place? You’d think someone would have spotted it.” And probably tried to book a wedding. Khalon would make a mint. Not many castles in New York these days. The décor was pretty extravagant too. He knew a few people who would have happily given their firstborn to get married in a place like this.

“In your world you must have come across magic.”

Riley cocked his head. “Like, Vegas magic? Because I hate to break it to you....”

Toka chuckled and poured Riley some fruit wine concoction. “No. Like monsters, changelings, mermaids, witches, things that go bump in the night.”

“On TV. Lot of weird stuff on TV.” Actually a lot of weird stuff in real life lately too.

“Well, that *weird stuff* is real.”

Riley swallowed a mouthful of tasty chicken. “You’re telling me ghosts, vampires, werewolves, it’s all real? You expect me to believe that?”

“You were just saved from demons by a group of magic-wielding warriors who can change into tigers. Yet you can’t believe the rest exist?”

“Touché.”

The thought that every otherworldly creature he’d ever seen on TV might be real was... terrifying. The whole reason he was never scared as a kid—and admittedly as an adult—was because he knew none of it was real, and now....

“Our world has always existed alongside yours, protected and hidden by magic wards. For centuries the growing discord in both our worlds has begun to weaken the wards, allowing those bound to our world to slip through into the human world. Demons are notorious for slipping through, but the Soldati have hunted them since before humans walked this earth.”

“Speaking of Soldati. What’s the deal with King Crabby-Pants?”

Toka took a nibble of what looked like a sugar cookie, only fancier. “He’s not as bad as he seems.”

“You mean he’s only a self-absorbed prick some of the time?”

Riley moved on to some of the other meats. There were all kinds and cooked to perfection. There were bowls of fruits, platters of cheeses, vegetables, and plenty of mouthwatering desserts. He plucked what looked like a lemon bar. One thing was for certain: the Soldati knew how to feast.

“I’m sure your boss is a great guy and this is all just a big misunderstanding. So why don’t we expedite this process a little and you tell me how I can get back home.” He gave his most charming smile. “How about it?”

Toka’s troubled expression gave Riley pause. “You’re safer here. The demons are searching for you. They won’t rest until you’re either dead or have been claimed.”

“Claimed? Are we talking joint taxes, or...?” He had a feeling Toka wasn’t talking about taxes.

“A union of body and soul.”

“Union? You mean sex? I have to have sex with Mr. Personality so the demons don’t tear me apart? Wow, okay. I can do that. A few drinks and it’ll be like any other night at the club.” He reached for the wine bottle, only to have Toka gently lay a hand over his.

“It’s more than sex.”

“First it was just sex, now it’s more than sex? What’s he want, a commitment? It’s going to take more than one night chained up in his basement with him growling at me to win me over. Okay, and an amazing dinner, but I’m not that easy.” He popped a couple of grapes into his mouth. Khalon and his warriors had saved Riley’s life, and he was grateful, but it didn’t give the guy the right to have him locked away in his castle like some medieval princess, or prince, apparently. It wasn’t like he asked for any of this. He was an unwilling participant in this bizarre situation.

“Khalon is a Soldati king and a great warrior descended from the fiercest Soldati warriors. Every Soldati king is destined to be mated with an equally powerful creature, one of the great priestess’s choosing. This mate will rule at his side as his lover and prince. The union makes the Soldati more powerful. It’s a position of honor and privilege. Khalon’s mate is meant to bring greatness to him and his kind.”

“And instead he gets stuck with me. Yeah, I can see why the guy would be pissed.” No one had ever mistaken him for a warrior, much less a prince. Four years of art school, and what did it get him? A string of crummy jobs and a long list of clients who wanted him to either work for a pittance or give his art up for free. His mother was right. He should have been a pharmacist.

Toka leaned over and took hold of Riley’s wrist. He pushed up the sleeve, revealing the tribal bands around Riley’s forearm. “This is Khalon’s mark. It was imprinted on your soul from birth by the great priestess, waiting to be revealed the day your king arrived to claim you. Today was the day you were to be claimed, which is why the demons found you and why you were able to see them. The all-seeing Eye led Khalon and his warriors to you.” He released Riley’s arm and Riley couldn’t help but run his fingers over the black tribal patterns.

“How did the demons know where to find me?”

“Your life force. We each have a force of energy unique to us. When a new Soldati prince or princess is revealed, their life-force energy will emit a

pulse so their mate can find them. Unfortunately the Soldati king and his warriors are not the only ones who can sense or feel this pulse.”

“Has the great priestess ever been wrong?”

Toka shook his head, his delicate red hair swishing with his movement. The guy was adorable. “You’ve been chosen for a reason.”

“I hate to break it to you, but I’m just a regular guy. Unless cooking the perfect poached egg becomes a superpower, I’ve got nothing.”

Toka smiled sweetly. “We’ll see.”

The room grew quiet and Riley wasn’t feeling so hungry anymore. “There’s no way out of here, is there?” Even if there were, Riley believed Toka. If he went out there on his own, there was a chance he’d run into more of those demons. It would be kind of tough serving up cappuccinos with demons tearing at his mortal flesh, and he wasn’t talking about the morning coffee rush.

“I know you have no reason to trust us, Riley, but you saw the demons for yourself. They will kill you.”

Riley couldn’t help his curiosity. “And if they do?”

“If unclaimed, a new mate will be revealed to Khalon. If claimed, the demons will no longer hunt you, as they fear the power of the Soldati prince as much as that of the Soldati king. However, if you are claimed and happen to be killed, Khalon is destined to live without a mate for the rest of his immortal life. There will be a void he will never be able to fill.”

Riley swallowed hard. Well, that sucked either way.

The doors opened and Riley recognized the tall dark-haired guy who walked in. It was one of Khalon’s warriors. Toka swiftly jumped to his feet, his hands clasped in front of him and his head slightly lowered. Riley noticed the way his cheeks flushed.

“Rayner.”

“Toka.” Rayner smiled warmly. He took hold of Toka’s hand and put it to his lips for a kiss. “Thank you for taking such good care of our prince.”

“I’m only doing my duty, sir.”

“Of course.” Rayner released Toka’s hand and turned to Riley. “I hope you have enjoyed the king’s hospitality. In the morning we set out to the temple of the great priestess. Khalon will present his case in the hopes of getting the mark removed. You will be returned home.”

Riley stood. “The priestess can remove the mark?”

“The great priestess can do anything. She is the one who marked you, and therefore the one who can remove it. Khalon will be given a new mate, and you may return to your life unaware of what has transpired.” Rayner bowed and turned to go.

“Wait, what do you mean I’ll return unaware? I won’t remember?” Riley wasn’t sure he liked the sound of that.

Rayner bowed his head. “That is correct.”

Before Riley could say another word, Rayner bid him good night and excused himself. Riley sat back down, moving his gaze to Toka and watching him smooth down his embroidered tunic. Seeming to realize he wasn’t alone in the room, Toka cleared his throat and motioned to a long gold rope hanging from the ceiling beside the bed.

“Should you need anything at all, simply pull on the rope, and someone will arrive immediately. The servants shall be in to clean up. Sleep well, Riley. May you find what you seek on your journey to the temple. Is there anything else I can do for you before I go?”

“So you and Rayner....”

Toka smiled bashfully. “Good night, Riley.”

“Good night.” Riley returned Toka’s smile and watched him go.

He liked Toka. The foxling was really sweet. He clearly had a thing for Rayner, though Riley had a feeling servants and Soldati warriors rarely mingled, much less dated. Did Soldati warriors date, or did they just carry off their lovers and *claim* them? An image of Khalon claiming him entered his head and Riley jumped to his feet, his face burning up. *Nope. Not going to happen.* His arm itched and Riley scratched at the bands. He had to get this off. If the priestess could do that, then he’d go along on this crazy adventure.

After the servants came and took what was left of the food away, Riley walked around the room in hopes of easing the fullness of his belly. At least that was his story and he was sticking to it. He was not nosing around. The wardrobe was huge and it was filled with all kinds of snazzy clothes. There were candles everywhere and a huge stone fireplace with a comfy-looking chaise lounge in front of it. The walls were decorated with intricately woven tapestries of tigers frolicking. Once he was done walking off his fullness, he cleaned up in a bathroom that was bigger than his tiny apartment.

As he lay in bed, he thought about what their journey might entail. He sat up and ran his fingers over the tattoos on his arm. Soon they'd be gone. He'd be back in the café, none the wiser of any demons or sexy tiger men. But the demons would still be out there. Would they come for him once the mark was removed? Toka had said a new mate would be revealed, so he supposed the demons would be the next guy's problem. If the demons did come for Riley, would Khalon bother protecting him if they weren't connected?

What he needed to do was get some sleep. With every question he asked himself, half a dozen more popped up. He had no idea what lay ahead tomorrow. He had a feeling getting a decent night's sleep would be about as easy as facing Khalon King again in the morning. Maybe he was being hard on the guy.

"You know what? I should cut the guy a break. Start fresh." Yep. That's what he'd do. Maybe Khalon just had a rough day. Who didn't have them? Tomorrow things would be better.

Chapter Four

KHALON KING was an asshole.

“Are you listening?” Khalon growled.

Riley rolled his head toward Khalon to deliver what his manager Clara once informed him was the most spectacular “fuck off and die” look she’d ever come across. Riley couldn’t help it. He’d been dragged out of bed at an unholy hour—ass-crack-of-dawn early—and after being awake long enough to remember where the hell he was, the servants brushed his teeth for him, got him dressed, tried to comb his hair—which was followed by him making grunting noises at them because it was too damn early for that—and the next thing he knew, he was in a dining hall, flopping down into a chair next to this asshole, and oh God, was the guy still talking? *Dude, stop. Just stop.*

Khalon narrowed his eyes. “Did you hear any of what I just said?”

“Nope.” Riley grinned as Khalon’s nostrils flared. There was a good chance the guy was about to punch him in the face, but it would be worth it to see Khalon lose his shit. *Let’s try this again.* “Coffee.”

“Riley—”

“Coffee.” At some point Khalon would learn. Then again....

“You insolent—”

“Nope.” Riley sighed. “Coffee.”

Khalon slammed a fist on the table, making the tableware rattle. “Stop saying that!”

“Sure. When I get my.... Wait for it....”

Khalon gave him an impressive “don’t you dare” look.

Oh, I dare.

“Coffee.”

Riley could practically see the steam coming out of Khalon’s ears. Seriously. All he wanted was some coffee. Was that too much to ask?

The ginormous elegantly decorated banquet hall came equipped with a table long enough to seat an army, and yet there were only the five of them having breakfast. The spread was incredible. They had eggs prepared every

way imaginable. Scrambled, poached, over easy, over hard, fried, turned into omelets, quiches, frittatas, along with potatoes cooked up in all different ways, various types of bread, baskets of fruit, platters of meats, various fruit juices, but not one freaking cup of coffee. What kind of heathens was he dealing with?

Across the table from him, Rayner let out a snicker before quickly putting a fist to his mouth and coughing. Most likely as a response to Khalon's indignant glare. Khalon sat at the head of the table in a throne-like chair that would have made any fantasy geek wet his pants. Riley kept wanting to touch the ornate tiger-claw armrest, but he had no desire to lose a limb. Khalon turned his attention back to Riley and leaned toward him with a menacing snarl. Riley leaned away slowly.

"Now you listen here. While you're in my kingdom, you will do as I command."

Riley opened his mouth when Adira jumped out of her chair and slammed her hands down on the table. "For the love of our ancestors, Khalon, get him some bloody coffee before I stab you all with my butter knife!"

Wow. Okay. Riley stared at Adira along with the rest of them. She resumed her seat, snatched a croissant off a platter, and began to tear into it like she was disemboweling an enemy. *Note to self, do not piss off Xena.* With a disgruntled huff, Khalon signaled one of the servants, then motioned to Riley.

"Get this insufferable creature his blasted drink."

Riley smiled widely at the bright-eyed servant. "I'd like a triple-shot vanilla cappuccino, not too hot, in the biggest size you got. Like, pitcher-sized big. A little powdered chocolate on the top, if you've got it. Please." He gave the handsome young servant a wink, receiving a blush and a smile in response.

"Yes, of course, Your Highness."

Khalon let out a huff before the servant bowed, then hurried off. He seemed to notice Rayner's amused expression and scowled at him. Did the king of the Soldati ever smile? How was the guy not emotionally and physically exhausted from all that brooding? Rayner was more fun. Mostly because his life's mission appeared to be annoying the ever-living fuck out of his king. Riley kind of liked him.

In no time the servant returned with Riley's cappuccino. He smiled shyly as he placed the tankard-sized drink in front of Riley. *Now we're talking.*

"Thank you." Riley beamed up at the brown-eyed servant, noticing he had the same coloring as Toka, from his smoky hands to the kohl around his eyes. A foxling. "What's your name?"

"Angi, Your Highness," he replied, his cheeks turning pink again.

Somewhere behind Angi, Khalon muttered something under his breath. Riley ignored him.

"Well, Angi, thank you for bringing me my coffee. I appreciate it. Have a wonderful day."

Angi nodded happily before bowing and hurrying off. Finally Riley could get his morning started. He was about to take a sip when Khalon leaned in again. His frown was deep, and he narrowed his eyes at Riley's drink. Now what? The guy needed to learn a thing or three about personal boundaries.

"What is that?"

Riley followed Khalon's gaze. He smiled at the chocolate-powdered heart pattern on the froth of his cappuccino. "It's a heart." Khalon looked confused, so Riley made a heart shape with his fingers. "A heart."

"I know what a heart is, you whelp," Khalon growled. "What I don't know is what it's doing on your coffee."

Riley looked to Rayner. "What's a whelp?"

"A pup," Rayner replied, his eyes alight with amusement.

"I see." How was it Khalon could make something as innocent as a pup sound like an insult? Riley shrugged in response to Khalon's question and took a big sip of his coffee. He let out a low moan. "Oh God, this is so good."

Khalon turned to Rayner. "I want this foxling disciplined."

"What?" Riley almost choked on his drink. "You want him disciplined because he put a heart on my coffee? What the hell's the matter with you?"

Khalon's green eyes bore into Riley, and when he spoke, it was through his teeth. "How dare you speak to me in such a manner."

"Then stop being a jerk!" Riley snapped, aware the entire hall had gone silent, all eyes on him. Did no one ever challenge Khalon? They just did whatever he said without question? Magical king or not, Riley wasn't about to remain silent while Khalon punished some poor servant because he

did something sweet. “Angi was just being nice. I get the idea he’s not used to being smiled at, much less told he’s appreciated.”

Khalon appeared horrified. As if Riley had just insulted his mother. “He’s a servant!”

“He’s a human being—a person, foxling, whatever! My point is he doesn’t deserve to get disciplined because he did something nice for someone. You should try it sometime.” *Might help remove the stick you seem to have permanently inserted up your butt.*

Khalon stood, his hands balled into fists at his sides. Shit, maybe Riley had pushed him too far. Was it really *that* bad asking him not to be such a dick? Khalon turned to Rayner.

“I want everyone at the front gates ready to go in half an hour.”

Before anyone could reply, Khalon stormed off.

“Wow.” Riley took another sip of his cappuccino before helping himself to some breakfast. “That guy really needs to watch his blood pressure.”

“It isn’t wise to antagonize him,” Adira grumbled before serving herself a second helping of eggs and potatoes. Riley reckoned she could easily bench-press him.

“Antagonize him?” Riley let out a very indelicate snort. “He’s so full of himself.”

“He’s a king,” Rayner reminded him, a playful smile on his lips. As if he knew something Riley didn’t, which was most likely the case, but still.

“So that gives him the right to treat people as if they don’t matter? What kind of guy punishes someone over powdered chocolate?”

Rayner let out a low, husky laugh, his amber eyes warm. “Riley, you do not know our king very well. His displeasure has nothing to do with chocolate powder.”

Riley waved a hand at the empty throne. “Then what was that about?”

“What that was about, young prince, is your king and mate—because until the priestess removes Khalon’s mark from you, you are his mate—being shamed by a servant.”

“I still don’t get it.” Why would Khalon feel he was shamed by Angi?

“Oh, for creation’s sake,” Adira huffed. “A servant has shown affection toward you and pleased you with very little effort, where as he—your mate and king—has done neither.”

Again with the “mate and king.” It wasn’t like Riley had forgotten, even if he hadn’t exactly accepted it. Also, Khalon didn’t strike Riley as the affectionate type. Then again Riley didn’t really know him. “How is that my fault? Maybe if the guy stopped growling at me or cursing me for a second, I might actually get to know him. Is there even a point in getting to know him? I mean, he just wants to get rid of me.” Why would Khalon care about pleasing Riley if he wanted him gone? It made no sense.

Rayner cocked his head. “Don’t you wish to return home?”

“Of course I do, but not because his presence is an insult to my very delicate royal sensibilities, which seems to be the case with him.” Riley grabbed a croissant. Might as well eat his weight in baked goods. Who knew when his next meal would be? Riley just wanted to get this whole ordeal over with, but in the meantime, was it so hard for Khalon to give him a break? It’s not like he’d asked to be some magical king’s mate. Mate? Really? That was so... romance novel.

“All will be revealed in due time.”

Riley gave such a start he almost fell off his chair. He put a hand to his chest. “Holy shit.” He’d completely forgotten Ezra was there. The guy hadn’t said one word the entire time they’d sat here. “Seriously, man. You scared the hell out of me.”

Rayner got to his feet with a chuckle. “I believe Ezra secretly enjoys it.” He gave Ezra a wink.

With a roll of his eyes, Ezra stood and walked off. Adira soon joined him.

“Come,” Rayner said, motioning for Riley to follow. “We must get you dressed.”

Riley grabbed another croissant before following Rayner. “I am dressed.” When he woke up this morning, he’d found his clothes clean and neatly folded on the fancy tufted ottoman at the foot of his bed.

“If you are to make the journey to the temple of the great priestess, you will need proper attire.”

Riley shrugged. “Sure, why not.” He supposed he did kind of stick out in his T-shirt and jeans.

As he followed Rayner through the castle, he took in everything around him. The place was a flurry of activity with Soldati warriors and servants. Riley had never been in a castle before. It was sort of a mix of old and new, except without modern technology. He hadn’t seen one TV since

he arrived. The Soldati probably had better things to do than lounge around watching human talent shows. Speaking of technology, Riley pulled out his cell phone.

“That won’t work here,” Rayner informed him. “There are no satellites or cell phone towers in the Soldati Realm. The lighting you see around you is generated by magic and fire.”

“You know about cell phones?”

Rayner looked amused. “Simply because we have no use for something doesn’t mean we don’t know it exists. The Soldati have walked among humans since the beginning.”

“Do any live there? With humans, I mean.”

Rayner stopped at a set of large wooden doors, which he opened for Riley. “Magical creatures have always lived among humans, Riley.”

“What?” Riley wanted to know more, but before he could ask, he was gently shoved inside the room, where he was greeted by a tall, handsome young man with stark-white hair, a black streak in his bangs. He had kind amber eyes. Was he another foxling? He didn’t have Toka’s coloring, but he did have the same kohl around his eyes. The man smiled widely and bowed before them.

“How may I be of service, Rayner?”

“Our friend Riley is in need of proper attire for his journey. We will be leaving shortly, so I’m afraid a swift alteration will have to do.”

“Of course.” The man bowed again before motioning for Riley to stand in front of a long gilded mirror with an identical mirror to each side of it. Riley held his hand out to the man, who looked down at it, then at Rayner as if for guidance.

“Riley, this is Tura, my tailor. Tura, this is Riley. He is a guest of Khalon’s.”

Tura’s eyes widened before he swiftly took Riley’s hand and bowed over it.

“I just meant to shake hands, but okay. I’m not used to your customs. Are you a foxling too?” Riley asked as he stepped where Tura asked him to.

“I am. I’m a marble foxling. There are many types of foxlings in our kingdom.”

That made sense. He wondered what other type of animals the inhabitants of the Soldati Realm changed into. Rayner took a seat on one of the tufted leather chairs as Tura whizzed about. He moved so fast Riley was

in danger of getting whiplash just keeping up with him. His fingers worked deftly and Riley barely felt his touch as he took Riley's measurements. Riley was fascinated. Tura didn't write anything down. In a matter of moments, Tura disappeared behind a closed door.

"He's fast."

Rayner chuckled. "Foxlings are captivating creatures."

"Like Toka?" Riley met Rayner's gaze through the mirror. For a slip of a moment, Rayner's gaze clouded with darkness, and Riley saw the dangerous man lurking beneath the charming smile. Riley cleared his throat and looked away. "He's very sweet. I feel calm around him." When he looked back up, Rayner's expression had softened, and there was once again warmth in his eyes.

"Yes. He has a way about him."

"Has he always been a servant in this castle?"

Rayner nodded, his gaze off to the side but at nothing in particular. "He's one of many born on the castle grounds. His mother served Khalon's mother."

"Wait, Khalon had a mother?"

Rayner stared at him before letting out a bark of laughter. Riley wasn't sure what he found so funny.

"Of course he had a mother. Do you believe he was simply spawned from nothing?"

"He was spawned from something, all right," Riley muttered, receiving another guffaw from Rayner. "What happened to his parents?"

Rayner wiped a tear from his eye. He sobered up. "They are at peace."

"Oh, sorry to hear that. How did they die?"

Rayner shook his head. "They are not dead, Riley. I said they are at peace. They live in a foreign realm. Once the crown was passed on to Khalon and he became king, his parents moved on to a more peaceful realm. I believe humans call it 'retirement.'"

Riley turned to face Rayner, his expression showing he was less than impressed. "Are you being serious right now?"

Mischief twinkled in Rayner's eyes. "I am. Not every hero has a tragic story. Khalon led a very happy childhood filled with love, and both his parents are alive and well, leading long, happy lives." He shrugged. "Soldati are immortal, but they hardly wish to spend eternity fighting demons. When the time comes to pass the mantle, it is done, and the former

reigning monarchy makes way for the new. The entire court follows their former king and queen to a new realm to lead out their immortal lives in peace. They visit twice a year.”

A thought occurred to Riley. “What about in instances like this, when a king is mated with a prince. Who is the mantle passed down to?”

Rayner looked amused. “There are several ways for us to have children, Riley. Adoption, surrogate, or the royal couple may ask the great priestess to choose a worthy heir.”

“Oh. Neat. So if Khalon is so well-adjusted, why is he so grumpy all the time?”

Rayner’s smile faded. “Khalon is a good king, but more importantly, he is like a brother to me. I assure you his happiness matters greatly to me, and after centuries of waiting for—”

Tura came out from the back and Rayner promptly stopped talking. Riley wondered what Rayner had been about to say. It obviously had something to do with this whole mistaken mate thing.

Tura didn’t waste any time, moving about in a flurry as he helped Riley get undressed. Rayner stepped outside, something about propriety or something, which was why—according to Tura—Riley had been appointed male servants. It was strange how the Soldati were so modern thinking in some instances, yet very traditional in others. Either way it looked like the servants were the only ones who got to see anyone naked.

It was amazing how quickly Riley was growing accustomed to undressing in front of strangers. There were a lot of layers involved, laces, buckles, pulling, tying, and adjusting. The boots were heavy and would take getting used to, especially since they came up to his calf over his black pants, but when he spotted himself in the mirror, he couldn’t help his dopey grin.

Tura dressed him in a deep-green leather tunic thing with short sleeves and a thick black leather belt around his waist. Underneath he wore a black shirt with long flouncy sleeves he could smuggle a whole chicken in. He noticed the Soldati were partial to leather. They had a sort of modern-day Robin-Hood-in-bondage look going on. Overall he looked like he’d been cast in some period-piece movie. He had to admit the clothes made him feel kind of... important, almost regal. He looked good too. It accentuated his slim waist and broadened his shoulders a little. The pants were a little snug,

but with the boots, it almost appeared as if he worked out. He turned in front of the mirror, peering over his shoulder at himself.

“Holy crap, my ass looks fantastic in this!”

Tura let out a snicker before quickly straightening. “I’m pleased you like your garments, sir.”

He approached with a comb in his hand and proceeded to neaten Riley’s hair, parting it on one side and smoothing it out, making him seem a little clean-cut, but it fit with the wardrobe. When he was done, Tura opened the door so Rayner could come back in. Rayner came to a halt when he saw Riley.

“Oh.”

Riley glanced down at himself with a frown. “Oh? Is that a good ‘oh’ or a you-look-like-a-dork ‘oh’?”

Rayner smiled widely. “You appear every bit the prince.” He bowed in front of Riley as Tura gasped. Rayner straightened and gave Tura a wink before placing his finger to his lips.

“What?” Riley asked, lost by the unspoken conversation Rayner and Tura seemed to be having.

“Come along. It’s time to meet the others.” Rayner ushered Riley toward the door, but not before Riley called out over his shoulder.

“Thank you for the clothes, Tura. They’re awesome!”

Tura beamed at him. He gave them a nod as Riley was escorted out the door. It was weird what a little wardrobe change could do. In his T-shirt and jeans, he’d received curious looks. Now dressed in his new outfit, one dude ran into the wall because he was staring at Riley and not paying attention to where he was going. When it happened a second time, Riley became concerned.

“Do I have something on my face?” Riley whispered as they headed down a long stone corridor decorated in rich blues and black. “Why’s everyone staring at me?”

Rayner seemed to find the whole thing amusing.

“Do I have something in my teeth?” He tongued his teeth but couldn’t feel anything poking out anywhere. “Seriously, man, help me out here.”

They reached what Riley assumed was the front gate. Khalon stood with his back to them, speaking to Adira and Ezra. There were several Soldati and servants around, all of whom started murmuring and whispering

to each other. Why the hell was everyone looking at him? Was it because he was a human? Did he look like an ass?

Riley tugged at Rayner's sleeve. "You gotta put me out of my misery. What's going on?"

"You are a vision, Riley Murrough. They want to know who, and what, you are."

"They've never seen a human?" That didn't make sense. The Soldati protected humans from demons. Surely they'd seen thousands, maybe millions, of humans in their lifetime. Why was Riley different?

"Your golden hair marks you as rare."

"There are no blonds in your kingdom?"

"No."

Now that Rayner mentioned it, Riley looked around. No one had blond hair. The closest was a light brown on one of the foxlings. Weird.

"But they've seen blond humans."

Rayner nodded. "They have. However, they sense Khalon's mark on you but know you are not Soldati. They don't know what you are other than a rare flower that has yet to bloom."

Riley wasn't sure what to make of that.

"What the hell is going on?" Khalon grumbled. He turned, doing a double take when he saw Riley. It would have made Riley laugh were he not suddenly the center of attention.

He didn't know what to do with himself, so he stood there, back straight, chin lifted high. Well, if he was going to be gawked at, he might as well do his part, especially since Khalon's eyes had gone wide and his mouth dropped open as he swept his gaze over Riley. *Way to be subtle.* Riley tried telling himself he didn't care whether Khalon was pleased with him or not, but he was failing pretty spectacularly.

Riley felt good about himself. The guy obviously liked what he saw. *Who's a whelp now?* Rayner elbowed Khalon's side and cleared his throat, a smile tugging at his lips.

"You're gaping, Your Majesty."

Khalon snapped himself out of it and turned to glare at Rayner. "Shut up." He spun on his heels and stormed out, Adira and Ezra exchanging glances before following him. Riley stepped up beside Rayner and held back a smile.

“So do you think that means he approves?” He was pretty sure he knew the answer.

Rayner threw his head back and laughed before giving Riley a hearty clap on the back. This was going to be interesting.

Chapter Five

RILEY WAS surprised by the large crowd gathered outside the gates. He was even more surprised to find the crowd was there to wish Khalon and his warriors well on their trip. Everyone from Soldati to servant stood to one side. They appeared genuinely concerned for Khalon and Riley was stunned to see the affection in Khalon's eyes. The way everyone met his gaze or bowed their head when he touched their shoulder, assuring them he would return, spoke volumes of how they felt about him. It was clear they loved him. They certainly respected him. There was obviously a whole other side to Khalon Riley had yet to see. Why was Khalon so intent on keeping Riley at a distance?

While Khalon accepted the words of encouragement from his people, Riley took the opportunity to get a good look at the castle. Holy hell! It was huge! Which he supposed castles tended to be, but he'd never been inside a four-bedroom house, much less a castle. It was like one of those Scottish castles in the movies, but with plumbing.

The gray stone façade was covered in ivy while expansive and lush gardens surrounded the castle on all sides. Beyond the gardens were thick forests, and above them, the bluest sky he'd ever seen. Riley was horrified to discover they'd not only be going into the forests, but they'd be making the journey on foot with Ezra and Adira in their tiger forms. As a New Yorker, he was used to walking a lot, but he'd never marched through wildlife. He was never one of those kids who always wanted to go camping. Sleeping on rocks and getting eaten alive by mosquitos or whatever furry beasts lived in the woods never appealed to him.

Riley had no idea what direction they were heading in or how long it would take to get there. Thankfully Rayner informed him they'd be stopping at villages along the way for provisions, and the forest would provide food, whatever that meant.

As they walked Riley figured he might as well make the best of the situation. At least the woods were scenic and not some creepy dark fairy-tale woods. The bright sunlight filtered in through the lush trees on either

side of the dirt path they followed. It was a sunny day but cool. Thank God. He couldn't imagine trekking through the heat in this much leather. There was a nice breeze. He couldn't remember the last time he'd walked through so much nature. Did Central Park count as a hike through the wild?

Rayner and Khalon walked ahead, neither speaking, but they didn't seem to mind the silence. In fact, Rayner looked content, and Khalon.... Well, at least he wasn't scowling. He looked almost pensive. After what seemed like an eternity to Riley, he stopped to rest on a fallen log.

"You guys don't have cars, or horses? Carriages? Something that moves you can sit down on?"

"We have no need for vehicles or horses," Khalon muttered, sitting down on the log.

"How do you get around?" Riley's question was met with a chuff from Adira, who sat close by, her tail thumping against the grass. "Right, the whole tiger thing. Question: where do your clothes go when you change?"

Khalon folded his arms over his broad chest, looking even more imposing and larger than life, if that was possible. He was dressed all in black, from his black leather tunic to his pants, boots, and shirt, including wide black leather cuffs on his wrists over his sleeves. "Our clothes are like a second skin. When we shift, it simply becomes one with our bodies. Clothes are an invention of man. Unfortunately even our world has conformed to your nonsense and we've been forced to adapt. Entering your world unclothed yields... undesired results." Khalon motioned it was time to get going. Hey, a whole five minutes. Fantastic.

Reluctantly Riley got to his feet and started walking again. "If it's a second skin, do you feel pain when you get your sleeve caught on something or your boot steps on a rock?"

"No."

Cool. So because Riley couldn't shift into anything more than a couch potato, they were all forced to walk. Way to make friends.

Something had been bugging Riley since last night. "Is it really necessary to wipe my memories? I mean, don't you think humans have a right to know about what's out there?"

Khalon came to an abrupt halt and spun on his heels. Uh-oh. He'd angered Mr. Personality. Again. How unsurprising.

"A *right*?" Khalon loomed over him, which wasn't difficult considering he was about a foot taller than Riley. "You humans are so

arrogant. You believe your mere existence entitles you to whatever you fancy. That you are the center of the universe. For centuries my warriors and I have risked our lives to keep you safe, and yet year after year you find new ways to destroy yourselves. There is no greater threat to the human race than itself.”

Wow. Okay. Not a fan of humans, clearly. Before Riley could say another word, Khalon stormed off. Did the guy ever stick around to have a conversation? Or was it just Riley? Did he smell? He subtly gave his armpit a sniff. Nope. He smelled like flowery soap and nature. Maybe he’d just soak in all the greenery, seeing as how Khalon clearly couldn’t wait to get rid of him. Was it so terrible they get to know each other?

Around them the birds chirped and Riley smiled when he saw some squirrels playing. Soon some other furry little creatures joined in. A group of rabbits appeared, heading swiftly in the same direction. Did rabbits travel in packs?

“Um...” Riley caught up to Rayner. “Quick question.”

Khalon let out a heavy sigh. “Your questions are never quick. And here I thought I might have a moment’s peace.”

“Your charm continues to astound me,” Riley drawled before turning his attention back to Rayner. “Are the animals in this forest always in such a hurry?”

Rayner stopped. He sniffed the air and narrowed his eyes, peering into the woods. He turned and gave Adira a nod. She leaped into action, darting off into the woods while Ezra took off in a different direction. That didn’t bode well.

“What’s going on?” Riley asked, a chill spreading through him. He didn’t like this. Something was wrong. There was a distant roar and Rayner’s eyes widened. He grabbed Riley’s arm.

“Run!”

Before Riley could ask, the sun was swallowed in darkness, or so it seemed. A thick fog rolled into the woods all around them and Khalon pulled Riley between him and Rayner as they sped down the trail. The fog became so thick Riley couldn’t see what lay two feet ahead of him. He trusted Rayner and Khalon not to run him into a tree.

A horrifying shriek resounded before it multiplied into several more, followed by two familiar roars. Riley’s heart was ready to beat out of him. He didn’t need to be told what was behind them. The tattoos on his arm

burned but he ignored it, too horrified by the noises coming from within the fog. He could barely see a thing, and as much as he hated to admit it, he was scared shitless. Whatever number of demons had shown up in the alley last night was nothing compared to what was after him now.

“Khalon, what’s happening?” Riley asked as he did his best to keep up with the warriors on either side of him. He really needed to lay off the cake. If he survived he’d have to remember to thank Tura for the boots because his sneakers—and feet—wouldn’t have survived the jagged rocks and harsh terrain of the woods. An icy wind whipped in his face and his lungs ached from his heavy breathing, but he continued to push himself, his boots kicking up dirt and pebbles as he raced down the path.

“There’s a village not far from here,” Khalon informed him. “Straight ahead. Whatever you do, don’t look back, and don’t stop.”

Despite what Khalon might think, Riley wasn’t an idiot. He had no intention of stopping until he either ran out of ground or collapsed from exhaustion. Amazing how the threat of being killed by demons unlocked a level of athleticism Riley never knew he had.

The noise intensified and the hairs on the back of his neck stood on end. Something was close. He could feel it. Like it was clawing at his soul. His chest got tight and it suddenly became harder to breathe. What the hell? Was he running out of steam already? He wasn’t *that* out of shape. His lungs burned and he felt dizzy. No, this was something else. His vision flickered, and when a strange pulse erupted from his chest, he got scared and cried out.

“Khalon!”

Riley didn’t know why he called Khalon’s name, but when the world around him spun off its axis, his vision growing dark and his legs giving out from under him, he was relieved and grateful Khalon was there to catch him.

Chapter Six

KHALON FELT the flicker in Riley's soul like a knife to the chest. He'd spun on instinct, seconds before Riley called out his name and just in time to catch Riley before he could hit the ground. Lifting him easily, Khalon hoisted Riley over his shoulder and took off again. Adira and Ezra reappeared alongside him. Word of Riley's presence in the Soldati Realm had spread quicker than anticipated and the demons were out in full force. He needed to get Riley to safety. They were almost there. He could see the village up ahead. As they neared, Rayner shouted at the villagers to get indoors.

Khalon ran through the expansive stone archway marking the entrance to the village and spotted Rayner up ahead, waving him over to an open doorway. Khalon swiftly entered the cottage and was greeted by a family of kit foxlings. The taller of the adult females showed him to a bedroom with a bed tucked inside an alcove.

"Lay him here, Your Majesty. We'll watch over him," she stated, her big brown eyes gentle. "I am Flora and this is my mate Lasa, and our daughter Tinia."

Khalon gave the three female kit foxlings a nod. Riley would be in good hands. He laid Riley on the bed, startled by his sudden reluctance to leave him. His instincts pulled at him, demanding he protect what was his. He shook himself out of the ridiculous sentiment. Riley was not his, nor would he be. The priestess would set all to rights. For now he had to protect Riley, and in turn, his kingdom. He hurried for the door, ordering the kit foxlings to close it behind him.

Outside the wind whipped fiercely, the shrieks of approaching demons intensifying as they drew near in a cloud of putrid fog.

"Take positions!" Khalon shifted instantly into his tiger form and the four of them situated themselves around the small village, the others following his lead when he roared.

White light burst from their open jaws into the sky, spreading over the small village and forming a protective barrier, warding it from the demons.

The thin veil of magic sealed within seconds, and the first small wave of demons disintegrated into black smoke upon colliding with the barrier of light.

The remaining storm of demons encircled the translucent dome, unable to see in, but from within the barrier, Khalon could see them clearly. He shifted into his human form and approached the barrier, waving a hand so he could be seen by a select few on the outside, or more specifically, one demon. He stepped up close and fixed his gaze on the empty eyeholes of one particularly repulsive-looking demon. It was a dark demon, a scout. Khalon should have known.

Demons attacked in brute force, driven by the instinct to kill and harvest souls, but occasionally a dark demon could be found among them, leading the others, their intentions far more wicked. Dark demons didn't merely hunt humans for their souls; they had purpose. This one had purpose. To kill Riley and, in turn, weaken Khalon, leaving him and his warriors vulnerable. Without the Soldati to protect the humans, their souls would be ripe for the taking.

As expected the dark demon sensed Khalon's presence, drawn by his power and the light in his soul. It drew as close to the barrier as possible without contact, knowing it would disintegrate into nothingness should it touch the light. Its mouth elongated, hissing and dripping rotten blackness.

Despite Khalon's low growl, he knew the demon could hear him perfectly. "You won't lay one decayed tendril on him, putrid beast. I promise you."

The dark demon hissed and shrieked its annoyance at being unable to claw at Khalon's face.

Rayner stepped up beside Khalon and let out a noise of disgust. "Revolting bastard."

Khalon nodded. He waved a hand so the horrid creatures could no longer see inside. Rayner followed him as he headed back to the small stone cottage where he'd left Riley.

"I admit I hadn't expected one to show up so quickly," Rayner added.

"Have Adira keep an eye on them, that one especially. It's likely he'll call others. Send word to Captain Airaldi. I want him along with three dozen warriors dispatched immediately. Tell him I expect my path to the temple to be cleared by the end of the week."

"It will be done. What of Riley? What do you suppose happened?"

Was that concern Khalon heard in Rayner's voice? He was about to reply when Flora came running, her brown eyes filled with fright.

"Your Majesty! Come quickly!"

Khalon broke into a run with Rayner on his heels, an icy chill spreading through him as he entered the cottage. Riley's terrified moans met his ear and he hurried to Riley's bedside, his chest tightening at the fear plaguing his soft features, his brow beaded with sweat. Khalon reached out to wake Riley when Lasa caught his wrist. He arched an eyebrow at the foxling's boldness.

She snatched her hand away as if burned, and when she spoke, her voice was quiet. "Please forgive me, Your Majesty, but I tried to wake him, and when I touched him, I was hurled across the room by a powerful force."

Khalon frowned. He looked down at Riley in the midst of what appeared to be a terrible nightmare. His body twisted and contorted, tears escaping from under his closed lids. "He is of the human world. There is no magic in his soul." He believed Lasa nonetheless, yet he could hardly stand by and do nothing. Whatever Riley was experiencing, it brought Khalon great discomfort.

Bracing himself, Khalon sat on the bed beside Riley. He let out a guttural scream that shook Khalon to his core. Riley was terrified. Khalon called Rayner over.

"Rayner, I need a moment. Please fetch Ezra and escort Flora and her family to the village square for provisions, as well as a show of my gratitude for their wonderful hospitality."

Rayner nodded. With a kind smile, he ushered the foxlings out of the cottage. There was no telling what might happen, and Khalon preferred to keep matters concerning Riley private. When he spoke to Riley, it was in low and soothing tones.

"Riley, listen to my voice. It is your mate. I won't hurt you. It's my touch you will feel." He tentatively eased his hand closer to Riley, taking a deep breath as Ezra appeared. His friend and confidant remained silent as Khalon placed his palm to Riley's heart.

Riley's breaths fell in pants before he released another scream.

"Riley, I'm here," Khalon stated firmly. "Open your eyes and see me."

Riley's eyes flew open, revealing nothing but white, and Khalon refrained from cursing under his breath. What the hell was happening?

Riley's back arched up off the bed, his brows drawn together. He fell back onto the bed with a steep gasp.

"I can't find you," Riley whispered hoarsely, his eyes still void of iris and pupil. His voice broke when he next spoke. "I'm scared."

Khalon took hold of Riley's hand and placed it on his where it lay on Riley's chest. "Feel me, Riley. I am here. Tell me. What do you see?"

Riley whimpered, another tear rolling down his cheek before he replied. "Death. So much death. The world is burning. There's no hope. They're all dead. Every last one."

Khalon stared at Ezra, his wide eyes a reflection of Khalon's own. He seemed to snap himself out of it and nodded toward Riley. Khalon cleared his throat.

"Who's dead?"

Riley squeezed Khalon's hand, his body wracked with shivers. He moved his lips but no sound came out. Khalon leaned in.

"I can't hear you, Riley. Tell me."

Riley took hold of Khalon's head and turned it gently so his face was inches from Riley's, their lips almost brushing. Khalon inhaled sharply as a horrifying scene flashed before his eyes. Riley's reply was whispered, but Khalon heard it as if it had been shouted.

"The Soldati. They're all dead."

A fierce jolt of anguish and pain flared through Khalon, and he tore himself away from Riley and the bed, his chest heaving. Tears welled in his eyes. *Oh Goddess above!* Khalon shook his head. This couldn't be. Every last warrior dead. Adira, Ezra.... Khalon shut his eyes tight in an attempt to get the image of Rayner's lifeless, broken body out of his mind. His amber eyes, once filled with such mischief, were vacant, his handsome face and strong body smeared in his own blood caused by the sword piercing his chest, pinning his corpse to the earth. Khalon saw it clear as day, as if reaching out, he might be able to touch Rayner's bloodied cheek. The smell of burning, rotten flesh stung his nostrils and he gulped fresh air through his mouth. It wasn't real. He shook his head of the haunting vision.

"Khalon!" Riley gasped and bolted upright, his eyes wide and back to their former state as he clutched the blankets on either side of him. His face crumpled, and without thought, Khalon was immediately at his side, drawing Riley into his embrace.

Riley buried his face against Khalon's chest, his arms wrapped tight around him. Riley's sobs made his body tremble, and he clung to Khalon as if releasing him would thrust him back into the carnage. The brief glimpse was enough to unsettle Khalon, and he was a warrior king accustomed to death. He could only imagine how spending any time at all in such horror would feel to a human. Khalon let his cheek rest against Riley's head and he tightened his embrace, offering what comfort he could.

"It was only a terrible dream," Khalon assured him softly. He dared not speak the truth. There was no sense in frightening Riley any further. He ran a hand over Riley's back before giving Ezra a subtle nod. Ezra placed a hand on Riley's shoulder.

"Sleep now, Riley Murrough. Dream of coffee and sweet cakes."

Riley's body relaxed against Khalon, his arms slipping from around Khalon's back to fall at his sides. Carefully Khalon laid him down, relieved at the smile on his boyish face, his expression no longer plagued by fear. Khalon ran a hand over the feathery golden locks before pulling away to stand.

He followed Ezra into the foxling kitchen, both of them having to duck through the doorway so as not to hit their heads. When he turned to face Ezra, his suspicions were confirmed. "He is Saugur."

Khalon shook his head. It couldn't be. "There has not been a Saugur since the days of our forefathers, and never has there been a human Saugur."

"Never has there been a human Soldati prince," Ezra reminded him. "I did not believe either was possible."

Khalon let out a heavy sigh. "I have no bloody notion what the hell is going on." He met Ezra's amber gaze. "The Eye flows through you, Ezra. Can it tell us nothing?"

"The Eye cannot find what has never been."

Ezra took a seat at the small kitchen table and Khalon joined him. Why were foxlings so blasted small? Khalon barely fit in the chair, his knees bent somewhat awkwardly. Ignoring his current discomfort, he studied his dear friend. It did not bode well that Ezra was at a loss.

The Soldati Eye saw all and Ezra was its voice. Whenever a new Soldati became king, the old king's trusted council stepped back to make way for the new king's council. After his father's departure, Khalon knew of no better council than that of his childhood friends. There was no one he

trusted more with his life. Rayner, Ezra, and Adira had been by his side all his life. The moment Khalon became king, the Eye chose its voice, a Soldati warrior who would be connected to its power and fathomless knowledge. It chose the gentle and quiet Ezra. It made sense. When they weren't training or fighting, Ezra's nose was always in a book. He was a calm and peaceful soul. A healer even before the Eye chose him.

"I don't understand why the priestess would mark him," Ezra said, his blue eyes filled with concern. "It seems to me an exceptionally cruel jest."

Khalon let out a heavy breath. "I have been telling myself that very thing since we found him."

"No, not because he is a human." Ezra's eyes glowed a whitish blue, signaling the use of his powers. He was most likely communing with the Eye. Finally they might have some new information. Ezra let out a gasp and Khalon straightened.

"What is it?"

Ezra's eyes returned to their usual blue and he met Khalon's gaze. "If Riley is truly a Saugur, he will die."

Khalon stared at him. "What?"

"As a human Soldati prince, his body is frail and vulnerable, but he can continue to be Soldati. As a Saugur? A human soul cannot hold the power of the Saugur. Once it seeps into his mortal body, he will wither and die."

"I'm going to die?"

Khalon stood abruptly, the chair toppling behind him and clattering noisily to the floor. Riley stood in the doorway, looking stricken. He leaned against the doorway, his face ashen.

"You should be resting." Khalon picked up the fallen chair before walking over to Riley. "Come, get back into bed, and I'll have Ezra bring you something good to eat once you wake."

"Tell me," Riley insisted, his hazel eyes determined. His expression softened. "Please."

Khalon felt the pull of compassion. He could sense the fear in Riley, yet he also sensed courage. Here was Riley, a human in a strange world of magic, his life threatened by demons, forced to follow a king who had done nothing but show anger toward him, and yet he was soft, trusting, and bold. Riley did not ask for this. He did not deserve to die for someone else's mistake.

“You are not going to die,” Khalon promised. “We are going to get you to the priestess and have her remove the mark, as well as the gift of Saugur. She made a grave error. A human should never have been made a Saugur.”

“What’s a Saugur?” Riley allowed Khalon to usher him back toward the bedroom. “And how did we get here?” He looked around. “One minute we’re walking through the woods and the next I’m waking up in someone’s bed. Is this a B&B or something?”

“This is the home of Flora, Lasa, and Tinia, a kit foxling family in the village of Selvan. We were attacked by demons in the woods and you lost consciousness. I carried you here.”

“Oh.” Riley sat on the edge of the bed and rubbed his arm, his cheeks turning a rather pleasant shade of pink. Khalon had the sudden urge to sit beside Riley and pull him into his embrace, but he restrained himself.

“You don’t remember anything after the walk in the woods?”

Riley shook his head.

Khalon was thankful Riley couldn’t recall the terrible vision, though a part of him was disappointed their embrace was equally forgotten. It was a good thing Riley didn’t remember the way he’d clung to Khalon, or how through his fear he called out for Khalon and no one else. Soon he would be back in his world with no memory of Khalon or the Soldati. It was best they not grow attached. There was no keeping Riley now. Not that he’d intended to.

“So what’s a Saugur?” Riley asked, drawing Khalon’s attention.

“A Saugur is a Soldati prophet, one who has visions of what may come to pass should the warnings not be heeded. They are exceptionally rare. There has been only one other in the history of the Soldati.”

Riley tilted his head in thought. “What makes you think I’m a Saugur?”

Damnation. Khalon thought about how much he should tell Riley and decided there was no need to worry him further. “Ezra is connected to a powerful force. Its knowledge is all-seeing. Now rest. When you wake up, we shall dine and see about getting you to the priestess.” Khalon summoned a smile. “All will be well.” He turned to leave when Riley grabbed his hand, the warmth quickly spreading through him. Khalon schooled his expression as he met Riley’s bright hazel eyes.

“Yes?”

“Thank you for, um, carrying me here. For keeping me safe.”

“You’re welcome.” Khalon meant to leave but Riley held on to his hand. As if reading his thoughts, Riley released him.

“Sorry.”

Khalon nodded and walked away before he did something foolish. Like stay.

Chapter Seven

RILEY WOKE up to the most delightful smells. His stomach rumbled and his mouth watered. Man, he was starving. When he opened his eyes, it took him a second to remember where he was. That's right. They'd run into demons and were in a cottage in some village. Why the hell did he pass out in the woods? Maybe he'd overexerted himself and not realized it. How embarrassing. Khalon probably thought he was pathetic. At least he was nice enough to carry Riley's sorry butt to safety. He didn't seem too pissed off about it.

There was chatting and a childish squeal, followed by a giggle that made Riley smile. He got out of bed and headed toward the sounds. The cottage was cozy, with an exposed wood-beam ceiling, stone walls, and a stone fireplace. He left the tidy bedroom decorated in earthy tones and walked to what he assumed was the living room. There were vases with colorful wildflowers, the furniture all dark wood with rich hues in reds and browns. The twinkling white string of lights arranged around the walls was charming and gave the place a warm, cheerful air. Riley was absolutely enchanted to discover they weren't lightbulbs, but tiny glowing flower buds. More charming than the décor was the sight of Khalon laughing as he entered the room. Riley stood transfixed.

Khalon's entire face was transformed. His full lips were wide and little creases formed at the corners of his eyes. He looked like a different person. Equally surprising as seeing him laugh was seeing him playing with the little girl in his arms. Her coloring was different to Toka and Tura, with her hands and feet white as snow, the color traveling up before fading into her fair skin. The kohl around her big dark eyes was barely visible and her copper-colored bob bounced as she climbed all over Khalon. She looked to be about six or seven, but he had no idea how foxlings aged. Khalon wrapped an arm around her and carried her at his side like a satchel. She squealed and giggled, kicking her small feet. With a laugh he sat down on the loveseat, taking up almost the width of it. He looked out of place, the black of his hair and clothes a stark contrast against the floral cushions. As

if sensing Riley, Khalon looked up. Their eyes met and Riley's breath hitched at the beautiful smile aimed at him.

"You're awake." Gently he placed the little girl on her feet, whispered something in her ear, and smiled as she ran off into the kitchen. Riley stood exceptionally still as Khalon walked over. He stopped in front of Riley, his expression turning concerned. "How are you feeling?"

Riley opened his mouth when his stomach answered with an obscenely loud grumble.

Khalon chuckled. "I guess we have our answer, though I'm not surprised. You were asleep for two days."

Riley gaped at him. "Two days? What? How?" There was something in Khalon's gaze, something that worried Riley. He seemed reluctant to answer. A part of Riley didn't want to know, but he asked anyway. "Is it because of the whole Saugur thing?"

"It's possible," Khalon replied quietly.

"Oh God, am I dying?" Was it happening already? Riley couldn't believe this. First he was swept away to another world and told he was a prince, then a prophet, and now he was dying? His knees grew weak and Khalon wrapped an arm around him, leading him to the loveseat he'd vacated moments earlier.

"You are not dying," Khalon assured him. "If you were truly a Saugur, it would take time, several prophecies before your body began to feel the strain of its power." Riley plopped down onto the loveseat and Khalon kneeled before him, his strong hands on Riley's knees. "Several of my warriors have arrived and they're keeping vigilance with Rayner, Adira, and Ezra. The rest of my warriors are forging a path to the priestess's temple as we speak. I will get you home, Riley. I promise."

How could Khalon make a promise like that and expect to keep it? After what Riley saw in the woods? It seemed like every time he made a move, the number of demons trying to kill him quadrupled. How long before they were outnumbered?

"What's to keep the demons from coming back after your warriors clear a path?"

Khalon shook his head. "No demon will escape their light. They will become nothing but ash. The stench will alert the others of the danger and they will attempt to find another way. As long as we stick to the path, all

will be well.” He gently squeezed Riley’s knees again. “You must have faith, Riley.”

“Okay. I’ll try.” He gave Khalon a tentative smile. “Thanks.”

“Good.”

Khalon pulled him to his feet but didn’t move out of the way, so Riley ended up almost pressed against him, his hands still in Khalon’s. He was all chiseled features and hard muscle, his stubbly jaw giving Riley the urge to nip at it. He was gorgeous. Why hadn’t he noticed that before? He had tiny nicks and barely visible scars on his neck, jaw, and over his left brow, but somehow they enhanced his beauty. He had a strong nose, full lips, and his pitch-black hair was tucked neatly behind his ears, though it fell over his brow on one side. He felt solid. Like he could weather any storm and never break. Whatever strange trance they seemed to have been in, they snapped out of it, each turning away from the other. Khalon cleared his throat.

“Let’s get some food in you. Flora and Lasa have cooked a wonderful meal.” He motioned toward the kitchen, his hand coming to rest on Riley’s lower back as he ushered him in. His touch had a strange soothing effect on Riley, which was odd considering up until recently, Khalon had a talent for putting him on edge.

Entering the kitchen, he was met with the mouthwatering aroma of fresh bread, cooked meat, and several other dishes that were unfamiliar but smelled heavenly. He was also greeted by his hostesses Flora and her mate Lasa. Behind Flora their daughter Tinia clung to her skirts. Riley smiled at Tinia. He kneeled down in front of her.

“Hi. I’m Riley. Your dress is very pretty.”

Tinia smiled shyly. She released Lasa’s skirts and edged closer to Riley, her eyes going to his hair. He remembered what Rayner said about no one in the kingdom having blond hair.

“Do you like it?” he asked her, touching his head. She nodded, her gaze fixated on his head. “Would you like to feel it?”

She looked up at her mothers and Flora nodded. “If it’s all right with Riley.”

Riley gave her a nod and Tinia carefully drew closer to him. She reached out slowly, lightly brushing the side of his head with her small fingers. She gasped in delight.

“It’s so soft, Mommy!”

Riley chuckled. She petted his head, her little face filled with wonder. He'd never met anyone so awestruck by his hair. Normally people didn't give him a second glance. There had never been anything extraordinary about him. He wasn't particularly attractive or ripped, and his only talent was drawing and making a mean cup of coffee. He wasn't an overachiever, and in some people's opinions, not even an average achiever. The most use he'd gotten from his art degree came in the form of a few months of freelance, and up until recently, he could boast that his coffee shop had the best-looking sandwich board on their block.

"All right, time for bed," Lasa instructed. "Say good night."

Tinia threw her arms around Riley and he found himself smiling like a dope. He gave her a gentle squeeze in return, then released her, laughing when she launched herself into Khalon's outstretched arms.

"Can you tuck me in?" she asked, batting her long lashes, her dark eyes wide and hopeful. Riley doubted Khalon could say no to a face like that. He didn't even try.

"Of course." He carried her out of the room and Riley watched him go, amazed.

"It's such an honor to have you both here," Lasa said, coming to stand beside Riley. "I am relieved to find the rumors surrounding His Majesty to be true."

"Rumors?" Riley asked, following Lasa to the dinner table. He took a seat when prompted. "Thank you."

"That he is as compassionate and charming as he is fierce."

"And very handsome," Flora added with a wink.

Riley ignored her knowing smile and placed his napkin on his lap. Was his face red? He hoped not. "So he's a good king?"

"Oh yes." Lasa smiled brightly as she set a plate before Riley. "As was his father before him. The Soldati kingdom continues to thrive under his rule. His people are well cared for and happy. The king and his council are just. Many of us live simply but we want for nothing. His Majesty sees to it."

"And then there's the Soldati Summer Solstice Festival held every year on the castle grounds." Flora finished placing dinner on the table and Riley's mouth watered. It all looked so good.

"What's the Soldati Summer Solstice Festival?" That was a mouthful, much like he was about to have with all this tasty-looking food.

“For an entire week, the castle grounds are open to the kingdom and filled with festivities and food, all provided by the king and his court. Everyone looks forward to it every year. Oh, it’s glorious! The music, the dancing, and games. The king is in attendance with his council and court, dressed in their finery.” Lasa’s eyes lit up as she talked about it. “It’s like a fairy tale.”

The festival was obviously a hit. Riley felt guilty for judging Khalon so harshly. He was clearly revered by his people. From what he’d seen of Khalon’s interaction with Tinia, he also seemed to possess a gentle side.

“Thank you so much for everything. I really appreciate it. This looks delicious.” He helped himself to some fresh bread, salad, chicken, potatoes, and vegetables.

“It’s an honor, Riley Murrough,” Flora replied sweetly. She took a seat at the table across from him beside Lasa. The two exchanged glances, their cheeks somewhat flushed. Riley smiled at them.

“What?”

Lasa leaned in, her voice quiet. “Forgive our impertinence, but... are you and His Majesty, um....”

Riley’s eyes widened and he swallowed hard. “No, um, we’re not, uh.... I’m just passing through.”

“Oh,” Lasa sighed, she and Flora looking disappointed.

“Why did you think we were?” Did he sound nervous? He hoped he didn’t. He shouldn’t. It was an innocent question. No big deal.

“Well.” Flora busied herself serving Lasa dinner. “His concern, for one. He barely left the cottage while you slept. He seemed very worried.”

Flora nodded. “Mostly it was the way he looked at you.”

Riley paused, his fork halfway to his mouth. “What do you mean?”

“While you slept he checked on you often. In the evenings he stayed by your bedside. I don’t think he slept very much.” Flora gave her mate a kiss on the cheek in thanks.

Khalon had stayed by his side watching over him? The thought made Riley want to smile, but he did his best not to give away how stupidly happy that made him. It shouldn’t, but it did. Maybe there was a reason for Khalon’s initial animosity toward Riley. Whatever that reason, things seemed to be changing, and Riley found himself feeling hopeful. For what he wasn’t entirely sure, but he couldn’t ignore the fact he felt drawn to Khalon.

Flora turned her attention back to him. “Do you already have a mate?”

Riley wondered how much Khalon had told them. From the sounds of it, not much. It was probably safer that way. Though he must have said something, considering the whole village sat under a magical ward to keep demons away.

“No, I don’t.” Riley took a sip of the drink in front of him. It was a sweet fruity wine that tasted amazing. Lasa looked confused.

“Does he not appeal to you?”

Riley almost choked on his wine. “Excuse me. Um, that’s not, I mean, of course he’s appealing. And not because he’s a king. He’s obviously a great guy too, and yeah, he’s gorgeous, like, wow. Those eyes? I mean, who wouldn’t find him appealing? He’s just a bit, *a lot*, out of my league.” Then there was the whole human in another realm thing, and—

“You shouldn’t sell yourself so short, Riley.”

Flora’s and Lasa’s eyes were wide as saucers, and Riley found he was frozen to the spot. *Oh my God, he heard me!*

Khalon took a seat beside him and chuckled. “Your face seems to be attempting to out-red the tomatoes in your salad.”

With a groan Riley dropped his head into his hands. “I don’t suppose you know any magic that could make the earth swallow me up?”

“I’m afraid not,” Khalon replied, sounding amused.

Riley sat up and glared at him. “You know, you could have been a gentleman and pretended you hadn’t heard any of that.”

“I could have,” Khalon agreed before leaning close to grin wickedly at him. “But what would be the fun in that?”

Flora and Lasa broke off into giggles, and Riley stabbed his salad before waving a tomato at them. “You two are not helping.”

There was more giggling and chuckling before Khalon put him out of his misery and changed the subject, thanking Flora and Lasa for the meal as well as their hospitality. He told Riley he’d show him around the village after they ate, and as promised, after Riley’s belly was full, Riley followed Khalon outside. He wasn’t sure what he’d been expecting, but it wasn’t this.

It was as if he’d stepped out into an old European village. All the structures were made of light stone, their façades covered in ivy and batches of colorful flowers. There were flowers everywhere, actually. In pots along the walls, in gardens, patches of grass. Strings of the same glowing tiny white buds decorated the buildings, hung between lampposts, and wrapped

around trees. Apparently they grew rampant in the forests. The town was alight with the warm glow from the many wall sconces and a cheerful melody floated up from a live band somewhere. The entire village seemed to be out, all chatting and smiling.

“What’s going on?”

“They have never had the king of the Soldati stay in their village,” Khalon replied warmly. “I didn’t have the heart to quell their elation or put a stop to their festivities, seeing as how we’ll be here for a few days at least.”

“What about the you-know-what?”

Khalon pointed to the sky. “Any demon that touches the barrier of light will meet its end.” He smiled down at Riley. “All is well. Enjoy yourself.”

“Would that work on us?” Riley asked, curious. It made sense to him that if Khalon and the others could protect the village, they could ward themselves.

“What do you mean?” Khalon followed the path of Riley’s finger as he pointed up to the sky. Khalon let out a heavy sigh. “If only it were so. The ward remains solid, as the village is unmoving. Attempting to place a ward over a living creature requires exceptional concentration, and the ward would last mere seconds. The moment you moved, it would fall away.”

Well, so much for that. Wasn’t the whole point of having magic the ability to do anything? He had no idea there were so many rules and restrictions.

“There he is! Your Majesty!”

Riley was stunned by the dozens of villagers who flocked to Khalon, all vying for his attention. They were all smiles and awe, thanking him for being there, offering him anything he needed. They all wanted to talk to him, touch him, though they didn’t dare do the latter. They crowded him, got close to him, but not one of them touched him or grabbed him. As he started to move forward, they moved with him, but gave him enough room so he wouldn’t walk into anyone. It was like watching a movie star walk down the street, except people weren’t trying to maul him or rip his clothes off. Khalon was handsome, and from his smile and responses, it was clear he was used to this. He was polite and appeared genuinely interested in what they had to say.

It was funny how the whole “king” thing didn’t register until now. Watching Khalon interact with the villagers was something else. He exuded

nothing but confidence, giving off an air of royalty in the way he carried himself. His posture was nothing less than perfect, his broad shoulders squared back, and his attention focused intently on his people, as if whatever they were saying was the most important information he'd ever heard. He towered over the village of foxlings, even over the tallest foxling males. He was imposing with his great height and muscular build, yet his smile had everyone captivated, including Riley.

Watching Khalon, an urge to be near him rose up in Riley, and he didn't quite know what to do with it. Like the villagers, Riley wanted to reach out and touch Khalon. He remembered Khalon holding on to his hands, and Riley was startled by his yearning to have his hand in Khalon's once again. His heart squeezed and Riley kept his distance. It was abundantly clear the priestess had made a huge mistake. There was no way Riley could be Khalon's intended mate.

With Khalon busy and the villagers distracted, Riley sneaked away. He wandered down the cobblestone street and found a stone archway covered in ivy. On the other side was an expansive circular garden enclosed by tall dense trees and shrubbery. There were hundreds of flowers in all colors in bloom along the edges and a circular stone fountain in the center. Inside the outer edges of the garden were three evenly spaced stone benches. It was almost like a little hideaway. Riley took off his shoes and socks, placing them next to him before he lay down on the crisp, cut grass.

"Wow," he murmured to no one in particular. He laced his fingers behind his head and stared up at the night sky. It was gorgeous. Hard to believe what was out there in the dark, waiting for him. He tried not to think about that. Instead he looked up at the stars. He'd never seen so many. In the distance he could faintly hear the music and lively chatter from the village square, but mostly he heard crickets and the sounds of the forest. He was oddly at peace.

Soon he'd be home, back to working at the Tiger Tails Café, fighting his way through traffic, noise, and going home to... what? He had his mom, whom he loved, of course, but she was always away with her girlfriends on some cruise or another. Sometimes he didn't hear from her for weeks. He didn't blame her or her mantra of getting her kicks while she could still get them.

His college friends were getting married, some of them busy with kids and making new friends who had kids. Their schedules hardly ever matched

up. Occasionally he went out with his work colleagues to a bar or club where he'd sometimes hook up with a guy. He'd had a few boyfriends, none who stuck around very long, either because they lost interest, or he did.

A breeze swept through the trees and Riley let out a heavy sigh. What did it say that he didn't miss his life back home? Home. He liked his cramped little apartment well enough. That along with his job were temporary, or so he'd been telling himself since he graduated college. The truth was he had no idea what he was doing with his life. He closed his eyes. What he needed was a fresh new start.

A new start where? Here? Don't be stupid.

Even if he wanted to stay, what the hell would he do? He wouldn't be a prince for long. Even if he chose to stay, if Khalon *let* him stay in his kingdom, what then? He had no money, nowhere to stay, no magic. He supposed he could try to get a job in one of the villages. Maybe Flora and Lasa would let him stay with them for a while.

Are you listening to yourself? Stay? Are you insane? You don't belong here. His human practicalities had no place in a kingdom where everyone turned into a tiger, fox, or who knew what else.

No. He couldn't stay. It was a fanciful thought, a nice dream, but a fantasy nonetheless. He'd just enjoy the peaceful surroundings while he could. At least that's what he was doing until he got kicked. Riley gave a start, bolting upright in time to see Khalon flailing non-too king-like before hitting the grass. It took a significant amount of self-control on Riley's part not to laugh his face off. The perplexed look on Khalon's face alone was priceless, and Riley couldn't take it anymore. He burst into laughter. Khalon stared at him as if he'd lost his mind.

"What the blasted hell are you doing on the ground?"

Riley held his hands up and snickered. "Hey, I was just lying here, minding my own business, watching the stars when you came out of nowhere and kicked me."

Khalon opened his mouth to reply then closed it before he spoke up. "Did I hurt you?"

"I'm fine. What were you doing lurking around in the bushes, anyway?"

"I wasn't lurking," Khalon replied with a huff. He sat up and brushed his sleeves off. "I was escaping."

Riley cocked his head. “Escaping?” It struck him then. He held back a smile. Looked like the king of the Soldati was a little camera shy. “Oh, the villagers.”

“Yes. They are kindhearted, generous, and enthusiastic, which is lovely.” Khalon winced and Riley sensed a “but” coming on. He decided to give Khalon a break and help him out.

“It gets kind of overwhelming, huh? I mean, you probably get it everywhere you go, and although you appreciate their love and attention, it can get a bit much.”

“Exactly!” Khalon beamed brightly. He drew his knees up and wrapped his arms around them. He studied Riley curiously. “What are *you* doing here?”

Riley shrugged. “I needed a little quiet and found this place.” He couldn’t help his smile as he gazed up at the wide starry sky. “It’s beautiful.” When he looked back at Khalon, he had his face turned up to the sky, his lips pulled in a contented smile.

“Yes, it is.”

Khalon turned his attention back to Riley and their gazes met. Wow, he was handsome. Whoever ended up being Khalon’s mate would be one lucky guy. Shit, Riley was staring. He cleared his throat and looked down at his feet. Why was he so damned awkward? No wonder Khalon couldn’t wait to get rid of him. Like he didn’t have enough to worry about without having Riley passing out, possibly getting mauled by demons, dying from some prophet’s power, or staring at him like some horny teenager with his first crush. Not that he had a crush on Khalon. He was just easy on the eyes. *Keep telling yourself that.*

“I’d like to apologize for my behavior upon your arrival. I allowed my emotions to get the better of me. I hope you’ll forgive me for being such a miserable bastard.”

Riley shrugged. “I get it. You waited centuries for your mate, and when you finally get him, he’s... well, me.”

“There is nothing wrong with you, Riley.”

Riley was pleasantly surprised by Khalon’s sincerity. “You’re right. I guess what I mean is I’m not what you expected, what you were meant to get. You’re a king. I serve lattes. You’re powerful, wield magic, and turn into a tiger. I’m a human, and a pretty average one at that.”

Khalon leaned back on his arms, his expression thoughtful. “I don’t know about average. An average human wouldn’t have adapted so quickly to all this.” He motioned around him and Riley supposed he had a point.

With a smile Riley lay down, his stomach doing a flip when Khalon lay beside him. They exchanged glances before turning their attention to the stars. As they lay there in companionable silence, it struck him then adapting wasn’t so much a problem as having to leave it all behind.

Chapter Eight

“HOW BAD is it?”

Khalon walked through the village square with Rayner and Adira, who’d returned just before dawn from their stalking. They’d snuck out through the barrier in their tiger forms to walk the grounds around the village and determine how many demons still lurked.

“As expected, some gave chase to Captain Airaldi and our warriors while others have grown weary of waiting. I did not feel the presence of the dark demon,” Rayner informed him.

“Nor did I,” Adira added. “It disappeared into the trees sometime before dawn, and I have not felt its presence since.”

Khalon considered this. “Do you suppose he followed Airaldi?”

“I doubt it,” Adira grumbled. “The filthy beast knows Riley is still here.”

“How long before Airaldi reaches the temple?” Khalon asked Rayner, his attention momentarily captured by Riley as he ran around the village square chasing the foxling children. After several minutes of petting his golden hair, they’d pleaded with him to play. Khalon found himself smiling at the memory of Riley’s wonder when the children all shifted into their fox forms.

The foxlings bounced around Riley, making him laugh. They hopped, darted here and there, and made gekkering sounds as they played. Riley seemed to be having a grand time, his childlike glee an endearing sight.

“Khalon?”

Khalon blinked at Rayner. “I’m sorry, what did you say?” Rayner gave him a knowing look and Khalon scowled at him. “Oh, shut up.”

“I didn’t say anything,” Rayner replied with a laugh.

Khalon narrowed his eyes and poked Rayner in the chest. “No, but you were thinking it.” The only disadvantage to having a second who was as shrewd as Rayner was the scoundrel missed nothing when it came to Khalon.

“As I was saying,” Rayner continued, ignoring his glare as usual. “It will be days yet before Airaldi and our warriors reach the temple. Once the path has been cleared, he will post half our warriors along the way while the others return to divert the remaining demons around the village. We’ll leave under the cover of darkness, stick to the path forged by Airaldi, and get Riley to the temple. The priestess will remove the mark and you’ll be presented with a new prince.”

Khalon gave him a nod. “Good.” Now if only he would stop feeling the opposite.

As if sensing his reluctance, Adira spoke, her voice gentle, which was most unlike her. “He does not belong in our world, Khalon. He is not strong enough to be a Soldati prince. Not physically. I admit Riley possesses great strength for a human and a good heart. He is kind and patient. In truth he possesses many admirable traits expected in a Soldati prince, but there is no point in you entertaining the idea of him staying in our world, much less as your prince. Especially if he is truly Saugur. If by some miracle Riley survives the visions he will surely have, he remains mortal. A man. Even if he survives the countless dangers of our world, if he lives out a full life, Riley will die while you continue to live for centuries with a broken heart and no mate.”

“Always the voice of reason, Adira,” Khalon replied softly, unable to help the ache in his heart.

“Forgive me.” She lowered her head, and he took hold of her hands, bringing them to his lips for a kiss. Her concern and love for him was evident in her bright gray eyes.

“That is not a slight against you, my dear friend. I am grateful for your sage advice. It may be difficult to hear at times, but necessary nonetheless. What manner of king would I be if I did not heed the wisdom of my treasured council?”

Her smile was sad, but she accepted his words. He could never be cross with her. Adira might not always be the easiest to warm up to, but she was an exceptional warrior, and a greater friend. He let out a sigh and released her hands.

“We have to get him home,” Khalon stated, his voice rough. Adira was right. He could not afford to lose his heart to a man who would leave him too soon.

Rayner put a hand to his arm. “Khalon—”

“No.” Khalon shook his head. He summoned a smile for Rayner. “You know as well as I do that it cannot be. The heavens are against us.”

Rayner nodded sadly, accepting Khalon’s words.

“What are you doing?”

Riley’s boyish laugh drew his attention once more and Khalon couldn’t stop his quiet laugh as Riley sat on the floor, tears in his eyes from laughter. One of the foxlings had jumped into a large, empty flower pot, his bottom sticking out and tail twitching. Khalon walked over and carefully took hold of the foxling, then pulled him out. The foxling barked and Khalon put him down on his paws.

“Careful, foxling, or you will get yourself stuck.”

“I think he wants to play hide and seek.”

At the mention of the game, the foxlings broke off into a chorus of cries and gekkering. Several ran circles around Riley before speeding around Khalon’s legs.

“Oh no. I’m far too big to hide in pots and shrubbery.”

“Aw, come on.” Riley got to his feet before tapping one of the foxlings. “You’re it! Everyone hide! No hiding indoors allowed.” They all scattered and Riley called out behind him as he ran. “Come on, Your Majesty. You wouldn’t want to disappoint all the adorable little foxes!”

Beside Khalon, Rayner coughed into his fist, his eyes dancing with amusement.

“Oh, shut up.” Khalon took off down the cobblestone path, ignoring the sound of Rayner’s hearty laughter behind him. He wasn’t familiar with the village, so he looked through gardens and areas with dense greenery. Just then he remembered the garden where he’d stumbled over Riley the previous night. There was a fountain, plenty of trees and shrubs, and when he ran in, he spotted the curtain of vines and leaves he saw last night. As he suspected, the curtain concealed a deep alcove. There was most likely a statue or large vase there at one point.

A foxling bark nearby had him moving swiftly, and he pushed through the curtain, mindful not to break any of the vines. He ran into something soft.

“Hey,” Riley hissed quietly. “This is my hiding spot.”

Khalon didn’t budge. “This is the only place big enough where my scent will be masked.”

“Crap, I forgot. They can sniff us out. Wait, you said your scent will be masked. How?”

Khalon pointed at the tiny white blossoms sprinkled about the ivy. “These flowers will mask our scent.”

Riley opened his mouth and Khalon threw an arm around him, bringing him up close against him, clamping his free hand down over Riley’s lips as he shushed him. One of the foxlings was nearby. They stilled and Khalon listened, his sharp hearing catching the sound of the tiny foxling’s paws hitting the grass as she pounced through the garden.

Khalon was aware of more than the foxling’s steps, like Riley’s hand on his chest, the other covering Khalon’s where he’d meant to remove it from his face. Khalon’s thigh was between Riley’s legs and Riley was all but riding him, their bodies pressed up against each other. Riley was unaware of their proximity until the foxling moved on and Khalon found himself staring down into gold-green eyes. He slowly moved his hand away from Riley’s mouth, but not before his fingers brushed Riley’s soft bottom lip as he pulled back.

“Are they, um, gone?” Riley asked, sounding breathless. His pupils were dilated and Khalon could feel Riley’s pulse quicken. His scent changed, his arousal evident in the hard bulge pressing into Khalon’s thigh. As if realizing his response, Riley parted his plump lips, and Khalon could no longer resist.

Khalon lay siege to Riley’s mouth, slipping his tongue between those luscious lips. Heat flared through Khalon, threatening to set him ablaze. He wanted to devour Riley, to tear off his clothes, and have him submit. He wanted to sink his hard shaft deep inside the beautiful creature in his arms, to part his supple cheeks and bury himself to the hilt. Khalon groaned, kneading the tight globes of Riley’s ass cheeks with his fingers. In his arms Riley whimpered and rutted against him, his body trembling with his desire. Khalon’s fingers turned to claws and his canines elongated as he moved his mouth to Riley’s neck. His heart begged him to do it, to claim the mate he’d waited so long for.

“I found them!”

Khalon spun on instinct, tucking Riley behind him and baring his fangs, his heart pounding fiercely. Thankfully the foxling child was busy squealing with excitement with the approaching children at having found

them. Behind him Riley let his head fall against Khalon's back, his hand wrapped around Khalon's wrist.

"I thought foxes were quiet."

Khalon chuckled. The foxling children crowded the alcove entrance and Khalon tenderly shooed them. "All right, back to the square. Let's repose for a moment. Then we'll all go for a run in our feral forms."

Riley cleared his throat and Khalon felt himself flush. "Oh, well, in Riley's case, perhaps he can run with us in his human form. Go on now."

The foxlings cheered and took off. Once they were gone, Khalon stepped out. He held out his hand for Riley and helped him through the curtain.

"Why did you send them away?" Riley asked. "I'm not tired."

"No," Khalon agreed, stepping up to Riley, his voice husky as he spoke. "But you look deliciously disheveled, as if you'd been ravished by a lustful beast." Riley's cheeks flushed beet red, his mouth hanging open. Khalon couldn't help but chuckle. He kissed Riley's cheek. "You are adorable."

Riley let out a huff and straightened his clothes before holding his head high and walking off. Khalon followed, enjoying the view very much. Hide and seek was quickly becoming his favorite sport.

The rest of the day went swiftly, with Khalon and Riley playing with the foxlings until Riley was too tired to stay upright. Flora and Lasa decided to have dinner in the garden so Rayner, Adira, and Ezra could join in as well. Riley had eaten his weight in potatoes and currently sat snoring softly against Khalon's shoulder.

"It would seem the foxlings have exhausted him," Flora said as she leaned into her mate with a sigh. The two were taken with Riley and enjoyed feeding him at every opportunity. Riley happily obliged, stating he didn't want to be rude by rejecting their succulent dinners. More like he couldn't get enough of all the food and attention. Riley seemed to thrive on both. That and coffee.

Khalon glanced down at Riley, smiling warmly at his slumbering face. "I fear those foxlings would tire the most steadfast of Soldati." He wrapped an arm around Riley and lifted him to his feet as he stood. "Come, young Riley, it's time for bed."

"Just one more chapter," Riley mumbled, his voice laced with sleep. He didn't even open his eyes.

“Chapter?” Lasa asked, bemused.

Rayner chuckled. “It appears our prince has a habit of falling asleep with a book in his hand, much like a certain king.”

Khalon let out a haughty sniff. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I am nothing but the paragon of kingliness.” They all laughed and Khalon dismissed them with a wave of his hand. “You all are spending far too much time around Rayner. Now if you’ll excuse me, I’m taking Riley to bed with me.”

Flora and Lasa giggled and Rayner let out a bark of laughter while Adira and Ezra gaped at him.

Khalon realized his faux pas. Honestly they were worse than foxling children. “I meant taking him to bed along with me. I’m going to bed. He’ll be in his own bed. You know what, Rayner—”

“Shut up? Yes, I know,” Rayner said with a laugh.

Bastard.

Khalon managed to rouse Riley enough to get him to walk, though his eyes remained closed and he leaned into Khalon, an arm wrapped around Khalon’s waist. With a grunt Khalon tucked Riley under his arm as they walked. It wasn’t far to Flora and Lasa’s cottage. Tinia was staying two doors down with relatives while her mothers borrowed her bedroom after insisting Riley take theirs. Khalon had mostly kept watch, napping in intervals as he watched over Riley. He would have to sleep elsewhere tonight.

“Today was nice,” Riley said, his contented sigh making Khalon smile.

“It was,” Khalon admitted quietly. It was easy to forget the real reason behind their village retreat. If he wasn’t careful, he could fool himself into believing he had whisked his prince away for a few days of recreation. How long had it been since he took time away from hunting demons? He couldn’t even recall. His court was exceptional at taking care of his kingdom while he was on the hunt with his warriors, and with no prince to come home to, it was easy to stay away. Fighting made him forget the emptiness in his heart. It kept him from the reminder he was only half of a whole.

With Riley pressed up warm against his side, it was the first time he felt reluctant to leave. As they reached the cottage and Khalon opened the door for them, he paused, his heart aching. This was only an illusion. He was yet incomplete, and Riley was not his prince.

“You okay?”

Khalon looked down at Riley, his eyes now appearing more gold than green. “How do your eyes do that? Appear as if they change color.”

Riley shrugged before letting out a yawn. “Lighting, I guess.”

“I guess.”

Khalon smiled softly then ushered Riley indoors. He didn’t know why he followed Riley into the bedroom. As if he might get lost along the short walk through the cottage. He stopped inside the doorway of the cozy room peppered with floral patterns and gossamer curtains. It was light and romantic.

“Well,” Khalon began somewhat awkwardly, “good night.” He pointed behind him. “I’ll be in the sitting room, should you need me.” Good heavens, what was the matter with him? He turned and quickly left the room before he did something he’d truly regret. Riley was going home and that was the end of that. Why was he bloody pacing? More importantly, why were his thoughts suddenly consumed by Riley? All Khalon could think about was the taste of Riley’s soft lips, the feel of his supple body against Khalon’s, his hands on Khalon. Blasted hell!

Khalon marched toward the bedroom. He had to put an end to this once and for all. They were not meant to be. Riley was a reasonable man. He would understand. What happened today in the alcove could not happen again.

“Riley, I must—” Khalon came to an abrupt halt inside the doorway, his gaze transfixed on the curves of Riley’s sinewy figure. Sweet merciful heaven! Riley was beautiful.

Unlike the Soldati, who were all great in stature with thick, muscular frames befitting warriors, Riley was sleek, his muscles subtly defined and smooth as if he were carved from pristine marble. His shoulders tapered into a slim waist Khalon could easily wrap his large hands around, and his spine curved in the most delicious way before rounding in a pert backside. He stood in only his snug black trousers, his chest and feet bare. His golden-blond hair fell roguishly over one side of his brow. Khalon had never seen such a stunning creature.

Riley darted his pink tongue out to lick his bottom lip and he bashfully rubbed a hand up his arm, as if the gesture might somehow shield his nakedness from Khalon.

“I.... Forgive me.” Khalon spun on his heels to leave when Riley caught his arm.

“Wait! Please.”

Despite the warning in his head, he remained still. “I shouldn’t be in here with you like this. It’s not proper.”

“What did you come to tell me?”

Khalon tried his best to avert his gaze but he could feel the heat coming off Riley. The pull to take him, claim him was growing fiercely. This was a perilous situation they found themselves in. If Khalon wasn’t careful....

“Khalon?”

Khalon made the grave error of meeting Riley’s gaze. His pupils were dilated, the black almost taking over and leaving a sliver of green-gold because now they were more green than gold. They were stunning. Everything about Riley was exquisite. What had he come here to say? Riley’s eyes widened slightly and he put his hand to Khalon’s chest.

“I can hear it.”

“What?” Khalon’s voice was low and gruff. Riley’s touch burned through his clothes to his skin.

“Your heartbeat.” Riley snapped his head up, his smile lighting up his face. “I can hear your heart. It’s incredible.”

Khalon pushed Riley into the doorway with a feral growl. He crushed his lips over Riley’s, groaning at the whimper he let out as he opened his mouth to Khalon. Their tongues tangled and Khalon pressed his thigh to Riley’s erection, exploring Riley’s skin with his hands. Fire burned through Khalon and he moved his lips to Riley’s neck, where he sucked, licked, and nipped at his soft skin. He slipped his fingers into Riley’s feathery locks, taking fistfuls of it. Riley moaned, arching his back up as he pressed himself into Khalon as much as he could.

Riley’s bare shoulder called to him and Khalon felt his canines elongate. He licked the skin when the tribal markings under Khalon’s clothing shifted, the bands on his wrists spinning in anticipation. With a gasp Khalon tore away from Riley.

“I’m sorry,” Khalon said roughly. Riley looked puzzled. His lips were pink and swollen from Khalon’s kisses, his chest rose and fell with rapid breaths, his skin flushed a wonderful shade of pink. He looked decadently ravished. Khalon stepped out of Riley’s reach. “Forgive me, I came to say

we shouldn't indulge in such acts, and here I go betraying my own judgment."

"Oh." Riley's disappointment squeezed at Khalon's heart. "Because I'm leaving?"

Khalon nodded.

"I don't suppose you.... You could ask me to stay," Riley said hopefully. The words made Khalon foolishly happy and simultaneously wretched. Riley had given him the opportunity to save them both from further heartache, and Khalon would make use of it.

"I won't be doing that," he replied gruffly. He straightened, his expression hard and his tone intentionally cold. "Do you know why I'm protecting you from the demons?"

Riley swallowed hard. He shook his head.

"To protect myself. If you were to be killed, I would be left weak and vulnerable. The demons would slaughter me next. That's why I protect you. Self-preservation. I cannot afford to keep you. You are weak, and my life would be in constant danger."

Riley flinched as if he'd been struck. "I know you feel something more than that."

"What I feel is the mark causing me to believe I care. No other reason. I am king of the Soldati. I could never be mated with such a frail and weak creature. You have nothing to offer, Riley Murrough. At most you are a pretty distraction."

Riley nodded, his voice almost a whisper when he spoke. "Right. Got it. Thanks for clarifying."

When he turned and walked off into the room, he took Khalon's heart with him. A considerable amount of effort was required on his part not to follow. He could sense Riley's heartache, the overwhelming despair and feeling of inadequacy. It was clear even in the human world, Riley struggled with confidence, and Khalon had callously used it to his advantage.

Khalon walked into the sitting room and shifted into his tiger form, curling up in front of the fireplace. He concealed his face beneath his large paws in an attempt not to hear Riley's quiet sobs. He consoled himself with the knowledge that once the priestess removed his mark from Riley and sent him back to his world with no memory of Khalon, his heart would once again be mended.

If only the same could be said of Khalon's own heart.

Chapter Nine

IT WAS kind of sad and pathetic, but Riley was happy.

Despite Khalon's harsh words to him, Riley wasn't pissed off at Khalon. How could he be? Okay, maybe he was a little bit pissed, but Khalon had every right not to want to keep Riley around. Everything he said was true. Riley had nothing to offer Khalon but possible death. Who would want that? So Riley went to Khalon the next morning and told him he understood. Khalon was visibly surprised, even more so when Riley asked if they could be friends while he was around. To Riley's relief, Khalon accepted.

It was almost two weeks since that night, and maybe it was selfish on his part, but he was secretly glad the captain and his warriors had needed more time to clear the way for them. In those two weeks, Riley spent almost every moment of every day, from early morning to late evening, with Khalon. As friends, of course. Setting that boundary helped ease the tension.

The two of them helped around the village, where Riley learned how to plant seeds, harvest vegetables, and gut and clean fish, among other things. Rayner was teaching Riley how to fight with a sword despite Khalon's disapproval. He was afraid Riley might hurt himself, but actually Rayner said he was doing exceptionally well for a human. Apparently Soldati warriors learned swordplay by the time they were old enough to walk.

When Riley wasn't sparring, he and Khalon spent time with the foxling children, playing and learning from them. Well, Riley was learning. He learned about all the different types of foxlings and how the Soldati kingdom was also home to lynx shifters, wolf shifters, ocelots, margay, and leopard cat shifters. Khalon and Riley ate together, went for walks, and Riley told him about growing up an only child to a single mom. How despite her busy work schedule, she always made time for him, how they'd had fun together, and her current adventures as she traveled the globe via cruise ship. He told Khalon about his brief career as a freelance artist. How

designing corporate banners and brochures slowly ate away at his soul, so he stopped. No matter what he did, he just couldn't seem to find his calling.

The morning was spent like any other, with Riley and Khalon helping the villagers with their tasks and chores. After lunch Riley and Khalon walked around the village with Rayner, Adira, and Ezra. Khalon stopped, lifting his handsome face to the sky.

"I think we should chance spreading the ward and exploring the woods," he suggested.

The others nodded and Riley stepped back as the four shifted into their tiger forms. He still wasn't used to that. It was impressive, the four of them looking even more regal. They let out fierce roars and a white light beamed up through their mouths into the sky. For the first time, Riley could see the ward. There was a subtle gleam to it, like glass that was so clean if you weren't careful, you'd run into it. The barrier expanded, inching outward slowly. It spread far into the woods. Shortly after Khalon shifted back to human form.

"Adira, you and Ezra remain in your tiger form. Rayner, you and I will explore in our human form."

"What about me?" Riley asked, looking from Khalon to Rayner and back.

"You stay here."

Riley frowned. "Why? The space is warded, right?"

"If there's any danger, I want you safely indoors."

Riley narrowed his eyes. "But any demons that would have come in contact with the ward when you spread it would have disintegrated."

Rayner turned his face away in a clear attempt to hide his smile.

"Fine," Khalon grumbled. He spun on his heels and stormed off toward the woods. Adira and Ezra pranced off with happy chuffs, seeming delighted by the expanse of woods they had to run in. Soldati weren't fond of being confined to one area, no matter how spacious the village might be.

Riley followed Rayner into the woods, keeping his distance from Khalon. As beautiful as the village was, being in the woods was refreshing. It was a warm, sunny day, and Riley tried his hardest not to stare at Khalon's bare arms beneath his short-sleeved tunic. Riley wasn't wearing his flouncy-sleeved shirt either, but his arms were hardly as impressive as Khalon's, even with the tattoos around his wrist and arm. For the next few

hours, they explored the woods around the village and luckily found nothing more dangerous than nature itself.

Up ahead a colossal fallen tree blocked their path. Khalon climbed the huge branches with incredible grace, leaping up to the top before disappearing over the other side. Adira and Ezra did the same, leaping from branch to branch until they were up and over.

“Um...” How was he supposed to get up there? He could climb the branches, but the highest branch was way too far from the top of the trunk for Riley to jump.

Rayner landed at the top, and for a moment Riley thought he’d be left behind. Instead Rayner turned and got onto his stomach. He reached down, a wide smile on his handsome face.

“Use the branches to climb up, then take my hand. I’ll pull you the rest of the way up.”

Riley did as he was told and carefully climbed like he used to do when he was a kid. He’d been pretty good at it then and surprisingly still was. When he ran out of branches, he stood on his toes and stretched himself as far as he could to take hold of Rayner’s hand. He pulled Riley up like he didn’t weigh a thing. Rayner motioned for him to stay, then leaped down, landing perfectly on his feet. He turned and held his arms up.

“I’ll catch you.”

Riley felt a little silly, but he couldn’t jump from this height without hurting something.

“What’s going on?” Khalon asked, appearing beside Rayner. He frowned up at Riley. “What are you doing? We’ve no time for games.”

“I’m being assisted by your second since the almighty king has forgotten I can’t leap skyscrapers.”

Khalon rolled his eyes. “That’s a fallen tree, not a skyscraper.”

“It’s like a freakin’ redwood. I’m sorry if I’ve disappointed you yet again with my human frailty and inability to leap tall buildings in a single bound.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake.” Khalon turned to Rayner. “Adira is mewling about being hungry or something to that nature. Go see what she wants.”

Rayner bowed his head and was off, leaving Riley with Khalon and the royal stick that was once again wedged up his fine ass. Khalon raised his arms.

“Jump.”

Riley sat down on the edge of the tree, eyeing Khalon warily. “How do I know you won’t drop me?”

“If you don’t hurry up, I just might.”

Riley swung his legs back and forth, a sweet smile on his face. “Tell me something. When you court your next prince, do you plan on being this charming, or am I just special?”

Khalon growled, a deep rumble that came up from his chest. Okay, maybe he shouldn’t poke the grumpy tiger with his witty repartee.

“Fine. I’m going to jump.”

Riley took a deep breath and pushed himself off. He managed to maintain his dignity by not flailing—too much. Khalon caught him, his arms wrapped tight around Riley as they stared at each other. They were nose to nose, their lips inches away from each other. Well, that escalated quickly. Khalon’s scent invaded Riley, an earthy mix with the faintest hint of some fragrant blossom. His green eyes were hooded and he poked his tongue out to brush his bottom lip, brushing against Riley’s lips in the process. He could feel Khalon’s hot breath against his skin and he was consumed by the need to kiss Khalon. All he had to do was lean in just a little. Would Khalon reject him again? Would he kiss Riley back? Riley had the urge to offer himself up as prey, to be devoured.

As if reading his thoughts, Khalon parted his lips. His pupils dilated and he angled his head slightly. He dropped his gaze to Riley’s lips, tightening his grip on Riley.

“Forgive me,” Khalon said gruffly.

“For what?” Riley’s voice came out almost whispered. His body felt hot, especially his face, and his fingers had somehow found their way to Khalon’s shoulders. Khalon’s body was hard against Riley’s, his warmth radiating off him. Riley’s heart pounded, his pulse raced, and a desire he’d never experienced before coursed through his body. What was happening to him? It wasn’t just attraction. It was as if his body needed Khalon’s touch the way his lungs needed air. Was it the mark? Was it making Riley *think* he needed Khalon? He was so freaking confused.

“I’m... not certain,” Khalon replied quietly.

Apparently Riley wasn’t the only one.

Confusion crossed Khalon’s handsome face and he gently put Riley down on his feet, though his hands remained on Riley’s waist. “Stay close.”

“Um, okay.” Was he blushing? *Oh God, please don't let me be blushing.*

Khalon cupped his cheek and Riley leaned into the touch before he could stop himself. “Stay close to me.”

Riley nodded. He wasn't quite sure what was going on. He felt... strange. Did Khalon feel the same? He looked a little unsettled. Riley dropped his gaze when he noticed Khalon's tattoo was moving. The bands were turning on his arm, some in opposite directions.

“Your arm.”

Khalon followed his gaze down to his arm. He pulled away from Riley as if he'd been burned.

“What's wrong?”

Khalon placed his hand over his arm as if he were trying to stop the movement or cover up his tattoo, neither of which was working. He shook his head. “It's nothing. We should keep going.” He turned and strode off, leaving Riley feeling... disappointed. Again.

Riley felt a tickling on his arm and he went to scratch the itch when he saw the bands on his arm moving. They spun around his arm, some in different directions, just as Khalon's had. He needed to get some answers, but he had a feeling he wouldn't be getting any from Khalon.

As they continued ahead, Riley waited for the right opportunity. Khalon seemed lost in his own thoughts and he was walking at a brisker pace than the rest of them. Riley took the opportunity to sidle up to Rayner.

“Hey, can I ask you a question?”

“Of course.”

“What does it mean when his tattoos start moving?”

Rayner looked startled by the question. “Why do you ask?”

“Well, when he caught me, we kind of ended up a little closer to each other than expected. When he put me down, I noticed his tattoo was moving, but when I asked, he said it was nothing.”

Whatever he said seemed to amuse Rayner greatly. He let out a laugh, his eyes twinkling with mischief. “Is that so?”

“Yeah, what's it mean?”

“It means he's made an emotional connection with you, one from the depths of his very soul.”

“Oh. Is that a good thing or a bad thing? Because you know, a lot of his emotional connections leave me thinking he's close to following through

with a physical connection of his fist to my face.”

Rayner threw his head back and laughed. He wrapped an arm around Riley’s shoulders. “You are something else, Riley.”

Ahead of them Khalon paused long enough to glare at them over his shoulder before grumbling something under his breath and marching off again.

“Tell me, Riley. Did your mark do the same?”

“Yeah, it did.” Riley stared at him. “Wait, are you saying my soul had an emotional connection with him?”

Rayner nodded. He lowered his head and spoke quietly to him as they walked. “I think you are each as stubborn as the other. I also think the priestess was not mistaken. You were marked as his mate for a reason. Before this adventure is through, we shall discover the purpose. I’m certain of it. His reaction proves it.”

Riley let out a heavy sigh as they started walking again. “I doubt it. It’s just the mark making him think we’re connected. The only reason he’s protecting me is to protect himself, not because he feels anything for me. Which is fine, I get it.” Rayner looked oddly surprised by Riley’s words.

“What makes you say such a thing?”

“Khalon told me the truth. If I get killed, it’ll leave him weak and vulnerable.” It had hurt to hear, but it was probably for the best.

“That is true, but there is far more to it than that. Did he not tell you?”

Riley frowned. “What are you talking about?”

Rayner glanced ahead at Khalon and seemed to think before coming to some kind of conclusion. He spoke quietly. “It is true. If Khalon does not lay claim to you or if you do not accept your position as prince, the demons will do their damndest to kill you, and when they do, Khalon will be left weak and vulnerable. They will slaughter him, and the rest of us will soon follow since we will be left weakened as well.”

“What?” Riley couldn’t believe what he was hearing. Khalon didn’t say anything about the Soldati being weakened too. Why wouldn’t he tell Riley?

“Why do you think there are so many of the damnable creatures everywhere? They know. With the Soldati gone, the human world would be overrun with demons. Your death would weaken us all.”

Riley’s heart hurt. Why would Khalon intentionally leave that part out? Why make himself sound like a selfish jerk? *To push you away.*

“If you were to accept your position as prince, and he were to claim you, the demons would no longer hunt you, but you would remain mortal, and in our realm, a human would never survive. Khalon would be forced to live out his immortal life without a prince.”

“What if I accepted my position to be his prince, but he doesn’t claim me?”

“If you were to be killed before he could claim you, he would not weaken, as you have accepted your position as Soldati prince and begun the claiming, but your soul would forever be in limbo, belonging neither to your world or ours, as you have pledged yourself to a mate, but have not been claimed.”

“Well, that sucks too.” So if he was claimed and became the Soldati prince, he wouldn’t be hunted, but was still mortal, and his death would mean Khalon lived his immortal life without a mate. If Riley didn’t accept his position as prince and Khalon didn’t claim him, and Riley were killed, Khalon and the others would be weakened, vulnerable, and be killed. If Riley accepted his position and was killed before he was claimed, Khalon wouldn’t be weakened, but Riley’s soul would be in limbo for eternity. For crying out loud! Was there any scenario where Riley didn’t end up dead or screwed?

“However, I believe that is not the worst of it.”

“God, it gets worse?” What was worse than getting killed and having his soul be in limbo for eternity? Or in Khalon’s case, getting killed along with the whole of his army? How could there be something worse?

Rayner stopped to face Riley, his voice laced with concern. “Think about it, Riley. He claims you and loses his heart to you. Despite what you may believe, Soldati kings are born to love deep. They give their hearts to one mate in their lifetime. We have lived for centuries and will continue to live for many, many more. How long does the average human live?”

Riley felt the sting in the back of his eyes. “If I’m lucky? Another fifty or sixty years or so. Maybe.”

“So you see, Khalon is not merely protecting his kingdom and your world; he’s protecting his heart. The thought of loving you so completely, only to lose you in such a short amount of time, is more than he can bear, and, I suspect, the true reason for his rejection.”

Riley’s chest felt tight. He’d been right. Khalon did feel something for him, more than just the connection of the mark. He was afraid to lose his

heart, and then of course the small detail of maybe losing his life and the lives of his soldiers. Light flashed before his eyes and Riley gasped. He heard Rayner scream for Khalon before something slammed into Riley's chest, leaving him gasping for air.

It was like he was drowning. He gulped in deep breaths but no air seemed to fill his lungs. Everything around him grew blindingly white before it vanished suddenly. Riley stood alone in the middle of the woods. The trees were on fire, black smoke blocking out the sun and a fog surrounding him on all sides. Ash rained from the sky and Riley dropped to his knees at the carnage around him. Soldati warriors in human and tiger forms lay scattered all around him. All of them dead. Tears rolled down Riley's cheeks as he pushed himself to his feet, walking through the heaps of dead warriors, their skin or fur matted with blood, their eyes vacant and expressions filled with horror. So much blood....

Riley turned, realizing the bodies had all fallen in a circle around him. His gaze fell on a body dressed in black and he shook his head.

"No. Please." He forced himself to move, breaking into a run. He dropped to his knees beside Khalon, a sob catching his throat at Khalon's lifeless body. Blood stained his mouth, his once-vibrant green eyes now pale. "How...?" How could this happen? If Riley was still alive, how could Khalon—*oh my God*.

Riley had been so preoccupied by his devastation, by Khalon's death, he hadn't noticed the hand Khalon clutched to his side. With his heart in his throat and his body shaking violently, Riley stared at the man lying on his stomach in the mud, face turned away from him. It couldn't be. He pushed himself to his feet and shakily moved around to the other side of the body, his hands going to his mouth to stifle a cry as he stared into his own lifeless eyes.

Riley was dead. He shook his head then looked around. That's why they were all dead.

"No." He choked on the bile rising in his throat. "It's not my fault." Tears blurred his vision as he stepped back quickly, tripping on something and falling onto the muddied ground. He turned to see what he'd tripped on and found it was Rayner, a sword through his chest pinning him to the ground. A cry tore from his chest.

"Riley!"

Riley gasped, rising swiftly to the surface and breaking through. There were hands on him and someone tried to hold him.

“Riley, it’s me. It’s Khalon.”

Riley threw his arms around Khalon, crushing himself against Khalon as he shook. Oh God. It wasn’t real. He pulled back and cupped Khalon’s face in his hands. He was beautiful and warm and *alive*. Riley smiled through his tears.

“We need to go to the temple. Now,” he said. “I need to go home.”

Khalon’s brows furrowed. “What? Riley, what—”

Riley shook his head. He couldn’t stay here any longer, couldn’t put everyone at risk. They needed to go. It broke his heart, but he pushed away from Khalon, his legs unsteady. When Khalon reached out, Riley threw a hand up to stop him.

“I’m fine. Please, let’s just go. We need to go.”

Khalon nodded and Riley silently thanked him. He walked ahead as Khalon let out a fierce roar. Seconds later, in the distance, and barely audible to his human hearing, the call was answered by several others. A white light beamed above his head, and he watched as the barrier melted away. As soon as it was gone, Riley took off into a run with Khalon and the others on his heels. The other Soldati were somewhere to the east, so Riley headed in that direction, cutting through the trees onto a wider path, running as fast as his legs would go, spurred on by the anguish tearing at his heart.

“Riley, wait!” Khalon called after him, the rest of his words lost on the wind.

Riley was too focused on getting to the temple to hear what Khalon said. They couldn’t be far. He had to get there as quickly as possible. When he said his good-byes, he would ask Khalon to send his apologies to Flora, Lasa, and Tinia for not saying good-bye and tell them he’d miss them. He probably shouldn’t be pushing himself so hard after what just happened, but this wasn’t his first vision. He remembered now. Remembered the first time he saw the horror. He couldn’t stick around and wait for it to come true. The sooner he was gone, the safer Khalon and the others would be.

Around them the forest plunged into silence. No birds, no rabbits, squirrels, or leaves rustling. Riley squinted as he tried to see past the trees and bushes into the dense forest. It was dark. Why was it so dark? It was still midafternoon.

“The path!” Khalon roared as he approached. “You were supposed to stick to the path!”

The shadows moved as one and Riley gasped, dread sweeping over him. It wasn't shadows, it was demons. And there were thousands of them. Oh God. He'd let his fear and emotions get the better of him and forgotten all about the damned path. How could he have been so stupid? He hadn't meant to run off blindly. He'd just wanted the pain to stop.

Riley skidded to a halt and the four Soldati formed a tight circle around him, hissing and baring their sharp fangs, their collective roars terrifying. Riley crouched down, his hand instinctively going to Khalon's fur. It wasn't difficult to differentiate Khalon from the others. He was much larger. Yet even if he hadn't been, Riley would've been able to pick Khalon out from among a hundred tigers. How he knew that was beyond him.

Khalon's whiskers twitched, and he flattened his ears against his head, but he didn't object to Riley's hand on his fur. A shrilling sound knifed Riley's ears and he covered them, his eyes going wide at the half-dozen demons boring into Riley with their empty eye sockets. These weren't like the others. They were fouler, fiercer. And they were going to kill him.

Chapter Ten

KHALON ROARED, his call echoing through the trees, a warning to the demons that he would tear each and every one of them apart if they dared lay a hand on Riley. He summoned the power within him, channeling it through his body, the heat spreading until a white glowing light emitted from his eyes and body. He had only to brush near a demon with his light and it would crumble to dust. With another fierce roar, he sounded the attack. His warriors drew from their own power, each one with a unique light force. They only had to keep the demons busy until more of his warriors arrived. Whatever happened to Riley, it was horrifying enough to send him speeding off without a second thought to where he was going or the danger he was running toward. The terror in his eyes was evidence enough Riley had another vision.

The four of them charged, slashing and leaping into the ocean of demons, all while maintaining a perimeter around Riley. Khalon would not allow them to hurt him. Perhaps the priestess had been mistaken, perhaps not. Whatever the reasons for her bringing Riley into his life, Khalon would not lose him at the hands of demons.

A wave of foul creatures gurgled up putrid poison, their stench irritating Khalon's nostrils and their screeching resounding through the forests around them. Their razor-sharp claws scraped at the earth as they crawled, scurried, and hobbled toward Riley. The dark demons were a particular worry.

"You have to give me something to fight with!" Riley shouted at Khalon.

Khalon hissed. No simple weapon could kill these demons. *Leave this to us*, Khalon said in his mind.

"Did you just telepathically talk to me?" Riley looked startled and Khalon would have rolled his eyes if he could. He swiped his claws at another demon, slaughtering it.

How else do you think we communicate while in this form?

Riley kept himself away from clawing demons, skirting their rotting limbs as they attempted to get nearer. A tide of demons rose, its shadow washing over Riley.

Rayner! Khalon sped toward Riley and skidded to a halt. He braced himself as Rayner leaped and bounded off Khalon's back to give himself the height needed to eradicate the wave of demons from its center, catching one of the dark demons with a twist of his body in midair. Rayner landed on his paws and they continued to extinguish the foul beasts.

Khalon was taken aback by Riley's resourcefulness. Despite his lack of weapons or power, he found ways to outmaneuver any approaching demons, at one point leading a hoard straight to Khalon for him to pounce on and destroy. Riley caught on fast, using himself as bait to lead the demons straight to their destruction. It was a risky maneuver but it worked. Demons weren't very bright and Riley made full use of this knowledge. Adira used a tree as leverage, soaring through the air and twisting to swipe at another dark demon, its companion narrowly missing her claws and hurtling toward Riley.

Behind you!

Riley didn't hesitate. He leaped out of the way, but not before the demon clawed at his arm.

Riley! Khalon swiftly dispatched of the foul creature and rushed over to Riley, who sat up in the grass. He sucked in a sharp breath as he held on to his arm. *Are you all right?*

"I'm fine. Just a scratch. It burns, though."

Let me see.

Riley held his arm out, his skin torn where the demon caught him. The small gash was quickly turning black around the edges. Khalon licked at it, the foul stench and burn enough to make his eyes water.

"What are you doing?"

Removing the poison. Hold still. Almost done. There.

"Thanks." Riley smiled and gave Khalon a scratch behind his ear, causing him to purr. Why the blasted hell was he purring at a time like this? Riley's eyes went wide, a shadow casting over them.

"Khalon!" Riley shoved Khalon off of him with a strength Khalon didn't know Riley possessed. Khalon went rolling. He jumped to his paws in time to see a demon slash at Riley, its claws catching him across his stomach and chest.

Riley! No!

Riley fell onto his back, spurting and coughing up blood, his hand covering his wounds as blood seeped through the shredded jerkin.

Oh Gods no. Khalon's fury rose from within his very depths as he stood over Riley's broken and bleeding body. It was a primal rage he had never felt before, one that threatened to tear him apart from the inside out unless released. Khalon's roar shook the trees. His fur bristled and he called upon his Soldati power to free the rage demanding vengeance. A bright white ring of lightning burst from him with a deafening boom. It swept through the forest all around them, consuming and obliterating any darkness in sight and beyond, its force knocking over trees and shooting leaves in all directions. The demons screeched pitifully before bursting into ashes. Khalon destroyed them all.

"Khalon."

Riley's soft whisper caught his ear and Khalon quickly returned to human form. He pulled Riley into his arms and ran a trembling hand over his head.

"Riley... I'm so sorry. I failed you. I promised you I would protect you, get you home, and I failed."

"I'm sorry I couldn't be stronger for you. You deserve your warrior prince."

Riley's words splintered Khalon's heart. "Don't say such things. You are strong, Riley. Strong and brave and kind." How could Khalon have been so blind?

Riley smiled up at him, a tear running down his cheek. "Thank you. I just... want you to know that I was happy, happier than I've been in a really long time. You didn't ask for this, yet you gave me so much."

Riley gasped for breath and Khalon gently shushed him. There was so much blood, and the demon poison would have spread too deep and too quickly for Ezra to stop with his healing. What good was all his kingly power if he couldn't save one human? No, not merely a human.

His prince.

Why did he fight so hard against what was right in front of him, what his heart had been trying desperately to tell him?

"You must rest," Khalon said, placing a kiss to Riley's cheek. He held him close and let his head rest against Riley's. Soon he would be at peace. There would be no more roguish smiles or heartfelt laughter. No wonder

coming from his captivating eyes and beautiful face. There was so much Khalon could have shown Riley. "Forgive me for my arrogance. You are far from frail. You are every bit worthy of the Soldati. If there is any unworthiness here, it is mine."

Riley nuzzled his face against Khalon's, his hand on Khalon's chest. "There's nothing to forgive. I would've liked to spend more time with you." Riley's face grew ashen, his lips darkening. Khalon had been drawn to those lips not long ago when he held Riley in his arms. He'd cherish their stolen kisses for however long he had. His heart chastised him, telling him he was a fool for pushing Riley away. Their fate had been forged since the beginning. Khalon had waited centuries, and now his arrogance had robbed him of the chance at a life with Riley, no matter how short. Wasn't a few years of bliss with his human prince worth more than an eternity without him?

"I..." A tear rolled down Riley's cheek. "I accept my position as Soldati prince."

Khalon's eyes widened and his heart splintered. "Riley, no!" He kneeled there, motionless and aghast by what Riley had just done. How did he know?

A shaky smile spread onto Riley's face. "I'm sorry, but I can't let them kill you, any of you, because of me. It's the only way."

Tears blurred Khalon's vision. "Riley, what have you done? Your soul...."

"I know," Riley murmured. "It's worth it."

How could Riley subject his soul to an eternity of nothingness? Why? Riley's sacrifice spoke to the magnitude of his courage. Not wasting what little time remained, Khalon placed his lips to Riley's, though their previous warmth faded quickly and Riley went limp in his arms.

"No, please," Khalon whispered, his face buried in Riley's neck. "Please don't go."

As Riley departed from their world, so did Khalon's strength. The warm white light in his soul dimmed at the loss of his mate, as did his power. It would return shortly once the goddess of the dead, Thalna, claimed Riley's soul. Khalon had brought this upon them. In his damnable arrogance, he had sentenced Riley's beautiful, kind soul to limbo. "Forgive me." If only Riley could hear him, forgive him despite Khalon knowing he would never forgive himself for what he'd done.

Rayner crouched down beside Khalon and wrapped his arm around him, his voice breaking with sorrow. "I failed you."

"No." Khalon shook his head, his body wracked with shivers as the last of his Soldati strength left him. "*I failed him.*"

"Khalon King of the Soldati, why does your heart weep for this mortal man?"

Khalon's head shot up. "Priestess."

The priestess neared, her bare feet leaving trails of tiny flowers in the grass as she walked. Her dark skin was smooth as silk, her long midnight tresses untamed. Her golden eyes sparkled like the stars and her beauty was unrivaled by any other. She stopped beside him, reaching down to wipe his tearstained cheek with her thumb.

"I allowed my self-importance to blind me, and my mate has paid the price with his life."

"You believe the mark was placed in error. His soul will be claimed by the goddess Thalna and your strength returned. You shall be gifted another mate, one who is not unsuitable to a Soldati king."

"He's *not* unsuitable," Khalon growled, then recalled to whom he was speaking. "I beg forgiveness." He drew a deep breath and released it slowly. Calming himself, he continued. "It's true, he is a human and perhaps not as strong as I, but that does not mean he is weak or unsuitable as a Soldati prince. He is strong of heart, courageous, and, heaven help me, as willful as any other I have known. He did not deserve this death. This is all my doing. Had I not passed unwarranted judgment upon him, he would still live." He lowered his head, wishing he could do something so the goddess would take his prince to the veil beyond and not leave his radiant soul to wander in the darkness of limbo. Riley deserved to bask in a light equal to his own.

The priestess cupped his cheek and raised his head. He was taken aback by her warm smile. "Khalon King, there is purpose in all I do. What would you sacrifice to have your prince returned to you?"

Khalon stared at her. "You would return him to me?" Was it too much to hope for?

"For a price."

Khalon didn't hesitate. "Anything."

"Your Majesty," Adira interrupted cautiously. "Forgive me, but you must think about what you are saying. The loss is regrettable. Riley was

most certainly a noble man, but you are our king. What if the price is too great?"

Khalon swallowed hard. Adira was right. He had a responsibility bigger than himself, and he had known Riley for such a short time. Yet as he brushed Riley's hair from his brow, his long lashes resting against his pale cheeks, Khalon's heart spoke a truth he had attempted so callously to bury.

"He *is* my prince." Khalon gave the priestess a decisive nod. "Do what you must, but please, return him to me."

The priestess stood and stepped back. She raised her arms, her eyes glowing white. "You shall have your Soldati prince, Khalon King, as was intended."

A fierce wind swept through the trees, rushing out to surround Khalon and Riley, the noise drowning out the concerned cries from his friends. Khalon held Riley tight against him, watching as Riley's body illuminated from within. The Soldati markings around Khalon's arms moved and shifted while Riley's marks grew. What began as a few bands now traveled up his arm in a pattern matching Khalon's own markings. The color returned to Riley's skin and Khalon felt his strength returning to him, along with his power.

Riley arched his back violently, opening his mouth as the white light burst free, disappearing into the sky high above them. With a groan his prince blinked his eyes open, and Khalon noted the gold spreading from the center of Riley's irises until his eyes turned bright amber. A lock of hair on his brow darkened to pitch black.

"Riley?"

"What... what happened?" Riley frowned before turning his face to the priestess and giving a start. He clung to Khalon, making him smile. How good it was to have Riley in his arms so full of life again.

"It's all right, Riley. May I present the great priestess."

The priestess smiled kindly. "Welcome, Soldati prince."

Riley looked puzzled. "I don't understand. I... died. Didn't I?"

"Your king has made a great sacrifice to have you returned to him. I have granted you life and your true form. That of immortal Soldati."

Riley's eyes widened. "You mean like a tiger-shifting Soldati?" His jaw went slack. "Wait, did you say *immortal*?"

The priestess laughed softly. "You were always a Soldati, young Riley. Your true form would have been revealed once your king claimed you. I simply sped up the process. All that you have been, what you will become, shall be revealed to you in time. This is your destiny, Riley Murrough."

Riley's troubled gaze landed on Khalon. "What did you sacrifice?"

They all turned their attention to the priestess who addressed Khalon, her tone gentle and void of ill will.

"A Soldati King must never deem himself worthier than those whom he protects. Your arrogance and pride have led you to this. Yet you are of kind heart and have ruled your kingdom with fairness and goodness. Your sacrifice is thus, Khalon King. Every full moon you shall live your life as a mortal man, unable to shift and susceptible to wounds, pain, and the frailty you so feared."

"What?" Rayner shook his head in disbelief. "But—"

"I accept," Khalon stated firmly.

"Your Majesty, if the demons were to discover this—" Adira began, her protest cut short when Khalon held up a hand for silence. He bowed his head to the priestess.

"Thank you for your kindness and mercy. I shall do everything within my power to be worthy of you and those I have been blessed to share my life with."

The priestess put a hand to his head. "I know you will."

With that she disappeared, leaving behind the scent of blossoms and a night sky filled with dazzling stars. Each full moon would leave him vulnerable as never before, but that hardly meant he would be weak. He would simply need to exercise caution on those days. Besides, he had his warrior heart and his prince to guide him as he discovered his human strength.

Khalon stood, bringing Riley up with him. Taking hold of his hand, he pressed it to his lips for a kiss. His happiness bubbled up and he threw his arms around Riley, lifting him off his feet as he hugged him. Riley's laughter was a blessing and the most wonderful sound Khalon had ever heard. He placed Riley back on his feet and smiled lovingly at him. Near him his warriors lowered themselves on bended knee and placed their fists over their hearts. The four of them spoke in unison.

"We honor you, Prince Riley Murrough of the Soldati, and eternally pledge our blades, our hearts, and our fidelity to you."

Riley swallowed hard. “Thank you.” He moved his bright amber eyes back to Khalon. “I’m sorry. I don’t know what to do.”

Khalon kissed his cheek, Riley’s scent filling his senses. His desire and call to claim Riley threatened to overwhelm him, but he maintained a firm grip. Now was not the time. “Let us return home. There is much to discuss.” Riley appeared uncertain. “What troubles you? If you fear leaving your former life behind, know you are free to visit the human world whenever you wish. You are my mate, Riley, not my prisoner.” Was it possible...? Khalon swallowed hard and forced himself to speak the words. “If your happiness lies elsewhere and not at my side, I will honor your wish. You have only to speak it.”

Riley stood on his toes and kissed Khalon, the taste of him awakening something deep inside him. He pulled Riley against him, deepening their kiss as the fire spread through them. Khalon could feel the heat coursing through Riley, whose desire for Khalon, his need, was as fierce as Khalon’s, answering any misgivings Khalon possessed on whether Riley wished to remain at his side as his mate. Riley’s soft moan sent a shiver through Khalon and he slipped his knee between Riley’s legs, pressing up against Riley’s hardening length.

A distinct clearing of the throat brought their passion to a screeching halt. Khalon pulled abruptly away, his face heated and undoubtedly as red as it felt. “I, um, forgive me,” he said, sounding breathless. Goddess above, what was the matter with him? Behaving like some fledgling Soldati.

Rayner gave him a wicked look. “Perhaps we should return to the castle. We’ll sneak you in the servants’ entrance so that you might make it to your bedchamber without incident.”

“Rayner!” Khalon scolded, his face going up in flames. Beside him Riley groaned and buried his face in Khalon’s jerkin as the others giggled like children.

“Do you wish to get on with your *discussion* in private without the realm seeking to celebrate the union of you and your prince?” Rayner asked innocently, his intent anything but. “Or shall we announce your arrival and begin the festivities? It will be at least a week before you get to any... *discussing*. And then there’s the coronation, the reception, the—”

“I get it,” Khalon huffed. “Stop discussing our”—he made finger quotes—“discussion.”

Rayner threw his head back and laughed. He turned and walked off to the sounds of Khalon cursing him. Adira and Ezra followed, chortling along. Khalon turned to Riley, who looked up at him with a bright smile.

“I think I’m going to like it here.”

Chapter Eleven

RILEY WAS wrong. He didn't like it here. He *loved* it.

Riley arched his back and let out a low moan. It was taking everything he had to keep himself in control. With his newfound strength and power, he had no idea what could happen if he wasn't careful. Unfortunately control was difficult with Khalon's hard naked body pressing him into the mattress. Not that Riley was complaining.

"I find those little sounds you make very pleasing," Khalon purred before trailing kisses up Riley's torso. He roamed his strong hands over Riley's body, over his stomach, down his thighs, and in between his legs. Khalon took his sweet time as he explored every curve, every patch of skin, as if he were mapping Riley, committing every inch of him to memory. With every touch he followed up with a taste, then a kiss. It was driving Riley absolutely crazy.

Riley had no idea what came next. They somehow managed to sneak into the castle, but not without some sleight of hand from Rayner and the others. Apparently the whole realm wanted to meet its new Soldati prince. As much as Riley wanted to oblige, neither he nor Khalon could stand to wait any longer. Every second Khalon didn't lay claim to Riley became torturous. Their bodies were drawn to each other, a magnetic pull that caused Riley's body to physically ache with his need to have Khalon inside him. It was kind of scary.

"Are you sure this is what you want? That *I'm* what you want?" Riley asked, his toes curling and his breath hitching when Khalon found Riley's entrance with a lubed finger. "I know the priestess said this is who I really am, that I've always been a Soldati prince, but I don't feel all that different. I mean, I feel stronger and there's this weird, pulsing, warm glow inside me that I can't explain, but I'm still *me*."

"And I would not wish you to be any different." Khalon nipped at Riley's neck. "We shall face this new adventure together, guiding each other. I know you might be"—he pushed a finger inside Riley, causing him to cry out in surprise—"overwhelmed."

“Bastard,” Riley huffed.

Khalon chuckled and continued to stretch Riley. “But all will be well. I will be here with you at your side. Once I have claimed you, our bond will grow stronger. More of your true self will be revealed. Whatever happens”—Khalon’s tone softened and he placed a kiss to Riley’s lips —“we are one.”

Riley slipped his arms around Khalon’s neck, unable to believe this was all happening. Yet somehow it felt right. He had no idea what being a Soldati prince entailed, but he trusted Khalon. With a shuddered sigh, Riley closed his eyes and gave himself over, spreading his knees farther apart. Khalon settled in between them and lined himself up. Riley braced himself. He slipped his fingers down to Khalon’s shoulders and held on tight as Khalon stretched him. He dug his fingers into his lover’s skin. For all of Khalon’s strength and ferocity, he was also very gentle. Soon the pain and burn gave way to sweet pleasure and Riley groaned, a soft gasp escaping him as Khalon began to move.

“Khalon....”

“I love the sound of my name falling from your lips,” Khalon murmured, taking hold of Riley’s wrist. He brought it to his lips for a kiss before moving it to the bed and lacing their fingers together. He lowered himself carefully and Riley moved his other hand to the bed so Khalon could take hold of that one as well. “You’re so beautiful.”

Riley looked away, embarrassed. “I’m not.”

“You are, and I will spend my immortal life showing you how beautiful and good you are. The Soldati Realm is fortunate to have you, Riley, as am I.”

Had this happened back home, Riley would have thought he’d gone crazy. It was too soon to feel this strongly about the man in his arms, yet it felt as if Khalon had always been with him. If the mark had been with Riley since birth, simply hidden, then what about his connection to Khalon?

“My prince?”

“Yeah?” Riley looked up at Khalon and the amusement evident in his sparkling green eyes.

“You are thinking far too much. Close your eyes and give yourself to me.” The low husky order sent a shiver up Riley’s spine and he nodded, allowing himself to think of nothing but Khalon and the slow deep thrusts that had Riley gasping for breath.

Riley's brow beaded with sweat, his skin was hot and flushed as Khalon's movements became a little quicker, his breath more ragged. It was clear he was trying his best to go slow. Riley wrapped his legs around Khalon's waist, his voice hushed in Khalon's ear.

"Give yourself to me."

Khalon smiled, a sexy crooked grin that went straight to Riley's painfully hard dick. He pulled out of Riley and got on his knees. He twirled his finger and Riley did as he was asked. He turned onto his stomach and got on his knees, his head on the pillow. Riley expected Khalon to plunge inside him. Instead Riley let out a surprised gasp when Khalon began making a meal out of him. He cursed under his breath and grabbed fistfuls of the bedsheet. Moving one hand to his dick, he stroked himself, his moans and cursing seeming to urge Khalon on. Khalon soon replaced his mouth with his thick, hard length and Riley groaned as Khalon pushed himself in deep.

"Please." Riley wasn't above begging. He needed to feel Khalon's release. Needed to feel Khalon claim all of him.

"Are you ready?" Khalon asked. Riley nodded. In order for the claim to be complete, they would have to fully give themselves to each other. Heart, body, and soul, united through Khalon's Soldati blood.

Khalon gave Riley what he wanted, driving himself into Riley with deep, powerful thrusts that made the bed tremble beneath them. He dug his fingers into Riley's flesh and the sound of skin slapping against skin was glorious. Riley kept up with Khalon's pace, moving his hand faster as Khalon's thrusts began to lose their rhythm. The bands on Riley's arms spun furiously as the patterns of his markings danced and shifted.

Khalon folded himself over Riley, changing his angle and biting down on the flesh between Riley's neck and shoulder. A blinding pain shot through Riley and he couldn't help the strangled cry that tore from him as Khalon's fangs pierced his skin, sinking into him, and transferring his blood into Riley. The searing heat caused by Khalon's blood seeping into him lasted mere seconds. Riley's orgasm exploded through him and the white light inside him flared out through his body, igniting the room like a lightning strike. He came hard, his limbs shaking from the force of his release and the knowledge he had been claimed. Khalon soon followed, his heat filling Riley as his fangs retreated, his cry drowned out by the roar of his inner light being released into the room, the thunderous sound fading

only when Khalon collapsed onto the bed beside Riley. The white light in the room faded until only the warm glow of the wall sconces remained.

Riley turned with a satiated smile, and snuggled up close to Khalon when he remembered the bite. Gingerly he placed his fingers to his shoulder, stunned to find the wound already healed. Khalon wrapped his strong arms around Riley, kissing his lips before they were both forced to come up for air. Riley smiled up at Khalon.

“Wow. That was... impressive.”

Khalon chuckled. “It was rather exhilarating wasn’t it?” He planted a kiss on the tip of Riley’s nose. “My prince has quite a wicked streak.”

“Admit it, you like that about me.” Riley nipped at Khalon’s jaw, loving the low growl Khalon released.

With a playful roar, Khalon grabbed hold of Riley and rolled him onto his back. He nipped at Riley’s neck before moving his lips onto Riley’s for a long, deep kiss. When he pulled back, he smiled warmly down at him.

“There is much to like, my prince. You’ve been in my life for such a short time, yet you’ve changed it so much.”

“So what happens now?”

“Now you search your heart. I have claimed my prince, and in return, you have laid claim to my heart. Close your eyes and listen.”

Riley did as he was asked. He wasn’t sure what he was listening out for, but he listened. He could hear the water flowing in a nearby fountain somewhere outside the bedroom window in the garden below. Birds chirped and crickets came out to play now that nightfall had come. All of Riley’s senses were heightened and he felt *everything*. From the gentle breeze against his skin as it drifted in past the curtains to Khalon’s heart beating in his chest. He could feel the white light inside Khalon, his soul. They were connected. Whatever Khalon felt, Riley felt. *Wait. Does that mean...* Riley’s eyes flew open.

“Can you feel me? I mean, if something happens to me, can you feel it?”

Khalon placed Riley’s hand to his lips for a kiss. “We are one.” Khalon took Riley’s finger and he watched, mesmerized, as Khalon put the tip to one of his now-elongated sharp fangs. Gently he pushed Riley’s finger until he drew blood, causing Riley to suck in a sharp breath at the same moment Khalon winced. “We are connected. Your pain becomes my pain. My pain becomes yours.”

Riley worried his bottom lip. "What if I'm not strong enough? I don't want you to feel pain because I can't handle it."

"Fear not, my prince. I shall train you, show you the ways of the Soldati." He brought his hand to Riley's heart. "Great strength lies in you. We've only to bring it to the surface."

God, Riley hoped Khalon was right. A thought occurred to him and he scrambled out of bed.

"Can you show me?"

Khalon sat up and chuckled. "You would like to shift?"

"Yes!" Riley was so excited he was practically bouncing.

Khalon laughed as he got out of bed. He grabbed Riley's pants and tossed them at him. Quickly Riley pulled them on as Khalon stepped into his own black trousers. He held his hand out to Riley. "Come. Shifting is for outdoors."

Riley took his hand and they sneaked out of what was now his and Khalon's bedchamber. They hurried down the stone corridor awash in the warm glow of wall sconces until they reached a heavy arched doorway that led to a winding stone staircase. On the other side of a set of heavy doors, they stepped into the night and a huge gorgeous garden. Khalon released his hand and took a few steps away.

"Now shift."

Riley arched an eyebrow at him. "If I knew how, I wouldn't be asking."

"Riley, you are thinking as a human. Simply tell yourself you wish to change and you will."

It couldn't be that easy, could it? "Okay." Riley thought it, and next thing he knew, he was flopping onto his side, willing his huge paws to cooperate.

I'm a tiger!

And a stunning one at that. Look at your golden fur. Khalon nuzzled his head against Riley's. *You are the most beautiful creature I have ever laid eyes on. The kingdom will be enchanted with you. You are the only one of your kind.*

There are no golden tigers in the Soldati kingdom?

Only you. You are indeed our prince.

Riley had never felt more exhilarated in his life, or more unbalanced. Why wouldn't his paws do as they were asked? Damn furry things.

Wrinkling his nose, he tried something else. He extended his claws and opened his mouth to express his pleasure at doing something right, except a happy chuff came out instead of words. Right. No outside voice. Turning his head, he eyed his butt and the long heavy tail attached to it. He noticed his coloring. He was more gold than orange.

This is so weird.

Khalon's soft laugh was clear in Riley's head. *You'll grow accustomed to it.*

Strange didn't begin to cover it. But the more Riley did it, the easier it became. All he had to do was will it, and it happened. Of course changing was one thing; getting his new body to do what he wanted was something else altogether. It was like learning to walk for the first time.

Khalon shifted back into his human form and Riley willed his body to shift his body mass and bones, morphing back into his human self. Khalon reached down and helped him to his feet, pulling a little harder than intended so Riley ended up against him. A wicked smile came onto Khalon's lips and Riley's stomach filled with butterflies. He leaned in and nipped at Riley's bare shoulder.

"I look forward to claiming you each and every night, my prince. Every night, every day...." He placed a kiss to Riley's neck, sending a shiver through him. "In my study. In the gardens." He walked Riley toward the castle, caressing Riley's skin.

"I look forward to being claimed," Riley murmured before he ran his tongue up Khalon's jaw, allowing himself to be led back inside and up the stairs.

In the bedroom Khalon lifted him off his feet, making him laugh. He dropped Riley onto the bed and climbed over him, kissing him passionately.

A huge glowing orb caught Riley's attention and he pulled his mouth from Khalon's. "Um, Khalon? There's a gold orb thing floating behind you."

Khalon cursed under his breath and turned. That couldn't be good.

"What is it?"

"It's the Eye." Khalon released a heavy sigh. "It sees all. It also informs us of demons slipping into the human world."

Riley stared at the strange orb. "So it's kind of like an alarm system?"

"A little more complex than that, but yes. It informs us when humans are in danger and lets us know where the attack will take place. It's how we

found you.”

“So what now?”

“Now—” Khalon got up and stretched his long, muscular body much like the tiger dormant inside him. “I’m afraid I must leave you.” He kissed Riley’s lips before heading for the wardrobe.

“Leave? Wait, you’re going after those things?” Riley climbed out of bed and grabbed his shirt off the floor, quickly slipping into it.

“That is what we do, Riley. We protect against the demons.” Khalon opened his wardrobe and began removing clothes from it.

“Then I’m coming with you.”

“No.” Khalon tossed his clothes onto the chair and crossed the room to draw Riley into his arms. “You have yet to grow accustomed to your new Soldati body. Your limbs are still uncooperative and your focus undisciplined. Please, I cannot allow you to face this danger until you are ready. It could be perilous for the both of us. You know I speak the truth.”

Riley wrinkled his nose. Khalon was right. Didn’t mean he had to like it, though. Was he supposed to just sit here while Khalon faced those foul things without him? They’d only just gotten each other back. He wanted desperately to help but he didn’t want to put anyone in danger, which was what would happen if Khalon had to be worrying about his safety while trying to take down a bunch of demons.

“Stay here,” Khalon said softly, delivering a feathery kiss to Riley’s temple. “Explore the castle, get to know the court. I will assign guards to accompany you.”

“Can Toka come with me?”

Khalon looked surprised by the request. “If it would please you.”

“I like talking to him.” He also had a feeling Toka knew what it felt like to watch someone he cared about walk off to battle.

Khalon’s smile reached his eyes. “Then all the more. Now dress. I would like for you to see me off.”

Riley nodded. He quickly got dressed in his princely garb, which was another thing that would take getting used to. It was a lot more leather than he usually—ever—wore. He finished lacing up his boots, then took Khalon’s hand. He paused at the door long enough to take a deep steady breath.

“They will love you. Simply be yourself.” Khalon kissed his cheek and they left the room.

As they walked hand in hand down the castle corridor, everyone bowed as they walked by. It was the strangest thing. Usually when Riley walked down the street it was like he was invisible. There were times when he'd had so many people bump into him he felt like a bumper car at the fair. Now everyone bowed and addressed him as His Highness. They looked at him like he was some kind of rare and mythical creature.

Outside the front gate, Rayner, Adira, and Ezra waited along with what seemed like everyone on the castle grounds. Khalon's warriors all knelt the moment they saw Riley. With a proud smile, Khalon turned to Riley and pulled him close. He leaned in to whisper in his ear.

"They care greatly for you, as do I." He wrapped an arm around Riley, a wicked smile on his face before he kissed Riley to the sounds of cheers and catcalls. When Riley was all but out of breath, Khalon pulled away. "A little something to keep me in your thoughts until I return."

"Bastard," Riley said through a shaky laugh, the rest of the crowd joining him. He put his hand to Khalon's cheek, telling himself he'd be joining Khalon soon enough. "Be safe."

Khalon turned his face to kiss Riley's palm. "I shall." With a wink he turned and motioned for his warriors to follow. With a wave of his hand, Khalon stepped forward and disappeared, the others swiftly following.

Riley inhaled sharply at the sudden sense of loss. He put his hand to his heart and rubbed at his chest. He didn't like that feeling one bit. Toka stepped up beside him and Riley spoke so only Toka would hear him. "Does it ever stop feeling so horrible?"

Toka shook his head sadly, his eyes on the spot where Rayner had disappeared. "He takes my heart with him every time he goes off to battle, leaving me hollow until his return."

Maybe when Khalon returned, Riley would talk to him about Rayner and Toka. If Khalon was willing to accept being with a human, maybe he wouldn't be so against a Soldati being with a servant.

As Riley stood there, the breeze sweeping through his hair and before him a magical realm he wouldn't have been able to conjure up even in the greatest depths of his imagination, he felt a warm, loving glow spread through him. His arm itched and he looked down at it, smiling when the bands and the patterns of his mark began to move.

"He's thinking of you," Toka said with a warm smile.

Riley's heart swelled and he hoped Khalon could feel Riley thinking about him as well. He turned to face his people, all of whom had waited centuries for his arrival. Riley had no intention of letting them or Khalon down. There was so much to do and get used to. There was his warrior training, his tiger training, and a coronation to prepare for, not to mention finding a way to tell his mom about his new boyfriend/mate without the whole moving to another realm to live as a tiger shifter prince part. That should prove interesting.

His life as barista Riley Murrough might be over, but his life as Prince of the Soldati was just beginning. With a confident stride and a wide smile, Riley headed toward the castle's main doors and the beginning of his new life. It looked like he had finally found his calling. Who knew it would be as a warrior prince? For the first time in his life, he felt like he belonged. This was who he was meant to be, and he was going to rock it.

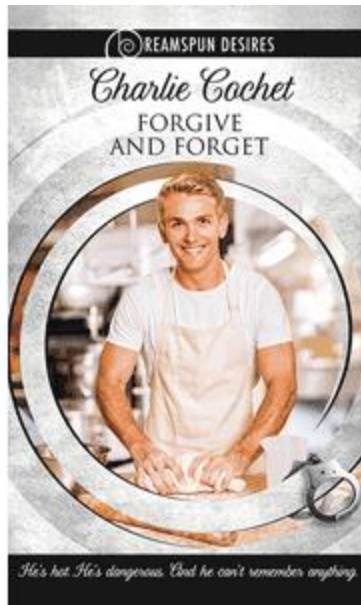
More from Charlie Cochet



For the last six months, Detective James Ralston has worked the nightshift as security for the Pacific Blue Hotel, and every night at 2 a.m. his rounds lead him to the radio room where the handsome and mysterious Franklin Fairchild sits listening to waltzes as old as the hotel itself. James is drawn to Franklin, but Franklin is a man at the end of his rope, and James has no intention of getting caught up in whatever trouble Franklin is in. A heated encounter late one night sends James down a disturbing path and has him questioning everything around him, including his very sanity.



Julian “Quinn” Quintero, a gruff, tough Miami SWAT officer, has been injured on the job, and all he’s looking for is a little peace and quiet to recover—difficult to achieve with his large Cuban family. An adventure in picking up his prescriptions puts him in the path of his geeky, brownie-baking neighbor, Spencer Morgan. Spencer sweeps into Quinn’s life like a tropical storm of sunshine and rainbows. Not surprisingly, it’s chaos at first sight. Quinn’s in need of a little tender loving care, and Spencer decides he’s just the man for the job. Their very different lives might clash, but they might also find some common ground—and maybe more.



He's hot. He's dangerous. And he can't remember anything.

As the owner of Apple'n Pies, Joe Applin leads a quiet, uneventful life, content to spend his days serving customers who come from all over to eat his delicious homemade pies. Along with his motley crew—Bea, Elsie, and Donnie—Joe couldn't be happier in his little kingdom of baked goods and java.

Experience has taught Joe that love is overrated—and at times dangerous. He has no intention of repeating past mistakes. But then he meets a mysterious, handsome man with amnesia, and Joe can't deny something sweet is in the works. He isn't one to take risks, not with his heart and certainly not with his life, but the more time he spends with the man he knows as Tom, the closer he is to losing both.



Enthusiastic, play-it-safe Kelly Sutton is an American intern at the Photonic Royal Society in New London. He's been working on Project Mars for over a year, a mission kept so secret by the society even Kelly doesn't know exactly what it is. What Kelly does know is his contribution to the task will benefit mankind, and that's enough for him.

Kelly's world turns upside down when concerns over his mentor's behavior lead Kelly to investigate and stumble upon a wicked truth. What is supposed to be a project to advance human life turns out to be an endeavor capable of mass destruction. The terrifying reality forces Kelly to choose between looking the other way to keep his job, as he's always done, or risking his career and even his life to do the right thing by saving the man who's captured his heart.



THIRDS: Book One

When homicide detective Dexter J. Daley's testimony helps send his partner away for murder, the consequences—and the media frenzy—aren't far behind. He soon finds himself sans boyfriend, sans friends, and, after an unpleasant encounter in a parking garage after the trial, he's lucky he doesn't find himself sans teeth. Dex fears he'll get transferred from the Human Police Force's Sixth Precinct, or worse, get dismissed. Instead, his adoptive father—a sergeant at the Therian-Human Intelligence Recon Defense Squadron otherwise known as the THIRDS—pulls a few strings, and Dex gets recruited as a Defense Agent.

Dex is determined to get his life back on track and eager to get started in his new job. But his first meeting with Team Leader Sloane Brodie, who also happens to be his new jaguar Therian partner, turns disastrous. When the team is called to investigate the murders of three HumanTherian activists, it soon becomes clear to Dex that getting his partner and the rest of the tightknit team to accept him will be a lot harder than catching the killer—and every bit as dangerous.

CHARLIE COCHET is an author by day and artist by night. Always quick to succumb to the whispers of her wayward muse, no star is out of reach when following her passion. From adventurous agents and sexy shifters to society gentlemen and hardboiled detectives, there's bound to be plenty of mischief for her heroes to find themselves in—and plenty of romance, too!

Currently residing in Central Florida, Charlie is at the beck and call of a rascally Doxiepoo bent on world domination. When she isn't writing, she can usually be found reading, drawing, or watching movies. She runs on coffee, thrives on music, and loves to hear from readers.

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