



SOLDATI  
HEARTS

THE  
SOLDATI  
GENERAL

SOLDATI HEARTS THREE

CHARLIE COCHET

# THE SOLDATI GENERAL

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SOLDATI HEARTS BOOK 3

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## **The Soldati General**

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## SYNOPSIS



*A powerful, yet awkward, Soldati healer. A retired Orso general. A plot to kill the king. A secret that could destroy them all.*

The Summer Solstice Festival has arrived in the Soldati realm, and guests from all over flood the kingdom to join the festivities. But the excitement is shadowed by rumors of an Orso plot to kill the king. Now Ezra and the Soldati council must protect Khalon's secret—and stop a conspiracy that could destroy the Soldati and the human world they protect.

As Ezra and General Segreti explore their growing affection, a dangerous game begins, but are they the pawns or the players? Can their hearts survive the final checkmate?

# CHAPTER ONE



“I CAN’T BELIEVE you’re going through with this.”

Ezra sat in quiet observation as his prince paced the study. He hadn’t seen His Highness so unsettled, but then Riley Murrough had been human once and quite prone to fretting. It took time for Riley to grow into his role as the Soldati Prince, but once he’d embraced it—truly accepted his destiny—it became apparent to all that the young man would be as great a ruler as their king. Riley was a kindhearted soul, yet fierce when the occasion called for it. Ezra understood why his prince was upset. Riley had lost his heart to his mate quite some time ago.

“My love, this is your first Soldati Summer Solstice Festival,” Khalon replied, rounding his desk to step before Riley and halting his pacing. He pulled Riley into his arms and lifted his chin so their eyes could meet. “I want you to enjoy yourself.”

Riley let out a huff. “How can I enjoy myself when it’ll be the full moon?”

Khalon’s expression softened, and Ezra frowned down at the open letters on his lap. He hadn’t been able to concentrate on a single word since Riley interrupted his council with Khalon, upset that Khalon had not cancelled the festivities, which were due to start in less than a week’s time. Royal guests would arrive as early as this evening.

Logically, Riley’s argument was sound. Every full moon, Khalon lived as a mortal man, unable to shift into his great

Soldati tiger form, making him susceptible to wounds, pain, and human frailty. This was the price he paid to have Riley returned to him by the great priestess after Riley sacrificed himself for Khalon and the Soldati. As it happened, this year's Soldati Summer Solstice Festival fell on such a full moon, meaning the castle grounds and their kingdom would be filled with all manner of creatures from various realms. This in turn made Khalon's argument sound, as he now reminded his prince.

"This festival is more than a few days of revelries. Not only is it part of our heritage, but it's important to our citizens. It allows them the opportunity to spend time with their monarchy and those who protect their world, to feel connected to the Soldati and rejoice with us. It invites them to celebrate our realm and all it has accomplished. It's also the largest festival of the year. The villagers count on it to sell their goods."

"I get that," Riley said. "But you have enemies out there, waiting for the perfect opportunity to pounce. Queen Verity confirmed it. There are Orso hidden within her kingdom who are still secretly loyal to that bastard Pavoni."

"Love, you know I'm well aware of this threat. We suspected as much after Pavoni's death, remember? Which is why Queen Verity allowed our spies to roam her kingdom in search of these traitors."

"Yes, but they still haven't all been found."

"They will be," Khalon assured him. "Besides, you are Saugur. Should our lives be in danger, you'll be the first to know."

Khalon spoke the truth. Riley was not only a Soldati prince, but the only living Saugur—a Soldati prophet, a rarity among their kind. Any threat to their realm or the human world they kept safe from demons would be seen by Riley.

"Trust in me." Khalon placed a kiss on Riley's brow. "I'd never allow any harm to befall you." He brushed his lips over Riley's. "I love you, and I'll do everything in my power to protect what we've built together."



“I love you too,” Riley murmured, wrapping his arms around Khalon’s neck. “And I trust you.”

The two kissed in a passionate embrace, their love for each other evident in their growing desire. Ezra dropped his gaze to the letters in his hand. Outside of Rayner and his foxling mate, Ezra had never seen mates possess such need for each other. He wasn’t quite sure what to do with it. Having a mate was something he did his best not to think about. No sense wasting precious time on something he was not destined for. As far as Soldati went, Ezra was considered somewhat of a paradox, and he’d resigned himself to an immortal life without a mate. Not that he’d ever secretly desired one. He was far too scholarly for such fairy tales.

This had to be the longest kiss in the history of kisses. Were they even breathing? They had yet to come up for air. Oh dear. Now they were moaning. It wasn’t his place to leave without being dismissed by his king, but his king seemed to have forgotten he was in the room. Ezra coughed lightly into his fist, and the two gave a start.

“Holy shi—pwreck.” Riley gave a breathy laugh. “I forgot you were there. No offense.”

“None taken,” Ezra replied, smiling warmly at his flustered prince.

“Forgive me.” Khalon smoothed down the front of his tunic as he quickly stepped behind Riley.

“Perhaps we should continue our meeting at a later time?” Ezra suggested politely.

Khalon glanced at Riley, no doubt taking in his flushed cheeks and kiss-swollen lips before nodding fervently. “Yes.” He cleared his throat. “Thank you. I’ll call for you.”

“Of course, Your Majesty.” Ezra stood and bowed. “Your Highness.”

“Thanks, Ezra.”

Ezra left the room, closing the door behind him. He smiled at the distinct *click* of the lock. His heart swelled with joy for his king and prince, both of whom deserved the love they

found in each other. Khalon was far less irritable these days, and how could he be? Riley was a beacon of light, quite literally. His Soldati prince soul pulsed a bright white glow that at times could be seen—but was mostly felt by all. He radiated warmth, love, hope, and goodness. Riley's powers were still somewhat of a mystery, but with each passing day they learned a little more.

Now that his meeting was postponed, Ezra had some spare time. Perhaps he'd fetch a book and do a little reading in the garden. That sounded lovely. As he headed for his chambers, he scanned his bookshelf with his mind's eye, pondering which story he'd lose himself to this time. The castle bustled with activity as everyone prepared for the festival. Servants, staff, and Soldati warriors dashed about, some decorating and readying guest chambers while others arranged meals, refined schedules, or discussed festival events.

Ezra maneuvered around the swift and deft foxling servants, mindful not to get in their way. He risked getting trampled on otherwise. Foxlings had served the Soldati for generations, each position one of honor and prestige. Soldati servants were treated with great respect and protected by the king. The Soldati realm would not have flourished without them, and thanks to Toka, a former foxling servant bestowed with the title and position of Soldati, the law stating servants—and anyone else, for that matter—could not mate above their station had been removed from Soldati law.

Stepping into his chambers, Ezra stopped cold at the sight of the Soldati Eye floating in the center of the room rather than nestled on the black-and-gold velvet pillow where it should have been. The all-knowing Eye flowed through Ezra, offered knowledge and visions of warning, though not on the scale of the prince's prophecies.

When the former Soldati king passed his crown on to Khalon, the former king and his entire court left for another realm. After centuries of fighting demons, they had earned the right to live out the rest of their immortal lives in peace. This left the Soldati Eye to pick a new voice. And it had chosen Ezra.

Being the voice of the Eye of the Soldati brought with it great power, new dangers, and a heavy burden, but Ezra had accepted the role with pride. With an entire army of Soldati to choose from, many of whom were renowned warriors, the Eye had honored Ezra with its power. Of course, at the time, Ezra had been unaware of exactly what that would entail, or the effect it would have on his personal life—the price he paid for such power. Regardless, to let down the Eye would be to let down his realm. For the longest time, Ezra believed the Eye to be a tool, a magical relic bestowed upon the Soldati by the Goddess since their creation. Lately, he'd begun to question whether there was more to the Eye than he'd originally believed. The blasted thing seemed to have a mind of its own, prone to all manner of mischief.

The glowing gold orb hovered, as if waiting. Ezra arched an eyebrow. “Well? What’s all this about?”

The Eye shot forward, forcing Ezra to dive out of the way. *Damnation.* Where did it think it was going? He scrambled to his feet, nearly tripping over his own cloak. Darting into the hall, he spotted the Eye floating nearby as if waiting for him.

“I’m not in the mood for one of your games,” Ezra scolded. “I have a book waiting to be read.”

The orb took off once again, and Ezra gave chase. This was *not* how he wanted to spend his afternoon. *Bloody overgrown marble!* A kit foxling holding a tray of silverware bigger than him headed straight toward Ezra, forcing him to spin out of the way, where he bumped into something hard and bounced off. Strong hands caught his arms and steadied him.

“Easy there, cub.”

Ezra bristled at the name. He lifted his narrowed gaze to the mountain of an Orso blocking his path. Honestly, the man’s stature alone was enough to block out the sun. Why was he so blasted tall? And wide. And... smiling. Why did he smile at Ezra? Not that anything was wrong with smiling, but Ezra had done nothing to warrant such a reaction.

“I’m not a cub,” Ezra replied with a huff. “Why do you keep calling me that?” He tried to peer around General Segreti

to no avail. Perhaps if he stood on his toes? Well, that certainly didn't help. He couldn't even see over Segreti's shoulders. As a former general for the Orso, Segreti was huge and imposing. His chiseled jaw was covered in dark stubble, his mane of pitch-black hair reached just below his shoulders, and his thick black brows had several tiny nicks. In fact, his tanned skin was covered in faint nicks and scars, though the most prominent crossed his left eyebrow, disappeared beneath the brown leather patch, and continued to his cheek. It saddened Ezra. Had he been present when Segreti was injured, he might have healed him and saved his sight. While Ezra didn't know the extent of the damage, he would hazard a guess that Segreti could no longer see from that eye. He was never without the eye patch.

"Because you remind me of a cub. All young, soft, and innocent. What are you doing?"

"I may be young," Ezra said, lifting his chin proudly, "but I'm a Soldati warrior and hardly innocent." *Where the hell did it go?* With a frustrated grunt, he planted his fists on his hips. "General Segreti, if you wouldn't mind stepping aside. I fear I've lost my quarry."

"There's no need for such formalities. Segreti will do." He turned to look behind him. "There's nothing there."

"Now there isn't, but there was before you blocked my path."

"What exactly did you lose?"

"The Eye."

Segreti peered at him. "The Eye? As in the *Soldati Eye*? Are you saying you lost the Soldati Eye?"

Ezra let out an exasperated sigh. Perhaps if he exerted some physical effort, he might get Segreti to move. He prodded Segreti, but the Orso didn't seem to even notice. Goodness, it was as if he were made of stone. "Of course not. I didn't lose it. It's merely hiding from me."

"Hiding..." Segreti arched an eyebrow at him. "You speak of the Eye as if it has a mind of its own."

Ezra blinked at him. “That’s because it does, General. Sort of.”

Segreti opened his mouth to reply, then closed it. He shook his head, as if attempting to understand. “Why is it hiding from you?”

“Because it’s bored.” Ezra threw up his arms. “I’ve no bloody notion as to why it does anything. Now, would you please step aside so I might find the damnable thing?” Who knew where it was by now? Thankfully, with the exception of a select few, the Eye didn’t allow anyone to touch it. Unpleasantness would come to anyone unworthy who attempted to lay hands on it.

“Easy there—”

“So help me, if you call me cub, I’ll—”

“Calm yourself,” Segreti said gently, placing his large hands on Ezra’s shoulders. It should have irritated Ezra. He did *not* like to be touched—though Segreti was incredibly tender for an Orso, despite his very large frame. “Come, I’ll help you find it.”

Ezra frowned. “You will?”

“Of course.” He winked at Ezra. “I can hardly leave such a charming Soldati in distress.”

Charming? *Him*? Ezra let out an indelicate snort. What nonsense. If Rayner were here, he’d have laughed himself to tears. Why Segreti would think such a thing was beyond Ezra. Regardless, if Segreti wished to be of assistance, Ezra would not deny him, even if he was perfectly capable of finding the Eye on his own.

Both Khalon and Rayner were quite fond of General Segreti. The Orso was renowned across the realms for his fearlessness and loyal heart. He’d served Queen Verity’s father before his mysterious death, then her bastard brother who’d inherited the crown and almost single-handedly destroyed the Orso realm. He’d certainly tarnished its great name.

With Pavoni’s death at the hands of the Soldati, Pavoni’s sister, Verity, had been chosen to be the next monarch. Despite

Khalon having the right by law to claim the Orso realm as his own, he merely requested that Queen Verity allow Segreti to pass on his helm to the next worthy Orso. After a lifetime of war and battle, of serving the Orso as their general, Segreti had finally been granted his freedom.

“How do you know where it went?” Segreti asked, snapping Ezra out of his thoughts. Just as he’d said the words, a shrill squeak pierced the air, followed by the clatter of silverware and loud gekkering. “It would seem your quarry has been found.”

“Oh dear.” Ezra tsked. “It has an awful habit of scaring the poor foxlings.”

They hurried down the busy corridor—where Ezra offered an apology to the frazzled foxling who hissed, fur bristling as he bounced anxiously—before rushing out of the open doors to the garden. Ahead of him, the orb lay settled in a bird’s nest among the tree’s thick branches and lush leaves. What in the name of the Goddess was it doing up there?

“It would seem your great and powerful orb believes itself to be a bird. Or perhaps an egg that needs hatching?” Segreti chuckled in amusement, a deep rumbling sound that could easily be mistaken for distant thunder.

Forcing his attention away from Segreti, Ezra considered his choices. If he shifted into his tiger form, he could easily climb up into the tree and reach it. However, his big furry paws wouldn’t be able to hold on to the orb to bring it down, and he didn’t want to chance the blasted thing taking off again. Its smooth, hard surface would prevent him from sinking his fangs into it, and he certainly couldn’t fit the whole thing in his jaws. Wait a moment...

Ezra snapped his fingers and smiled brightly at Segreti. “I can sit on you!”

Segreti appeared startled, and Ezra could have sworn his cheeks had gone pink. Perhaps Segreti was feeling a little under the weather? Ezra would offer to help with any healing once he’d completed his task.

“I beg your pardon?”

Ezra studied the orb in the branches, then with a decisive nod turned back to Segreti. “How tall are you in your bear form, General?”

His plan seemed to have dawned on Segreti, and he grinned wide. “Oh. Right. At least ten feet tall.”

“Well, if you shift and I sit on your shoulders, when you stand, I should be able to reach it.”

Segreti nodded. “How do you know it won’t take off again?”

Ezra glared at the orb. “It better not, if it knows what’s good for it.”

Segreti chuckled, and Ezra arched an eyebrow at him. Why was the general amused?

“Very well. Let’s fetch your orb.”

Ezra took several steps back, observing Segreti as he prepared to shift. He had heard many a tale regarding General Segreti. He was a warrior of legend, his heroic feats captured in song. As the fiercest of Orso warriors, he was even greater in stature than Khalon, certainly wider and more muscular. His biceps were so thick Ezra couldn’t wrap his hands around one if he tried. His shoulders were impossibly broad, his chest expansive. His whole body appeared as if chiseled from the great Orso mountain his realm was known for, from his square jaw down to his tapered waist and strong legs. The strength that radiated from Segreti was impressive. Each thigh was almost the size of both of Ezra’s combined. As a masculine specimen, he appeared perfectly proportionate.

Segreti clapped his hands together, drawing Ezra’s gaze to their size. His fingers were long and calloused. Segreti was a man who forged swords, who’d spent centuries pushing himself to his limits. Ezra was grateful the Orso queen, Verity, had released Segreti from his pledge. The general deserved to live out the rest of his immortal life in peace, without fear of being called out to battle. He’d already served far longer than any general, thanks to the previous bastard of an Orso king.

It was the swiftest change he'd ever seen in an Orso. Their bulk and mass impeded how quickly they could shift, especially compared to Soldati, but General Segreti was an Orso warrior of great experience and power. He shifted, the ground trembling beneath Ezra's feet when Segreti landed on all four paws. He was the largest Orso that Ezra had ever laid eyes on, with golden-brown fur that looked wonderfully soft despite the various nicks and scars around his body. His left eye was open, the pupil and iris a foggy white with a sliver of amber around the iris. The scar remained, running from his brow over his eyelid, and down to his cheek.

Ezra stepped before Segreti, his frame all but eclipsed by the Orso, and Segreti hadn't even stood on his hind legs yet. Segreti lowered his head in a show of respect, and what Ezra sensed to be... uncertainty. As if fearing Ezra would reject him in his bear form. Why would he think such a thing?

"My, but you're magnificent," Ezra said with a broad smile. He slowly placed a hand to Segreti's head, in awe of how thick and soft his fur was. "General, I've never been awestruck by an Orso until this moment."

Segreti let out a huff and nuzzled Ezra's side, making him chuckle. He then lowered himself to the ground, and Ezra climbed up, mindful not to tug too hard at Segreti's fur as he did. Once he sat across his wide shoulders, he patted Segreti's head.

"I'm ready." Ezra surprised himself by laughing when Segreti stood, the sudden movement forcing Ezra to throw his arms around Segreti's head so he wouldn't fall. "That was quite thrilling! Now, please, as close to the Eye as you can get." He held on as Segreti turned and stepped up to the tree. "Steady, General." Slowly, Ezra reached out and grabbed the orb. "Aha! I don't know what's gotten into you, but I do hope it's out of your system. I have the orb," Ezra informed Segreti, clutching the temperamental orb under one arm while holding on to Segreti with the other.

As soon as Segreti lowered himself to the ground, Ezra carefully climbed off. The orb pulled at his arm, and Ezra stepped back quickly, snagging his cloak with his bootheel. He



flailed an arm and gasped as he fell back. Instead of hitting the hard ground, he landed in Segreti's strong human arms. Ezra blinked up at Segreti, who stared down at him.

"Good catch, General," Ezra said cheerfully. "I'm pleased to see retirement has done little to impact your agility and vigor."

Segreti's eye widened. There was that flush again. "Oh, um, thank you." He straightened, and Ezra ended up a little closer to Segreti than was proper, but for some strange reason he couldn't fathom, he didn't mind. Segreti's scent was pleasant—a woodsy mix with many layers, one of them Segreti's own Orso scent. He stood unmoving; his cheeks rosy in color.

Ezra lifted his arm and laid the back of his hand to Segreti's brow. "Are you unwell, General?"

Segreti looked puzzled. "Unwell?"

"Your face is flushed."

"Oh, uh..." Segreti cleared his throat, and Ezra smiled warmly.

"I know! I'll make you some herbal tea. It'll work wonders. You'll see." He started for the south gardens but realized Segreti hadn't moved. He turned and arched an eyebrow. "Come along, General."

Segreti chuckled, and in two long strides was beside Ezra. "I've spent many a century following orders, but I daresay yours have been the most pleasing."

Ezra lifted his gaze to Segreti's. "Forgive me. I meant no disrespect." He'd been told many a time he could come across as brash. It wasn't his intent. He simply had no time for pretenses.

"There is nothing to forgive, sweet Ezra." Segreti took hold of Ezra's hand and kissed it. "It's certainly no hardship to follow you. Dare I say, I find myself eager to see where you might lead me."

Ezra nodded, though he was somewhat perplexed by Segreti's behavior. As they walked together, Ezra discovered he rather enjoyed Segreti's presence. Despite his stature and Orso nature, he exuded a pleasing sense of peace. Odd, since Ezra had always cherished the time spent on his own. He wasn't quite sure what to make of it, or of the quiet, smiling general at his side.

## CHAPTER TWO



*FASCINATING.*

Segreti found himself enraptured by the Soldati healer. Truth be told, he'd been beguiled by Ezra for centuries. The Soldati had fought alongside the Orso in many a war against the putrid demons that threatened the human world. It was where Segreti had met the gentle healer and voice of the Soldati Eye. His beauty had struck Segreti first, from his soft features and chestnut-colored hair to his eyes—bluer than the brightest cloudless sky. From the moment he'd heard Ezra's first quiet words, Segreti had been charmed, and he often wondered whether the healer had bewitched him in some manner. No other had stirred emotions in Segreti the way Ezra had.

The Soldati warrior also confounded him. Segreti had never known a more puzzling creature. Ezra went about collecting herbs from his many tiny pots, absorbed in his task to the point Segreti wondered if Ezra remembered he was there. He'd accompanied Ezra to a sizable cottage-like structure behind the castle, one whose walls were covered in winding vines of ivy and beautiful flowers.

Inside, it was bright, the sun coming in through the large open window on each wall. Several levels of wooden shelves ran along the walls, all heaped with little pots, glass vials, small boxes, and trinkets. Beneath the shelves, several oak tables were covered with stacks of books, parchments, paper, stationary, more pots and vials, and an array of knickknacks. In front of the stone fireplace sat a comfortable-looking love

seat with scattered throw pillows and a warm blanket, and beside it was a stool with a square pillow, where Ezra placed the orb. He scolded the magical artifact and wagged a finger at it in the most adorable fashion.

It was clear Ezra spent a good amount of time in here. He mumbled to himself as he worked. On what, Segreti had no idea. As far as Soldati went, Ezra was somewhat smaller than his brethren, but not by much. Segreti was under no illusion Ezra wasn't as fierce. All Soldati were fearless warriors.

Not one hair was out of place on his head, not one wrinkle on his clothes. Ezra smoothed down the front of his tunic, his blue leather bringing out the brilliant hue of his eyes. Despite being covered from neck to toe—except for his hands—the regal attire left no question a sensuous and delectable figure lay beneath the soft cotton and leather. The black leather trousers fit snug and had a habit of drawing Segreti's gaze. Thankfully, the weather in the Soldati realm was always perfection. Segreti couldn't imagine wearing so much leather in the heat, or the long sleeves Ezra wore beneath the finely detailed jerkin.

A kettle whistled from the fireplace, and Ezra hurried over. He turned and cocked his head to one side. "Please, do sit."

Segreti took a seat at the end of the love seat, though his great frame took up a good portion of it. Ezra turned to carry on, and Segreti inhaled deeply. The scent of Ezra mixed with the aroma of flowers and herbs stirred him deep inside. Perhaps accepting Khalon's invitation for an early arrival had been a mistake. In truth, he'd accepted in the hopes of catching a glimpse or two of the lovely healer. He hadn't expected the pleasure of spending time with him, much less being alone with him.

"Here you go."

The sweet sound of Ezra's smiling voice startled Segreti out of his thoughts, and he gave Ezra a rueful smile as he reached for the teacup held out to him. Like Ezra, it was delicate and beautiful. He feared causing it harm.

“It’s all right, General. The porcelain is the finest the Soldati realm has to offer. It can withstand far more than one would expect.”

Segreti arched a questioning eyebrow at him, and Ezra smiled knowingly.

“Your concern was written all over your face.”

“For a moment I wondered if you’d read my thoughts.” He frowned down at the golden liquid in his cup. “What is it?”

“A recipe of mine.”

“It smells... flowery.”

Ezra chuckled. “It tastes like honey. You’ll enjoy it.” He winked at Segreti, who almost choked on his first sip. The healer was going to be the end of him. Segreti coughed, and Ezra reached over to pat his back.

“Are you all right?”

“Yes. Went down the wrong way.”

“Do be careful, General.” Ezra turned and headed for a round wooden table strewn with all manner of herbs, some of which Segreti had never seen before. He proceeded to clean the mortar and pestle he’d used for the herbs in Segreti’s tea.

“Well, if I choke, at least I’ll have a healer close by.”

Ezra shook his head at him. Once he’d finished cleaning, he went about tidying a stack of already tidy books. How very intriguing. “How long will you be staying in our realm?”

“How long would you like me to stay?”

Ezra’s head shot up, and Segreti hid his smile by taking a sip of tea—more carefully this time.

“It’s not my place to say,” Ezra replied, matter-of-fact.

Segreti hummed. “I won’t take offense if you wish me to leave once the festival is over.”

Ezra wrinkled his nose. “You’re free to come and go as you please, General. However...” He paused, seeming to take

great interest in the leaves of a small herb plant. “Should you wish to extend your stay, I would not be opposed.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” Segreti replied, unable to hold back his smile this time. Was it possible Ezra might be interested in his company? Segreti quickly shook that notion from his head. What would a beautiful healer want with a battle-scarred Orso like him? Ezra was merely being hospitable. He leaned back in the love seat as he sipped his tea and studied Ezra, who busied himself returning books to their shelves. “Have you read all those books?”

Ezra turned to face him, a book clutched to his chest and an endearingly puzzled expression on his face. “Of course. Why would I have them if not to read them?”

“Some use books to decorate or to appear scholarly.”

Ezra’s delicate snort charmed Segreti. “Waste of a perfectly good book. Why not decorate with books you enjoy reading? And surely if you wish to appear scholarly, at some instance someone will believe you are and engage in scholarly conversation.” He dropped his gaze to his book, his expression timid. “Do you enjoy reading books, General?”

“I do.”

Ezra’s dazzling smile reached his bright blue eyes, making them sparkle. It stole Segreti’s breath. “That’s wonderful!” He rounded the love seat and sat, one leg bent on the cushion so he faced Segreti.

Segreti chuckled at Ezra’s excitement. He finished his tea and placed the cup on the small table beside the love seat before turning his body enough so he could comfortably face Ezra, their legs touching due to the limited space. “I admit I didn’t have as much time for it as I would have liked, but when you have an army to command, free time is a scarce commodity. When I managed a few blissful moments of rest, I often fell asleep while reading a good book.”

“What kind of books did you read?”

Segreti settled against the backrest, enjoying this heavenly moment. The sun’s rays filtered in, catching several of the

colored glass bottles around the cottage, giving it an ethereal feel. Birds chirped and sang outside the windows. It was a far cry from his dark, somber quarters, tucked away against one side of the Orso mountain. But as magical as his surroundings were, nothing could compare to the sweet creature before him.

“I fear you may be disappointed in my response.”

Ezra looked aghast. “I would never judge someone’s choice in literature.”

“Very well. I prefer more fanciful tales, often those filled with lovely prose. A happy ending is required.”

“Love stories,” Ezra deduced, sounding awed.

Segreti felt his cheeks burn, and he dropped his gaze to his calloused fingers, his frown deep. “They are everything my life has not been.” He shook his head and laughed softly. “Forgive me. I’m not usually prone to be so maudlin. I’ve never regretted my position as general of the Orso, merely some of the actions that have resulted from it.” Centuries of war, years under the command of that vile creature Pavoni meant he had blood on his hands, his soul forever tainted.

As if reading his thoughts, Ezra placed a hand on Segreti’s, his touch warm and tender. “No need for apologies, my dear General. Anyone who knows you, knows of you, is aware the manner of Orso you are.”

“And what manner of Orso am I?” Segreti dared to ask. He leaned forward, his body gravitating toward Ezra as if by some magnetic force.

“An honorable and noble warrior whose fearless deeds have become legend.”

Segreti bowed his head. “You think too highly of me.”

“Perhaps you don’t think highly enough of yourself.”

Ezra’s sweet words stunned Segreti, and he lifted his startled gaze to meet Ezra’s bright eyes. They were filled with nothing but sincerity and what could easily be mistaken for affection.

“You truly believe so,” Segreti murmured, a smile tugging at his lips. The healer continued to amaze him. Ezra offered no meaningless flattery or hollow words, only truth.

“I wouldn’t have said so otherwise. Tell me of the books you read.”

Segreti smiled. “I could lose myself in those stories, in the notion that someone might love another so completely they’d face any threat no matter how great.”

“I had no idea you were such a romantic at heart, General.”

“You would not be the first to think so,” Segreti said, a world-weary sigh escaping him. “Immortality can be a curse when all one is good for is war.”

“That’s absurd!”

Segreti blinked at Ezra, startled by his outburst. “You disagree?”

“I bloody well do.” Ezra jumped to his feet and began to pace before Segreti. “You’re more than your position, Gen—Segreti.” He spun to face Segreti. “Why would you believe such a thing?”

“Experience. Few suitors have lasted. They find me... beastly.”

Ezra tilted his head in observation. “How so? Do you possess a violent temperament?”

“Oh no. I meant in appearance.” Despite his size and ferocity, Segreti had always been aware of his power and strength. He would never harm the tiniest of creatures, much less a mate. Outside the battlefield, he found violence deplorable. Quite the contradiction for an army general.

“I don’t understand.” Ezra’s expression showed as much. He truly didn’t understand why someone might be repulsed by Segreti’s appearance.

“My body carries centuries of battle scars, the worst of which are from the lashings... during capture. I am large, with calloused hands, my hair untamable, my bones ache in the winter, and there is this.” He pointed to the patch concealing



his hideous eye. The foggy white had revolted plenty of suitors.

“May I see it?”

Segreti nodded. He was quickly discovering he could deny Ezra nothing. The time had come for him to get the silly notion of Ezra becoming more to him out of his head. Ezra was too beautiful and too gentle to be mated to someone like him.

Ezra resumed his seat and placed his book between him and the backrest. Closing his eyes, Segreti removed the eyepatch and remained still. He'd never hesitated before an enemy, yet he faltered before the healer.

A tender touch to his cheek made him flinch, and his eyes flew open. He sat stunned as Ezra smiled warmly at him, his hand cupping Segreti's cheek. Why was he not reeling back in horror or disgust? Ezra's expression fell, his lashes wet from unshed tears. A deep sadness radiated from him, so much so that Segreti felt it. He covered Ezra's hand with his.

“Why such sorrow?”

“It must have been terribly painful. I wish I'd been there. Perhaps I could've healed you, or at the very least relieved you of the pain.” A tear rolled down his cheek, and Segreti wiped at it with his thumb, his pulse quickening. No one had ever shed a tear for him.

“Forgive me. It wasn't my intention to bring you sadness. If I'm honest, I expected a far different reaction.”

“Oh? What sentiment other than sorrow could such an injury possibly evoke?”

Ezra continued to amaze him. Was it possible he truly didn't see what others did? “Most believe it to be rather repulsive. Even now I find myself eager to shield it from your view.”

“Outrageous,” Ezra said, seeming affronted by the very notion. “Your injury and loss of sight is a tragedy. It's not something to be repulsed by, but to be respected. The mark of a warrior. A general who has survived against the deadliest of

enemies. Your eye does nothing to detract from your handsome face.”

Segreti let out a raucous laugh. “Handsome? My dear Ezra, perhaps I’m not the only one lacking in sight.”

With a sniff, Ezra folded his arms over his chest. “I don’t see what’s so funny.”

“Wait... you’re serious? You truly believe me handsome?” It struck him then. A reminder that, once again, Ezra was a Soldati warrior. He might be a healer and scholar, but he’d been raised as a warrior among warriors. His noble title did nothing to change what he was or the battles he had fought in. Most of the nobility Segreti had met over the centuries were not warriors. They had others to battle for them.

Knowing Ezra found him handsome stirred something deep inside Segreti he didn’t quite know what to do with. Thankfully, Ezra broke into an enthusiastic conversation about books. Segreti listened with rapt attention, offering a comment here and there. He answered when prompted, but mostly listened, which worked for him since he was better at listening than conversing. As Ezra enthused over his favorite stories, Segreti decided he could easily listen to Ezra passionately discuss books for the rest of time. It wasn’t until the room grew darker that he realized the afternoon sun had begun to set.

“Goddess above!” Seeming to finally notice the time, Ezra gaped at him. “Please forgive me. I’ve been prattling on for hours. I’m certain you have far more pressing matters to attend to that don’t include sitting here listening to me carry on about nonsense.”

Segreti placed his hand on Ezra’s to steady his sudden fidgeting. “Your fretting is unnecessary. I’m in awe of your passion and hope *you* will forgive *me* for my boldness. I’ve enjoyed every moment spent in your company. Perhaps you’ll consider allowing me to join you again for tea and conversation?”

The smile that lit up Ezra’s face was glorious. “I would very much like that.” His expression grew timid, and he

dropped his gaze to Segreti's hand resting on his. "I hadn't expected to enjoy your company as much as I have. You're quite easy to talk to."

"I'm pleased to hear it," Segreti replied, his thumb stroking Ezra's soft skin. His pulse fluttered at the flush that came onto Ezra's cheeks. He lifted his gaze to Segreti's, his eyes searching for something. Segreti would have given anything to know what thoughts occupied Ezra's mind.

"Segreti, I—"

A knock sounded at the door, making Ezra jump. He let out an annoyed huff Segreti completely agreed with.

"Yes?"

A Soldati entered and bowed. "General Segreti, His Majesty requests your council."

"Of course." Segreti stood and bowed his head at Ezra. "Thank you for the tea."

"You're welcome."

Feeling bold, Segreti bent down and kissed Ezra's cheek. Color flared through Ezra's face, and he touched his flushed cheeks.

"Oh dear."

"What is it?"

"I think perhaps I should make myself some herbal tea. I fear whatever might have ailed you may have taken ahold of me."

Segreti held back a smile. "Is that so?"

By his bewildered expression, it was clear the poor fellow had no idea. "Do you think it could be catching?"

"One could only hope so."

Ezra opened his mouth to reply, then closed it. "I don't understand."

"You will," Segreti said with a chuckle. He lifted Ezra's hand to his lips for a kiss. "Should you need my assistance

again for any matter, you have but to ask.” Segreti turned and headed toward the door, but Ezra called out to him.

“Segreti?”

Segreti turned with a smile. “Yes?”

“Perhaps you might join me for tea tomorrow?”

“I’d be honored.” With another bow, he left the cottage, unable to contain his smile.

He accompanied the Soldati back to the castle and down the brightly lit stone corridor, the red and orange hues of the setting sun making the place glow. Soldati Castle was a far cry from his own realm’s fortress. Although vast improvements had been made since Queen Verity had inherited the monstrous palace built into the stone mountain, remnants of Pavoni’s putrid influence remained within its walls. Whereas the Soldati castle had always been filled with light and laughter, the Orso fortress echoed with the horrific screams and cries of those who’d had the misfortune to catch Pavoni’s eye or invoke his wrath. The place was haunted by ghosts of the souls Pavoni had touched.

Shaking those morbid thoughts from his head, he turned his attention back to the brightly colored flowers painstakingly arranged in intricately painted vases, the eye-catching tapestries, and the cheerful conversation of the servants as they went about their duties. Perhaps Khalon would honor him with an extended stay in his kingdom. After thanking the Soldati who’d silently accompanied him to Khalon’s study, he stepped through the doors. He bowed his head toward Khalon, who sat behind his desk, and the Soldati Prince, who sat beside him.

“Rayner,” Segreti greeted his old friend with a nod. Why did Rayner always appear as if he were up to something?

“Thank you again for accepting my invitation and for arriving early, as requested,” Khalon said, drawing Segreti’s attention.

“Think nothing of it. In truth, I’ve always enjoyed visiting the Soldati realm.”

Rayner leaned his hip against Khalon's desk, his arms folded over his chest and his amber eyes glowing with mischief. "Where have you been hiding yourself all day?"

"I've spent the most delightful afternoon with Ezra. He's wonderful company. Quite the chatty fellow, isn't he?"

Khalon stared at Segreti. "I beg your pardon?"

"Ezra. He's a chatty fellow."

Khalon and Rayner exchanged glances, and the prince broke into laughter.

"What? Is there something on my face?" He instinctively touched his eyepatch. No, it was secured in place.

Khalon peered at him. "Ezra? Are we speaking of the same Ezra?"

Was there more than one? "Pretty fellow with blue eyes, usually followed around by a floating magical orb."

"Yes, that would be him," Rayner agreed, his expression puzzled.

"He *is* actually a talkative guy," Prince Riley said, and Khalon's eyebrows shot up. With a soft laugh, the prince patted Khalon's cheek. "When he's talking about books. Or Segreti."

Khalon frowned; then something seemed to dawn on him. "Oh. *Oh!*" A slow smile spread across his face. "Well now, isn't that something."

Rayner clapped his hands and rubbed them together in glee. "Well, I'll be damned."

"What in the name of the Gods above is the matter with all of you?"

"My dear Segreti," Khalon said, sounding amused, "Ezra is *not* a chatty fellow. In most circumstances, you'd be lucky to get more than a few words out of him."

"Really? That hasn't been my experience. We've had a lengthy conversation about books, among other things. He's quite forward, but I find his approach rather refreshing. No

false niceties, even if I do believe him to be a little daft at finding me handsome.”

Rayner gave a hoot. “Oh, this just gets better and better!”

Khalon shook his head at his dearest friend. “Whatever mischief is percolating in that devious little brain of yours, I suggest you bury it.”

“Come now, Khalon. Think of Ezra. How often has such an event occurred?”

Khalon frowned.

“Exactly,” Rayner pointed out enthusiastically. “Never.”

Segreti looked from Rayner to Khalon and back. “What is this about?”

“Rayner’s trying to play matchmaker,” Riley informed him. “Other than his books, Ezra hasn’t shown this much interest in anyone or anything. I think he’s interested in you.”

In *him*? Heat flooded his neck and face. He spun toward Khalon. “I vow I’ve not laid hands on Ezra. Merely a peck on the cheek.”

Khalon lifted a hand, and Segreti pulled in a deep breath. In his experience, showing interest in someone who belonged to the king was a deadly mistake. “Calm yourself, Segreti. We have been friends for a very long time. I know you to be an Orso of honor. Should you feel affection for Ezra, and he feel the same, I fully support the match.”

Segreti stared at Khalon. “But... he’s yours.”

Riley whispered in Khalon’s ear, and Khalon’s expression softened as he turned his attention back to Segreti.

“Ezra does not belong to me. He isn’t my property, but my dear friend, my family. He is a trusted member of my council.” His gaze hardened. “Don’t get me wrong. I’ll protect him fiercely should anyone attempt to harm him.” His warm smile took Segreti by surprise. “But he is free to choose his mate, as is everyone else in our realm. What Ezra gives of himself is done so out of choice. His choice.”

Segreti bowed his head, the backs of his eyes stinging. “You are a good and noble king.”

Khalon stood and rounded his desk. He put a hand on Segreti’s shoulder and gently patted his cheek.

“You are free of that nightmare, Segreti. And as I’ve said to you many a time, you’re always welcome in the Soldati realm.” He went back to his desk and resumed his seat. “Now, on to business. I’ve called you here in the hopes we might be able to ease some of my prince’s worries.”

Riley arched an eyebrow at Khalon before moving his gaze back to Segreti. “Khalon thinks I’m overreacting, and although I know that along with overthinking, it’s a talent of mine, this time I have very good reasons for it. Hundreds of guests are about to flood our realm, among them Orso loyal to Pavoni who want revenge. No way are they going to miss out on an opportunity to get to Khalon.”

“Agreed,” Segreti said, thanking Khalon and accepting the offer to sit in the comfortable-looking wingback chair to the side of his desk. “Any threat to the king would surely be seen by his Saugur.”

“So Khalon insists, but these Orso have stayed hidden this long. They’re smart and calculating. They’ve managed to evade my Spidey senses so far.”

Segreti eyed the prince. “Your... spider senses? I’m not sure I follow.”

“It’s a human thing,” Khalon said with an amused smile. “It means his powers. The Orso have managed to keep themselves hidden from Riley’s Saugur powers.”

“Which is annoyingly impressive,” Rayner pitched in.

“But as I’ve told my prince, the moment any of those Orso begin to form a plot that would genuinely pose a threat to the Soldati, he’d know. As that has done little to ease my prince’s mind, I have asked you here in the hopes that you might offer insight to the Orso in attendance, primarily those most loyal to Pavoni. Can you think of any in particular who might attend whose loyalty you question?”

“I can think of several.” A few individuals came to mind. They’d been the most vocal over the Soldati handing the Orso realm over to Queen Verity.

Riley’s expression turned uncertain. “And you’re okay to report them to Khalon?”

“Any Orso still loyal to Pavoni who would come to this realm to plot its demise is a traitor and will be dealt with as such, whether by the Soldati or Queen Verity.” The idea that traitorous Orso would walk the same grounds as Ezra, or plot to do him harm, had Segreti balling his hands into fists. He would find these vile creatures and put an end to their plotting.

For good.



## CHAPTER THREE



“EZRA? ARE YOU OKAY?”

*Goddess above!* How long had he been standing at the window woolgathering? Ezra smiled warmly at his prince. “Oh, yes, Your Highness. Thank you.”

Riley studied him, his hazel eyes filled with concern. “The herb tent is up. I thought you’d have bought them out by now. Are you not feeling well?”

Ezra huffed as he turned away from the hall window. He’d intended to stop only long enough to glance out at the castle grounds where many of the stalls and tents were being set up, but instead he’d gotten lost in thought. He faced Riley and smiled. His prince was dressed in his royal garb of black and gold, a thin gold crown nestled on his brow. It had taken some time for Riley to grow accustomed to wearing several layers, and even then, he often ended up shedding layers throughout the day. It baffled Khalon to no end.

Finding a compromise, Khalon instructed his tailor to make Riley’s princely attire lighter and less “chokey,” as Riley put it. The heavier fabrics of his shirt, tunic, and cloak were swapped for softer and lighter ones, meaning Riley remained in his royal clothes until the end of whatever event called for his princely wardrobe. Of course, none of that seemed to stop Riley from battling his cloak. He was constantly at war with it. As if reading his thoughts, Riley swatted the offending item away from his shoulder.

“You know, after wearing this thing almost every day, I don’t understand why superheroes would wear one. Yes, it looks badass, but it’s so annoying and impractical. I got it caught in the door the other day and almost strangled myself!” He glared at his shoulder as if he were contemplating the item’s demise before turning his attention back to Ezra. “Sorry. Talk to me. What’s going on? The festival starts in just a few days, and everyone’s outside checking out the goodies.”

“Why are you not outside, Your Highness?”

Riley shrugged. “Had to pee.” He motioned to his clothes. “It’s a whole process now. Anyway, you were saying.”

“It’s rather strange. I felt perfectly sound, and then suddenly, out of nowhere, a flush came on, and heat whooshed from my face down to my toes. What if I caught whatever is ailing Segreti?”

“I don’t understand. Start at the beginning.”

Ezra did as his prince instructed, from when the Eye decided to play games, to when he ran into Segreti, Segreti helping him fetch the orb, then Segreti’s flushed face all the way to when Segreti kissed his cheek and Ezra’s ailment started. Once he’d explained everything to his prince, he lifted his gaze to find Riley staring at him, eyes wide as saucers. His prince bit down on his bottom lip as if he were attempting to hold something back.

“Do you think I’ve contracted whatever the general has?” Ezra asked, unable to help his concern. Soldati weren’t prone to illness or fatigue; the Goddess had made certain of it. Hard to battle demons if stuck in bed with an ailment.

“Possibly,” Riley said, and it struck Ezra that his prince was desperately trying not to smile.

“Your Highness? Why is this amusing?”

“Oh, Ezra. You’re adorable.”

Ezra frowned. Not the response he’d expected. “I don’t understand.” Why was everyone around him so perplexing? Just this morning he’d walked by Rayner and received a ridiculous smile and eyebrow waggle, as if Ezra was somehow

supposed to know what that meant. Then again, his friend had always been full of mischief.

Riley leaned against the wall, arms folded over his chest. “Can I ask you a personal question?”

“Of course,” Ezra replied. “My prince may ask me anything.”

“Do you think maybe you like General Segreti and that’s why you responded to his kiss?”

Ezra tilted his head in thought. “Well, of course I like Segreti. He’s a very noble warrior, and he helped us defeat Pavoni. Why would I dislike him?”

“No, I don’t mean like him. I mean *like* him.”

Ezra peered at him. “Are they not the same?” They sounded the same. Was this one of those strange human phrases? Every day Ezra learned something new of the human world from his prince. So many odd phrases.

“Right. I forgot who I was talking to. Let me rephrase that. Do you perhaps feel an emotional connection to Segreti? As you would in... a potential mate?”

Ezra gasped. A mate? “That’s preposterous. Why would I need a mate? And an Orso one at that?” His heart pounded in his ears, and his breath quickened. Goddess above, perhaps he was ill. He’d never experienced such a reaction to the mere mention of a potential mate. Not that Segreti was a potential mate. Oh dear, he suddenly felt quite breathless.

Riley hummed. “Why indeed? Have you never been in a romantic relationship? Or just found yourself needing to... release some tension?”

Ezra felt his cheeks flush. *Blasted hell.* That he understood. He shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the other. “It’s rather awkward discussing such matters with you, Your Highness.”

“We’re just a couple of guys having a chat. No big deal.”

“I... well, I’ve always... taken matters into my own hands.”

Riley's expression softened. "You're a virgin."

"I'm not entirely inexperienced," Ezra explained, though he wasn't certain why he felt the need to do so. "And it's not as if I haven't tried to... um, share those experiences with another Soldati. It's simply that..."

"What?"

"I am connected to the Soldati Eye. Those who do not fear me, treat me as though I were some fragile mystical trinket to be worshipped at an altar. They're afraid to even touch me. It's most vexing." He'd had enough rejections and awkward encounters to put him off the whole finding a mate nonsense.

"Segreti doesn't seem afraid to touch you."

"He's not a Soldati. His experience with the Eye has been limited to what he's witnessed or heard stories of. Also, Segreti is known to be quite fearless." Ezra frowned at the heat in his cheeks. Why did the mere mention of Segreti cause such a fierce reaction in him? It unsettled him.

"Let's say you wanted to pursue Segreti as a potential mate, you could, because now it's permitted."

Khalon had changed their kingdom's outdated law that would have prevented Ezra from seeking a mate who was not equal to his station. But to have a mate who wasn't Soldati? Then again, Rayner mated Toka, and his friend had never so much as considered anyone but the foxling.

"Even so, I doubt Segreti would be interested in a mate such as I."

"Why do you say that?" Riley pushed away from the wall and motioned for Ezra to accompany him.

They walked down the corridor, past elaborate tapestries depicting tigers frolicking among beautiful flowers and greenery. It was quieter indoors today, with the bedchambers already prepared and occupied by royal guests, most of whom were outside enjoying the beauty the Soldati kingdom had to offer. Was Segreti outside on the festival grounds? What might he be doing? Was he thinking of Ezra? *Damnation*. His thoughts had never been so tumultuous.

“Segreti is an Orso warrior, much like my fellow Soldati are warriors. From my experience, neither have much interest in books, herbs, or tea.” Despite showing interest in books and reading, Ezra doubted Segreti would be content to merely sit by the fire for hours reading. Not that it was required in a mate. Segreti had plenty of exceptional qualities that made him an ideal mate. Why was Ezra even considering this?

“What about Khalon? He loves to read. So does Rayner.”

“They are the Soldati council, and the king’s council has always been made up of both warriors and scholars. Our love of books was passed down to us from our Soldati ancestors. It’s quite different for the rest of the Soldati. Some may enjoy the occasional book, but their passion lies in their skills as warriors. Defeating demons would be far more challenging if they all had their heads in the clouds as I am often accused of.”

Riley chuckled. “Nothing wrong with having your head in the clouds. Besides, when it comes to jumping into the fray, you’re a Soldati and as fierce as your fellow warriors.”

Ezra beamed proudly at his prince’s words. “Thank you, Your Highness.”

Outside, the distant noise of festival preparations made Ezra smile. The day was beautiful, the weather perfect. The vast fields behind the castle were strewn with an endless sea of tents and stalls filled with villagers preparing to sell their wares, delectable treats, or fresh produce from their crops. The scent of delicious food wafted from one side of the field, while the roars and cheers of warriors testing their skills resounded from the other. Although the festival hadn’t officially begun, it often started early for the royal guests and continued throughout the week as more visitors arrived.

“There’s Khalon,” Riley said, his smile lighting up his face. What was it like to be so in love that the mere sight of your mate caused such an overflow of joy?

“Go to him,” Ezra said.

“Are you sure? We were talking about Segreti.” Riley looked torn, and Ezra couldn’t fault his prince for wishing to be near his mate. As it was, Khalon headed in their direction.

“I’m certain. I have several herbs I need to purchase before the entire realm descends.”

“Okay. Maybe talk to Segreti. Give him a chance.” Riley winked at him before running off and launching himself at Khalon, who laughed as he caught his mate with ease. They made quite the handsome pair in their matching regal attire, Khalon’s slightly larger crown gleaming in the sun. Leaving the two and their entourage of Soldati guards, Ezra made his way onto the festival grounds, enjoying the many wonderful scents. His heightened senses caught the tantalizing aroma of cooked meats and mouthwatering baked goods. Freshly baked bread and scones were a weakness of his. Nothing like spreading homemade fruit preserves on a buttered scone still steaming from the oven. But first things first.

Finding his favorite tent, he greeted the silver foxling pair who grew some of Ezra’s most beloved herbs. Tables laid out with pots containing every manner of herb lined the tent, and Ezra lost track of how long he spent inspecting each one. His excitement got the better of him at finding several herbs he’d been searching for, as well as bags of the best fertilizer available in the Soldati realm, and he hadn’t realized he’d accumulated far more than he could carry. The six bags of fertilizer alone would warrant two trips.

“May I offer you my assistance?” a deep familiar voice rumbled in his ear, and Ezra turned with a bright smile.

“Segreti.” Ezra hadn’t intended to sound so excited. Good heavens! Since when did he lose himself in such a manner? Segreti bowed and took Ezra’s hand in his, lifting it to his lips to kiss the back of it. Ezra did his best to ignore the heat that flooded through him, though he could do nothing to stop the shiver that wracked his body, one Segreti noticed, judging by his blown pupil. Segreti caressed the back of Ezra’s hand with his thumb, his gaze on Ezra, who couldn’t help but lower his eyes. “General,” he whispered, his face burning. He wasn’t

accustomed to such intimate gestures, much less receiving them in public.

“Allow me to carry these for you.” Segreti released Ezra’s hand to crouch down before the heavy fertilizer bags, the muscles of his biceps flexing with the weight of them as he scooped them up. Ezra quickly turned away, though not before catching a glimpse of Segreti’s backside. Oh Goddess above. He shouldn’t have looked. Why had he looked? And why was he so bloody flustered?

Segreti stood, seeming imposing as always. He wore a simple brown leather jerkin over a black shirt with short sleeves. The thick belt matched the heavy wrist guards and boots, which probably weighed more than most foxlings.

“Lead the way, dear Ezra.”

Ezra picked up his box of herbs, thanked the foxlings, and ignored their knowing smiles. They stood to one side, eyes on him and Segreti as they left the tent. They weren’t the only ones to stop what they were doing to take in the sight of Segreti following Ezra, his arms filled with heavy fertilizer bags. Had they never witnessed anyone being helpful? It was most aggravating.

Ignoring the curious and amused onlookers, Ezra headed for his cottage, Segreti at his heels. “Did you have a good rest, General?”

“Please, we’re past such formalities. And yes. At least better than I had in years. I’m a light sleeper and tend to wake up often. A hard habit to break after years of required alertness.”

“Understandable.” The need to be on alert when threats were near was something Ezra was all too familiar with.

“I should have known you’d be purchasing herbs. It only occurred to me when I entered the book tent and found it void of your lovely presence.”

Ezra’s breath hitched, an odd flutter in his stomach. “You searched for me?”

“I did.” Segreti came to walk at his side. “On such a beautiful day, only your company could surpass its perfection.”

“You flatter, General.”

“I speak only the truth.”

The sincerity in Segreti’s voice had Ezra’s heart skipping a beat. He didn’t know what to do with such sweet words. No one had ever sought out his company for the sheer pleasure of it.

“Thank you,” Ezra replied softly. “Lately, my thoughts seem to be occupied mostly with you and my desire to be in your company. At first I believed myself afflicted by an ailment, but after discussing the matter with my prince, I concluded that was not the case.” They reached the cottage, and Ezra held the door open for Segreti before following him inside. “You can place them over there in that corner,” Ezra said, pointing to the small nook where he tended to prepare his pots. He placed the box of herbs on a small wooden table before washing his hands. Segreti followed his lead, thanking him for the hand towel before he turned to face Ezra, who couldn’t understand why Segreti’s closeness made his pulse soar. “Thank you for your assistance.”

“It’s my pleasure.” Segreti’s voice was a low, rough rumble that sent a shiver through Ezra. He remained still as Segreti placed his fingers beneath Ezra’s chin, lifting his face so their eyes could meet. “What did you conclude, then?”

“Oh, well, I concluded that perhaps I... that I have certain feelings for you. Feelings I’ve never experienced before.”

Segreti studied him. “Perhaps?”

Ezra huffed, and Segreti smiled. “Not perhaps.” He met Segreti’s gaze. “His Highness believes there’s an emotional connection between us, one beyond acquaintance. I can’t deny your presence stirs certain... reactions in me.”

Segreti swallowed hard. “Oh. You... um, find me...”

“Arousing,” Ezra stated, matter-of-fact.



“I had convinced myself I’d imagined the way you shivered at my touch. That the change in your scent had been nothing but a trick of my fanciful thoughts.”

“Why would you think that?” Was it possible Segreti possessed insecurities similar to Ezra’s where mates were concerned? How was that possible? Segreti was an Orso with worldly experience. Why would he feel reservation in expressing his interest?

Segreti slipped one leg between Ezra’s as he cupped Ezra’s cheek, a low moan escaping Ezra. He was mortified to discover how quickly his body reacted. His shaft swelled and grew hard against Segreti’s leg.

“Look at you. You’re beautiful and soft, so very astute and powerful. What would you want with an Orso like me?”

“Segreti...” A whimpered name was all he could summon. His heart pounded fiercely, and his trousers grew painfully tight as Segreti slipped an arm around his waist. The scent of grass, sweat, and a heavenly male musk filled Ezra’s nostrils, causing his head to spin with desire. The object of said desire shifted his leg between Ezra’s and brought their bodies together, drawing a gasp from his lips. If Segreti had not felt how hard Ezra had been before, he certainly could now he was riding the man’s thigh. Segreti made no effort to hide his own erection, and it made Ezra’s body shudder.

“May I kiss you?”

Ezra swallowed hard, the very idea of it conjuring all manner of naughty images in his mind. His face flushed and his stomach tightened. He couldn’t bring himself to speak, so he nodded instead. With a tender smile, Segreti pressed his lips to Ezra’s.

Heat the likes of which he’d never felt flared through him, flooding to his groin. His breath quickened. What was happening to him? Heaven of heavens, ambrosia couldn’t have tasted better. Segreti’s mouth was all consuming, his tongue demanding entrance. Ezra raised the white flag and surrendered to his mercy without struggle, his lips eagerly parting.

Segreti's tongue and lips waged war against Ezra's, plundering and seizing. He tore his mouth away only to move on to Ezra's neck, sending a tempestuous fire exploding through Ezra. He groaned, needing to feel more, desperate to feel bare skin beneath his hands, desperate to know if Segreti felt as he did. Segreti kissed, nipped, and licked at Ezra's skin, and Ezra lolled his head to the side to expose more of his flesh to him. His own lips were swollen, but the strain in his trousers was far more painful, and he longed for release, prayed for it. Until now, he'd never felt the joy of release at the hands of another.

"Soon, my sweetness," Segreti said knowingly, his voice sounding breathless, as if he were barely restrained. He unfastened the belt around Ezra's tunic with one hand while his free hand gripped Ezra's backside, rocking him hard against his leg.

"Oh dear Goddess. Please." Ezra clutched Segreti's broad shoulders, and he cried out as Segreti crushed him back into a table, pinning him so he felt Segreti's engorged shaft hard against him. Ezra grabbed a fistful of Segreti's hair, his other hand joining Segreti's on his trousers as he pushed them down. Cool air caressed his skin, but Ezra paid no attention to his seminaked state. He was too busy tugging at Segreti's belt. It fell to the floor with a loud *thunk*.

Segreti spit into his hand before palming their shafts and stroking them both with a fervor Ezra felt to his very soul. What was it about Segreti that drove him to such madness? His thoughts were muddled, filled only with the overwhelming need to feel Segreti's touch. He could do nothing but allow Segreti to take what he desired in exchange for the roaring ardor he'd unleashed inside Ezra, an ardor he'd never known he possessed.

"Not Goddess," Segreti murmured in Ezra's ear. "But if you allow it, I will show you the sinful pleasures you inspire in me."

"Yes!" Ezra threw his arms around Segreti's neck and kissed him as if doing so would give him the answers to every question he'd ever had. Ezra thrust his hips shamelessly, the

rough friction tearing at any resolve he might have had left. A storm of pleasure rolled through him, and he tore his mouth away from Segreti, roaring as his release erupted from him, the cottage flaring with the white light of Ezra's soul and drowning out Segreti's own thunderous roar.

The light faded, and soon the only sound was that of their panting breaths. Ezra leaned his head against Segreti's chest and closed his eyes. He nuzzled close, his body limp as if drained of all his power, and in a sense he was.

"Are you all right?" Segreti asked quietly, one big hand at the back of Ezra's head.

Ezra hummed. "Merely blissfully tired."

"Here."

Before Ezra could figure out what Segreti was doing, he had Ezra in his arms. Normally Ezra would have argued he was perfectly capable of walking, but in this instance, he didn't mind. Being cradled in Segreti's strong arms was too wonderful to pass up. Segreti placed him carefully on the love seat, and Ezra set his clothes to rights while Segreti fixed his own clothing, their belts still on the floor somewhere by the table. Ezra's eyes threatened to close, but he forced them open at the sound of water running. A heartbeat later it stopped and Segreti sat beside him. For the first time since he could remember, Ezra didn't question his thoughts, simply gave in to his urge. He curled up against Segreti, smiling when Segreti wrapped an arm around him and held him close.

A sigh of contentment escaped Ezra as he allowed his body to sink into the cushions and the strong body against him. He'd never sought physical comfort from anyone, therefore had no notion of whether he'd enjoy it. Although he couldn't speak of what that comfort might look like with someone else, with Segreti, Ezra was blissfully satisfied. He was also pleasantly surprised by Segreti's tenderness as he stroked Ezra's arm or his hair, nuzzled the top of his head.

How easy it would be for Ezra to lose himself in Segreti and the pleasures the handsome Orso brought him, but pleasure alone was not enough. It would do him well to keep

his heart carefully guarded. He'd been through enough similar situations in the past to know how quickly affection turned to polite distance when his power and connection to the Eye came into play. For now, he'd enjoy this moment. He'd been so comfortable, sleep threatened to overtake him, when the pounding on his door startled him awake.

*Goddess above! Now what?* "Yes?" he asked, not meaning to sound so disgruntled.

The door opened, and Rayner rushed in, the concern in his eyes waking Ezra as if he'd been pushed into a lake of icy water.

"Come quick."

"What's happened?" Ezra asked, hurrying over to his dear friend. For it to have upset Rayner in such a fashion meant it was dreadfully important.

"Riley is having a vision."

A chill went through Ezra. If the Saugur had a vision, it meant only one thing.

Death.

## CHAPTER FOUR



“WHAT HAPPENED?” Ezra asked as he and Segreti ran into the king and prince’s bedchamber. Khalon sat on the floor with the prince cradled in his arms, concern and heartache written all over his face. Segreti could only imagine the pain in Khalon’s heart. As Saugur, his mate didn’t simply “see” what would come to pass should events not be altered—he lived through the horror of it. Segreti should have waited outside, but propriety be damned. Whatever the prince saw would affect them all.

Riley’s eyes glowed a bluish white, his pupils and irises gone. He appeared awake, but his body moved as if in the midst of a terrible fit.

“No!” Riley gasped before he made a choked sound and held his stomach. He shook his head, his voice hoarse as he cried out, tears streaking down his cheeks. “Khalon!” He arched his back violently, his mouth opening to release the light of his Soldati soul. Segreti quickly covered his eye, or he risked blindness. It was similar to the light Ezra had let out while in his arms, but more intense. From what he’d heard, this was merely a sliver of the power the prince possessed.

The light faded, and Segreti moved his hand away in time to see Riley’s eyes return to their usual hue. He buried his face against Khalon’s neck, his sobs wracking his body as Khalon held him close and murmured words of comfort. Ezra crouched beside his prince and placed a hand to his head. All at once, the prince stilled and fell heavily against his mate.

Khalon stood with Riley in his arms. He laid his mate's slumbering form on the bed.

"Will he be all right?" Segreti asked. The king sat on the edge of the bed next to his prince and held his hand.

"He will be. Ezra has him sleep after a vision. It eases some of the emotional turmoil. Riley is still very much a human at heart. The Saugur visions upset him greatly. When he wakes, he'll be better equipped to share his vision with us."

Segreti's only knowledge of the Saugur came from legend, their kind so rare few had met one in their lifetime. The Saugur's visions, along with the Eye, protected the Soldati. It was part of why they'd flourished for so long. Any peril to their king or their realm would be revealed, allowing them time to vanquish the threat. A Soldati Saugur was revered and cherished, though judging by the way Khalon gazed lovingly at his mate, it was clear Riley was adored no matter his title or gifts.

For centuries, Segreti had wondered if he'd be blessed with a mate to treasure. He'd all but given up hope until...

"He won't sleep for long." Ezra laid a hand on Segreti's arm, as if seeking his touch. "Our prince is quite headstrong."

"Like his mate," Segreti whispered with a wink. "A perfect pairing, if you ask me."

"I heard that," Khalon muttered, his gaze still on his prince, though a smile tugged at his lips.

Segreti chuckled. He took a seat in the wingback chair offered by Rayner, his heart happy when Ezra stood at his side. The door opened, and a pretty young foxling with bright red hair hurried in. He placed a quick kiss to Rayner's cheek before rushing over to the prince's bedside.

"I came as soon as I could." He placed a smokey-colored hand to the prince's brow, his amber eyes filled with affection and sadness. Segreti remembered the foxling quite well. A war had almost been fought over him. Rayner had made himself an enemy of Pavoni quite some time ago, and after a visit to the Soldati kingdom, which had included a dastardly plot against

Rayner, Pavoni discovered Rayner's weakness: his love for a foxling servant. The whole ordeal almost destroyed the Soldati kingdom, and in the end, Khalon, Rayner, the rest of the Soldati council, and their army marched into the Orso realm. Segreti had faced Khalon, seen the devastation his dishonorable and abhorrent king had brought to a noble race, and did something he'd never done in the whole of his immortal life.

That day, Segreti stood down.

Rayner brought home his mate, and Toka became the first foxling Soldati. From what Segreti heard, Toka and the prince were inseparable. They also got up to all sorts of mischief when their mates were off in the human realm battling demons.

"How is he?" Toka asked softly as he brushed Riley's hair away from his face. Toka's loyalty to his prince was admirable and well warranted. Next to Rayner, no one had fought as fiercely to protect the foxling.

"He'll be all right," Khalon replied with a sigh. "These visions exhaust him, but you know as well as I do that he'll be fighting to not stay asleep and be up in a matter of—"

A quiet groan made Khalon chuckle.

"What happened?" Riley's voice was laced with sleep, but he struggled to sit regardless. Toka helped him up and propped several pillows behind him. "Thanks, Toka." Riley smiled warmly at his friend. "What are you doing here? I thought you were refilling our stash of—"

Toka cleared his throat and motioned to the room. Seeming to realize they weren't alone, Riley coughed into his hand.

"Oh, wow. I'm so parched," he said through a forced hoarse whisper.

Khalon eyed them both as Rayner brought Riley some water. "What have you two been up to?"

Toka blinked innocently at his king while Riley held a finger up and took his time drinking. Segreti managed to stifle

a laugh. The prince took so long sipping his water that Khalon released a heavy sigh.

“Very well. Just... whatever you’re doing, be safe.”

Riley beamed at him. “Always.”

“Now. Do you remember what happened?”

Riley gazed around the room. “I’m guessing I had a vision. Give me a second.” He closed his eyes, seeming to focus. “I can see it.”

“What?” Khalon asked gently.

“Your death.”

Khalon sucked in a sharp breath, and Segreti slowly stood. It was true, then. Someone was plotting to kill the Soldati king.

“I was in the garden, but I couldn’t tell which one. It was so dark. Like this dark fog had moved in and sucked all the light out of everything. I was talking to someone, but I couldn’t see their face for some reason. I must have known them because I wasn’t scared or upset. Then I heard you calling out someone’s name, but I don’t think it was my name.”

Khalon jumped to his feet and paced the room. “What then?”

“You came running and... someone big appeared. They killed you.”

Segreti frowned. “How is this possible? No one is more powerful than the king of the Soldati.” Khalon had defeated hoards on his own. The light of his Soldati soul was the greatest weapon Segreti had ever seen.

Riley gasped, his eyes flying open and horror filling his gaze. “The shadows. They moved.”

“Speak it,” Ezra said as he stepped forward, the color drained from his face, as if he knew what the prince had seen.

“Demons,” Riley said, his voice all but a whisper. Tears filled his eyes, and he met Khalon’s stunned gaze. “An ocean



of demons.”

The doors burst open, and everyone jumped into readiness, their eyes locked on the glowing golden orb floating in the doorway.

“Must you be so dramatic?” Ezra scolded the ancient artifact as it entered the room. Rayner quickly closed the door behind it. As Ezra opened his mouth to speak once more, he jerked.

“Segreti, stand back!”

Segreti had no idea what the hell was going on, but he leapt into action, darting away from Ezra to stand near Khalon and now Rayner, who joined them.

“What’s happening?” Segreti asked Khalon, his voice quiet and his gaze on Ezra, who stood with his arms out and his head tilted back.

Khalon confirmed his suspicions. “The Eye is about to speak.”

Segreti swallowed hard. He’d witnessed Ezra’s visions before, but they’d mostly been quick flashes, a change of his eyes before they returned to their sparkling blue. This... this was different. His eyes glowed a bluish white, his pupils and irises gone. A faint glow surrounded him, his body thrumming with a power so fierce Segreti felt it to his bones. Gone was the sweet healer, and in his place, a great weapon. The Eye was in control, not Ezra, and that terrified Segreti. How did the Soldati not live in fear that one day they might fall out of favor with the Goddess? After all, the Eye had been a gift. It chose when to take action and unleash its power.

“The eve of reckoning approaches,” Ezra said, his voice echoing as the Eye spoke through him. “Death comes for the Soldati king at the hands of an Orso traitor.”

“Who?” Khalon asked.

“The face changes.”

“More than one, perhaps?” Rayner offered quietly.

Khalon seemed to think on it. “The Eye has yet to see who it is.” He moved his gaze to Ezra. “When will this occur?”

“The night of the full moon.” Ezra gasped, his knees buckling. Segreti didn’t hesitate. He moved quickly, throwing his arms around Ezra to steady him.

“I’m here. I have you,” Segreti promised.

Ezra blinked up at him, as if puzzled by Segreti’s response. His eyes softened, and a gentle smile came onto his face. “Thank you,” he replied quietly. When he nodded, Segreti released him.

“Is there anything else you can tell us?” Khalon asked Ezra.

Ezra held his hand out, and the orb came to rest on his palm. He closed his eyes, his brows drawn together. “It’s still so unclear. Danger lurks in the shadows. I fear Khalon is not the only one at risk. The threat looms near.” Ezra shivered.

“What is it?” Segreti asked gently as he placed a hand to the small of Ezra’s back, his heart swelling when Ezra leaned into him.

“I’m not certain. The Eye warns me, but of what I don’t know.”

A thought occurred to Segreti, and he turned his attention to Khalon. “I don’t understand. You are the Soldati king. Even without your Saugur and the Eye, your power is greater than any threat. How is this possible? And what does the full moon have to do with it?”

Riley darted a glance at Segreti, then moved his gaze to Khalon, who seemed to be considering something.

“Segreti, you have fought alongside the Soldati in battle for centuries, both with my father and then with me after I became king. Because of you, Rayner was able to save Toka and rid us of Pavoni once and for all. You’ve earned my trust, and I hope what I’m about to tell you will remain between us, or we risk the fate of the Soldati realm and those we protect.”

“Of course.” Segreti lowered himself to one knee, a fist over his heart. “You have always had my undying respect, Khalon, and from this moment on, you have my fealty.”

Ezra stared at Segreti, eyes wide. “If you pledge your fealty to Khalon, you’ll no longer be under the rule of Queen Verity. She’ll have the right to banish you from the Orso realm.”

Segreti stood to face Ezra. He cupped Ezra’s cheek, his heart ready to burst free when Ezra once more leaned into his touch. “My heart has not been with my realm for some time. I wish only to live out the rest of my immortal life in peace... and if the Goddess wishes to bless me with a gentle mate to share that life with, all the better.”

The pink that came onto Ezra’s cheeks made Segreti smile. He turned back to face Khalon. “I remain firm in my pledge to you.”

“Your pledge is accepted. I’ll discuss the details with Queen Verity, but first, you must understand the severity of the situation.” Khalon removed an ornate knife from its stand by the mantle. He carefully cut into his palm, wincing as the thin line of blood revealed itself. To Segreti’s disbelief, the wound healed slower than it should. The Soldati were renowned for their power. They not only shifted far quicker than any creature Segreti had ever known, but they healed just as quickly. He stared at Khalon.

“Why has your healing slowed?”

“My immortality leaves me, and by the time the full moon arrives, I shall be mortal.”

Segreti gaped at his friend. “*What?* How? Why?”

“Every full moon, I live my life as a mortal man, unable to change into my tiger form and devoid of all my powers. It was the price I paid to the great priestess to have Riley returned to me.”

“Returned to you? I don’t understand.”

Khalon nodded at Ezra, who stepped closer to Segreti, his voice quiet. “When Riley was first revealed to us as the

Soldati prince, he was human. Everyone knows this. They also know of our perilous journey to see the priestess.”

Segreti nodded. “I’m familiar with the tale. You all journeyed through forests, outrunning demons on your quest to present the prince to the priestess so she would awaken his powers.”

“That’s the tale we’ve told,” Khalon agreed, taking a seat at the edge of the bed next to his mate. “But that’s not what happened. At least, not entirely.” Khalon kissed Riley’s brow. “You see, when Riley was first revealed to me, I was a fool.”

“And so grumpy,” Riley teased, making Khalon chuckle.

“Yes, so very grumpy.” His smile fell away, his expression turning to one of shame. “I believed him unworthy of his title, of me. I decided to take him to the priestess so she would remove my mark and present me with a new prince.”

“During our journey,” Rayner said, his arm around Toka, “our king and human prince fell in love. Who saw that coming?”

Toka and Rayner raised their hands, ignoring Khalon’s grunt and Riley’s soft laugh.

“Get on with it,” Khalon grumbled.

“As I said, our stubborn king and equally stubborn prince fell in love, yet determined for the good of all that we would continue as planned. On our journey, Riley had another vision, panicked, ran off the designated path, and a battle against the demons ensued—one where Riley sacrificed his life for Khalon, accepted his Soldati prince title, condemned his soul to limbo, and died.”

Riley narrowed his eyes at Rayner. “You’re not good at this.”

“Oh?”

Riley threw his hands out, startling everyone in the room. “There I was, running for my life. Demons coming at me from every angle!” He made clawing motions with his hands.

“Whoosh, hiss, tigers leaping! What was I, a poor human prince with great hair, to do? I fought fiercely.”

“So fiercely,” Ezra agreed, his eyes alight with amusement.

“When suddenly a demon sprang up out of nowhere and made straight for Khalon. I pushed my love out of the way, and...” He gasped and clutched at his stomach.

“Was it not traumatic enough the first time?” Khalon asked, looking pained, but Segreti would hazard a guess it had more to do with Riley’s imaginative performance than the hurtful memory.

“Aw, don’t worry. It’ll be over soon.” Riley patted Khalon’s cheek. “Where was I?”

“You’d been wounded after so valiantly sacrificing your life for our king,” Rayner pitched in helpfully, earning himself an uninspired expression and headshake from Khalon.

“Right. So there I was in Khalon’s arms, and before my last breath, I accepted my title as Soldati prince.” He threw a hand out to Rayner. “I was dead for the next part. Take it away, Rayner.”

Rayner opened his mouth, but Khalon quickly interjected. “The priestess appeared, she asked what price I would pay to have Riley returned to me, I said anything, the price she set was for me to live my life as a mortal man every full moon. Riley was returned to me, we mated, I love him, we lived happily ever after. The end.”

Riley shook his head. “Wow. That was... I don’t even have words to describe it. You guys should *not* do theater.”

Khalon leaned in and kissed Riley, a short but passionate kiss that made the prince melt against him. “The point is, this is the price I paid for my love.” Riley grumbled something under his breath, and Khalon gave him a pointed look. “A price I’d gladly pay over and over, no matter how stubborn my prince is.”

“And this year the full moon has landed on the festival.” Segreti cursed under his breath.

Khalon stood and turned to Rayner. “We must be prepared. I want our best Soldati around the council at all times. We don’t know who else is in danger.”

“You don’t think that’s going to alert the bad guys that we’re onto them?” Riley asked.

“Our warriors will remain hidden. Either Rayner, Adira, or I will be with you wherever you go.” Khalon turned to face Segreti. “The Orso are arriving as we speak. Will you greet your brethren and perhaps gather some information? We must know if any among them are plotting against us.” Khalon balled his hands into fists, anger filling his eyes.

“If someone plots against you, my king, I’ll find them.”

Riley held up a hand. “Um, won’t whoever’s planning all this know that we know? I mean”—he pointed to himself—“Saugur.”

“Which means we must be extra vigilant,” Rayner said. “If you had a vision, it means they still intend to carry out their plans.” He brought Toka into his arms. “I don’t suppose I could get you to stay safe and indoors?” Toka arched an eyebrow at Rayner, making him chuckle. “Merely checking. Please stay with our prince.”

With a sweet kiss to Rayner’s lips, Toka left his mate and went to his prince’s bedside.

“Your Majesty?” Ezra stepped forward, his expression a mixture of concern and confusion. “I fear there is one crucial question we have yet to address.”

“What is it?” Khalon asked.

“We understand the why of Riley’s vision. There’s a plot afoot to kill you, and in your weakened state, the traitor manages to succeed. What we don’t know is how? How does this traitor know they will be successful?”

Segreti frowned. “Ezra is right. We know whoever plans to kill Khalon is smart and has been plotting since Pavoni’s demise. They’re not going to risk exposing themselves and their cohorts by simply hoping to catch Khalon off guard. Everyone knows of the Soldati Saugur and the Eye. Surely

they know if they so much as think of a way in which to kill Khalon, they will be seen by either the prince or Ezra.”

“Which means they know Khalon is vulnerable. Perhaps not the exact details, but enough to know he can be killed,” Rayner said, leaning against the fireplace.

Khalon sighed. “Until we know more, we’re in the dark.” He turned to Ezra. “I need you to join the festivities, keep the Eye close, and stay as near to Segreti as you can without arousing suspicion. Perhaps the Eye will glean additional knowledge should it be exposed to any possible traitors. We have two days until the full moon.”

Segreti bowed and left the room, Ezra on his heels. They walked in companionable silence, but soon the silence became too great. Spotting a shadowed alcove ahead, he took hold of Ezra’s hand and stepped into it. He turned Ezra so as to block his view of anyone who might be curious enough to investigate. His Orso vision helped him see enough of Ezra’s features and the concern in his eyes.

“Are you all right?” Ezra asked quietly.

Cupping Ezra’s cheek, Segreti brushed his thumb against Ezra’s soft skin. “Are *you*?”

“Well, it’s all quite unsettling, knowing there’s a traitor in our midst.”

“Agreed. However, I was referring to you and how you were feeling after our intimate time together.”

“Oh.”

Segreti might not be able to see the blush on Ezra’s cheeks, but it was there. Unable to help himself, he brushed his lips over Ezra’s. “You seem to be all I can think about lately,” he confessed. “My thoughts are filled with the taste of your lips, the feel of your warm skin, and the delicious sounds you made at my touch.”

“Segreti,” Ezra said through a gasp, his fingers digging into Segreti’s biceps. “I... I confess I struggle to think of anything else. I would have liked to continue what we started in the cottage.”

The words thrilled Segreti. “I’m glad to hear it. Perhaps once this mess is over with, you might allow me to spend some time with you?”

“I would welcome it.”

Segreti pressed his lips to Ezra’s, a small groan escaping him when Ezra parted his lips, his tongue poking out to meet Segreti’s. He wrapped Ezra in his arms and kissed him thoroughly, needing to bask in his taste and scent in the hopes it would stay with him until their next encounter. Ezra seemed content to remain enveloped in Segreti’s arms, a dreamy sigh escaping him when they came up for air.

“We should go,” Ezra said, his tone laced with reluctance.

“Be safe, my sweet Ezra. Should you need me for anything at all, simply call for me.” Segreti kissed the back of his hand before stepping out of the shadows and forcing himself to leave Ezra’s side. The quicker he found this traitor, the quicker he could return to Ezra.



## CHAPTER FIVE



SO MANY QUESTIONS.

Ezra had left Segreti with much reluctance. Although he chided himself for his growing attachment, he seemed incapable of reason and found himself longing to be near Segreti, to feel his strong arms wrapped around him, to taste his kisses and feel his desire. Heat filled Ezra's cheeks, and he quickened his pace on the way to his cottage. Segreti would be like the others. They all relished the idea of being with him until the reality of what Ezra was became too great.

Segreti's words echoed in his head. *I'm here. I have you.* Where others had balked or run, Segreti had rushed to his side, ready to catch him should he fall. Perhaps Segreti *was* different. And yet Ezra had sensed fear in him when the Eye had spoken. Ezra opened the door and entered his cottage as the Eye spoke to him in his mind.

*"Segreti's fear was for you, not of you."*

Ezra stilled. It was rare for the Eye to commune with him rather than through him, so when it did, Ezra listened. He turned to the Eye hovering over its velvet pillow.

"For me?"

*"Like many, he fears the power of the Eye, but unlike most, he does not fear its wielder."*

Was it possible? Ezra waved a hand in dismissal. "That's neither here nor there. We have greater concerns."

*“Indeed. The murder of the Soldati king, destruction of the Soldati realm, and annihilation of the human world must take precedence over your lingering chasteness.”*

Ezra crossed his arms over his chest and glared at the Eye. “What manner of company are you keeping these days? I’m not certain I approve.” The Eye remained silent. How very convenient. Ezra paced as he thought. Someone was going to kill Khalon in two days if they didn’t do something. If the traitors were here, they must be found. He stilled and turned to the Eye. “Come. We must hunt.”

Opening the door, Ezra waited for the Eye to exit before closing the door behind him. His hand froze on the doorknob, the hair on the back of his neck standing on end. He was being watched.

“I think another visit to the herb tent is in order,” he said to no one in particular. Speaking to himself or the Eye was a common occurrence, and no one would think anything of it. He headed through the garden toward the festival grounds, eyes still on him. “A visit to the book tent is also in order. Perhaps I’ll start there.” He greeted villagers along the way, all the while aware of the presence following him. Stopping at a flower stand, he smiled at the foxling family and complimented them on their beautiful arrangements. He made the usual agreement of purchasing any flowers left once the festival had ended. He always had use for flowers.

Inhaling the wonderful scent of lavender from a lovely bouquet, he discreetly glanced around him. Nothing. With a smile and a bow of his head, he left the flower stand and headed for the book tent, confident his shadow wouldn’t be so foolish as to follow him inside. The tent was busy, and Ezra was well versed in concealing himself. The Soldati weren’t warriors in name alone.

Slipping out the back of the tent, he shifted in the blink of an eye and darted into a thicket of nearby shrubs, his great tiger mass swallowed by the shadows. The Eye remained near his flank, its golden sheen dimmed so as not to give away their position. With sharp feline eyes, he scanned the festival grounds. There were many Orso scattered among the crowd;

some were villagers from the Orso realm, others warriors. Ezra crouched low to the ground, his body still. He flattened his ears against his head, his razor-sharp claws extending as he sensed a menacing presence.

*“Can you see anything?”* he asked the Eye with his mind.

The Eye remained silent.

Slowly Ezra stalked the festival grounds, using the trees and shrubbery, as well as the many tents, barrels, boxes, and wagons to conceal himself. The scent of his fellow Soldati warriors filled the air, along with the distinct heady mix belonging to the many foxlings. Ezra’s keen sense of smell caught a whiff of an Orso, and he swiftly set off on the hunt. His muscles tensed as he stopped behind a small area sectioned off for archery. Several Orso and Soldati tested their skills, each side teasing and laughing boisterously.

*“Anything?”* Ezra asked hopefully. Still no response. With a quiet huff, Ezra retreated. He no longer felt eyes on him. The traitors had to be here somewhere. A chill swept through Ezra as the Eye pulsed.

*“Seek out Segreti.”*

The urgency in the Eye’s voice had Ezra darting through the trees, nose to the air and mouth open as he searched out Segreti’s scent. Was Segreti in danger? If anyone so much as laid a claw on him, Ezra would tear them limb from limb! He skidded to a halt at his unexpected thoughts. What in the name of the Goddess was the matter with him? His ferocity wasn’t a surprise. He’d defend his king, his prince, and his kingdom with all the power he possessed, but when had Segreti become his to defend?

*“Find Segreti. Now.”*

With a huff, he took off in search of Segreti, refusing to think about how he was coming to see the Orso general as his.



What a beautiful day. The sounds of the festival's commencement filled the air and an ocean of guests flooded the field, their excited voices carrying in the summer breeze. In the distance near the archery games, Segreti spotted several Orso warriors, a small group of which huddled together. The thought that his former Orso warriors might be traitors both pained him and angered him. When Pavoni had come to power, his army had been filled with uncertainty. The more time that passed under Pavoni's rule, the more their army's loyalty diverted to Segreti, leaving only a few to embrace Pavoni's tyranny. Most of Pavoni's supporters had left after his demise, but a select few remained in their kingdom, hidden, plotting. Rogue Orso warriors weren't his only concern. For months now he suspected someone in Queen Verity's court was helping the traitors. They seemed to always be one step ahead of Queen Verity's Orso, a feat only achieved with help from within the court.

Segreti neared the group, grinning when a friendly face shouted boisterously at his approach. Fausti was a noble warrior who had often been found at Segreti's side. A young Orso, eager to learn, always honorable.

"General!" Fausti threw his arms out as he approached Segreti, his seemingly boundless energy never failing to bring a smile to Segreti.

"Retired general," Segreti reminded him, laughing when Fausti drew him into a fierce embrace. Fausti might be young, but he was nearly as big as Segreti. After his retirement, Segreti remained close to Fausti, keeping an eye on him, offering council, and most importantly, attempting to keep him out of trouble. A futile endeavor.

"Speaking of retirement, I heard the Soldati have welcomed you into their realm. Is it true the king invited you to live in his kingdom?" Vestri asked, smiling wide as he

greeted Segreti. Gori and Lazzari followed with hearty embraces of their own while Coiro and Basso merely nodded in greeting. They were good warriors but had always been reserved, keeping to themselves.

“He has,” Segreti replied. He’d been as surprised as the rest of them when Khalon offered him a place in his kingdom where he could peacefully live out the rest of his immortal life. It was given freely, but not given to many.

Lazzari whistled. “That’s quite the honor. Few have been extended such an invitation.”

“Is anyone truly surprised?” Fausti asked, bowing regally at a passing foxling. “What ruler wouldn’t want General Segreti residing in their realm? The Soldati have always been very clever.”

A pretty foxling carrying a stack of books almost as tall as he was raced toward them. He tripped on a tree branch, the books flying out of his hands as he stumbled forward.

“I’ve got the books,” Basso and Coiro called out in unison.

Fausti caught the foxling before he could hit the ground. “And I’ve caught this enchanting creature.”

The foxling blinked up at him before narrowing his eyes. “You may put me down now.”

Everyone snickered, and Fausti laughed as he helped the foxling to his feet. The foxling’s hands were white, fading into fair skin, his hair sandy, and his eyes big and dark. A fennec foxling. He was a tiny little thing, but by the looks of him, quite fierce.

“If not your thanks, may I at least have your name?” Fausti asked cheerfully, earning himself a glower.

“Sansone.”

“And where are you off to in such a hurry, Sansone?”

Sansone sniffed, his chin lifted high. “That is none of your concern, Orso.”

Segreti held back a smile. It would seem young Sansone wasn't a fan of the Orso. Segreti couldn't blame him. Not after the pain Pavoni had brought to his home. Foxlings were very protective of their own, and once wronged, were not easy to appease. Earning their trust was quite the endeavor.

"You're right," Fausti replied, his smile wide. "Forgive my boldness. I was simply struck by your beauty."

Sansone rolled his eyes. "I'm certain. Now, if you'll give me my books, I'll leave you all to your skulking. Or whatever it is Orso do."

"Ouch." Fausti placed a hand to his heart. "You wound me."

Segreti chuckled at Sansone's uninspired expression. The foxling was having none of Fausti's charm. Basso and Coiro handed the foxling his stack of books.

"May I at least help you with your books?"

"No." Sansone made to leave but turned to Segreti and nodded. "General." Before he took off again.

Fausti shook his head in amusement. "Such a captivating creature."

"At least he doesn't hate Segreti," Lazzari pointed out with a laugh.

Fausti's lopsided grin said he wasn't offended by the foxling's abrasive response. In fact, he seemed even more intrigued, following the foxling with his gaze until Sansone had disappeared into the crowd. "Visiting the Soldati realm is always such a feast for the senses. I particularly approve of all the lovely creatures."

"Come," Vestri said. "Let's find a table and enjoy some of this lovely Soldati hospitality. I hear Nestore has once again provided his famous fruit wine."

They headed for a table not far from one of the many food tents, but far enough away to provide a little privacy. Basso and Coiro went off to fetch them all wine as they took their seats at the round wooden table.

“I hope you’ve all been keeping yourselves out of mischief.” Segreti gave Fausti a pointed look, making his friend laugh loudly.

“Why do you always look at me? I’m not the only one who gets up to mischief. Just the other day, Lazzari was nearly knocked unconscious by one of Queen Verity’s ladies in waiting.”

Segreti arched an eyebrow at Lazzari, who frowned and rubbed his head.

“I still have a bump.”

“What did you do?” Segreti narrowed his gaze. Lazzari had a certain reputation, one that involved being a little too forward.

“All I did was comment on how lovely her gown looked.”

Fausti snorted. “Yes, while staring at her ample bosom.”

“I couldn’t help it. It was right there!”

Segreti shook his head. “One of these days, your lechering will get you in over your head.” Segreti had warned Lazzari countless times over the centuries.

“Especially now,” Gori said, shaking his head. “So many new rules. It’s hard to keep up with them.”

Fausti bristled, his smile falling away for the first time. “You prefer to have a tyrant’s rules? Ones he’d make up at his whim when it suited him?”

Gori held up his hands in surrender. “Forgive me, my friend. I meant no dishonor toward our queen. I’m not suggesting Pavoni—”

Fausti spit on the grass at the mention of Pavoni’s name, and Segreti placed a reassuring hand on his friend’s arm. There had been no love lost between Fausti and Pavoni. He was yet another of the bastard’s victims. Fausti might not have had a choice in serving his king, but he’d despised Pavoni with every fiber of his being.

“Let’s speak of more pleasant things,” Vestri suggested. “Khalon is a most fortunate king, isn’t he? Imagine being gifted with such a young and beautiful mate.”

Fausti perked up and nodded his agreement. “Not even half a century old! I can’t fathom it.”

“Yes, well, let’s not forget the prince was born and raised among humans,” Lazzari added.

“He might have been born and raised by humans,” Segreti said, “but make no mistake, he’s powerful and will protect his king at all costs.” Vestri lifted a questioning brow, and Segreti quickly cleared his throat. “Not that Khalon needs protecting.”

“As pretty as the prince may be, I would not wish for such a mate. Far too much upkeep. Plus, he’s a Sauger.” Fausti wagged his eyebrows. “Can’t get into trouble when your mate is a prophet.”

They all laughed, then cheered when Basso and Coiro returned with their tankards of wine. Segreti thanked them for his and took a sip. The Soldati truly did know how to feast.

“What of the king’s second?” Gori asked. “His mate is a foxling.”

Vestri shook his head in wonder. “A foxling Soldati. I never thought I’d see the day.”

“He’s far too delicate for my taste,” Lazzari said with a grunt. “I’d fear crushing him in my sleep.”

Gori grinned wickedly. “Or during some other bedroom activity.”

Most of the others agreed. Fausti glanced at Segreti, a mischievous twinkle in his eyes, before speaking up. “There’s the king’s healer. He—”

“No,” Segreti growled. “There will be no talk of the healer.”

“And why might that be?” Vestri asked, studying him.

Segreti fought the urge to punch the smug grin off Vestri’s face.



“Perhaps the general has eyes on the healer for himself,” Gori said with a knowing smile.

“Watch your tongue,” Segreti warned.

“Why do you not make a claim on him?” Fausti asked, curiosity filling his warm brown eyes.

“The Soldati do not claim mates in the same manner as the Orso.”

Orso mating was simple. When a warrior found a potential mate, he made a claim. If the claim was accepted by the intended and no other Orso challenged said claim, the mating would be presented to the queen for blessing. Once the blessing was given, the mates would bond, and it was done. Mates were chosen on several factors, from strength to virility. Sentiment rarely factored into the process.

“The Soldati are passionate creatures. They tend to select mates based on emotional connections.”

Lazzari huffed. “Sounds exhausting.”

“I admit he’s intriguing,” Fausti said. “The Soldati Eye flows through him, gifting him with unimaginable power, and yet he chooses only to use his gifts for healing.”

Which was why Segreti assumed the Eye had chosen Ezra. In the wrong hands, who knew what destruction the Eye could cause?

Fausti took a big gulp of his drink. “I hear he’s always lost in some book or in his herb garden. Odd for a Soldati warrior.”

“But he’s very pleasing on the eyes,” Gori offered.

Lazzari nodded. “Agreed.”

“What did I say?”

“Come, General. If you feel affection toward him, you should make it known.”

Fausti’s concern was touching. Segreti shook his head. “His soul is filled with warmth and virtue. I dare not sully it.”

Fausti cleared his throat. “Um, General...”

“I’m a beastly weathered Orso general covered in battle scars, with no army to command and a soul too battered to fight. He is beautiful and sweet, the light in him shining brighter than any sun. I have nothing of worth to offer him.”

“I would have to disagree, General.”

Segreti’s eye widened, and he slowly sat up straighter. He turned to find Ezra standing there, a book hugged to his chest and a timid smile on his handsome face, but there was something else in his eyes. Ezra had sought him out for... some reason. And where was the Eye? Its absence meant this encounter was more than it seemed, and Segreti would be wise to play along. Ezra lifted his gaze to meet Segreti’s, an intensity those who didn’t know him well enough would miss.

“I would say a noble and loyal heart capable of great sacrifice and love is worth its weight in gold. Whomever you give your heart to will be a lucky fellow indeed. I pray he’ll be worthy of such a gift.”

Segreti opened his mouth to reply, but no words came. Fausti elbowed him sharply, and Segreti asked, “Do you think it possible this fellow might feel some affection for this noble and loyal heart?”

Ezra’s cheeks went pink, his eyes darting to the others before returning to Segreti. “I do.”

Segreti stood slowly. “And why has this fellow not made his sentiments known?”

“Perhaps matters of the heart have always been somewhat of a puzzle for him.” Ezra’s gaze lowered to his book. “Perhaps he fears he has nothing to offer such a great and noble warrior.” Ezra leaned in to whisper loudly, “They say he’s a bit of an odd one.”

Everyone chuckled quietly behind Segreti.

Segreti laughed softly. He placed his fingers to Ezra’s chin and lifted his face. “Perhaps odd is just what this Orso general needs.”

Ezra’s smile filled Segreti with warmth. “Would you care to accompany me to the gardens?” He held up the book he

cradled to himself. “I found this wonderful story of an Orso prince. It’s very possibly fiction, but the prose is exquisite.”

Segreti didn’t question the request. “I would love nothing more than to accompany you and hear of this tale that seems to have enchanted you.” He excused himself from his brethren, promising to catch up with them at a later time. He also ignored Fausti wagging his eyebrows at him.

As they walked side by side, Segreti waited until they were far enough away not to be overheard. “What is it?”

“The Eye urged me to seek you out.”

“Why?”

Ezra shook his head. “I don’t know, but the moment I neared your table, it took off. It’s close by but remains hidden.”

“Do you think it suspects any of the Orso I sat with?”

“It’s very likely. We’ll wait in the garden. Perhaps when it returns, we’ll know a little more.”

The gardens were stunning, but then that was no surprise, considering the rest of the castle grounds. He’d heard the gardens were particularly favored by the prince, which would explain why they were immaculate, filled with colorful flowers of every variety, lush shrubs, and trees. Birds chirped happily; squirrels and tiny woodland creatures frolicked. It was like something out of a fairy tale.

Ezra’s expression softened. “Forgive my boldness, but I must admit the Eye having insisted I seek you out doesn’t change how happy it made me to do so, or the words spoken between us.”

Joy washed over Segreti, and he brought Ezra into his arms for a sweet, tender kiss. “You don’t know the exhilaration your words bring me.”

“I think I might,” Ezra replied shyly. He took hold of Segreti’s hand and led him toward a huge tree with many branches, its sparkling green leaves providing wonderful shade. “Sit with me.” Ezra took position at the base of the tree

and crossed his legs at the ankles, the buckles of his boots clinking together at the movement.

Segreti made himself comfortable beside Ezra, his larger frame eclipsing a great portion of the tree's trunk. "You said the Eye insisted that you seek me out. Are you saying it speaks to you?"

"Yes, but it's a rare occurrence."

"Is it usually so cryptic?"

Ezra chuckled. "For the Eye, yes. All will be revealed in time. I'm simply its voice. As I searched for you, I received a vision of this garden. You and I sat in this very spot in front of this tree, and I had this very book in my hand." He held the book out to Segreti, but Segreti placed his hands over Ezra's.

"Would you read it to me?" Segreti was certain his gruff baritone would not do the prose justice. Ezra's voice, on the other hand, was lyrical.

Ezra's face lit up, his smile wide as he nodded. "I would love to." He opened the book while Segreti attempted to get comfortable—*attempted* being the key word. Perhaps if he closed his eye, he might settle.

"Segreti?"

"Hm?"

"You needn't keep your discomfort to yourself."

Segreti opened his eye and frowned down at Ezra. "How did you know?"

"I'm a healer," Ezra reminded him. He patted the grass beside him. "Lie down. Put your head on my lap."

Segreti cleared his throat and averted his gaze, afraid his face might be as red as it felt. Goddess above, shyness! At his advanced years. "Where will you put your book?"

Ezra chuckled. "I have already moved it."

Segreti turned his face, his brows shooting up at the sight of the floating book. Well now, wasn't that something? With a nod, Segreti lay on the grass, his head against the softness of

Ezra's lap. The relief was instant. Ezra smiled down at him, and Segreti returned the gesture.

"Close your eye."

"I fear your voice and your lap may put me to sleep." He realized what it sounded like, and his eye flew open. "Not that you put me to sleep," he quickly corrected. "I would never be wearied by you, ever. I was referring to how comfortable I am in your presence, and I, um..."

Ezra laughed softly. "General, I know what you meant, and it pleases me to hear it."

"It does?"

"Yes. The fact you would feel such comfort in my presence that you'd allow yourself to fall into a state of vulnerability speaks volumes of your trust in me."

Segreti hadn't considered that. "You're right." He'd never allow himself to sleep in the presence of someone he didn't trust. Being alert and distrustful had been ingrained in him from centuries upon centuries of being out in the battlefield.

"Now, close your eye."

Segreti did as asked, his entire body growing heavy against the soft ground. A contented sigh escaped him, and he rubbed his cheek against Ezra's leg, basking in the warmth and heavenly scent of flowers and herbs that followed Ezra.

Ezra's palm came to rest on his brow. "Rest, my fierce General. There are no more wars to fight, no battles to concern yourself with. Only peace and the promise of a good sleep." Just as he said the words, a gasp escaped Ezra.

Segreti's eyes flew open, his gaze landing on the golden Soldati Eye floating above him, a pulsing glow emanating from it. Before he could speak or move, an echoed voice entered his mind and he jerked.

*"Sleep."*

Everything went black.

## CHAPTER SIX



AN AGONIZED CRY STARTLED EZRA, and he turned to find himself in a dark, filthy chamber, its stone walls splattered with a murky substance. The rancid smell of sweat and other bodily fluids threatened to choke him, and he reeled back. He ran into something hard and spun, a gasp escaping him at the sight of the battered creature covered in gaping wounds and festering lesions. Dark hair matted with blood hung over the face, concealing his identity. He was wide and built strong, his powerful body looking as if it had been bathed in blood. A low groan left the man's lips, sending a shiver through Ezra.

*It can't be.* Ezra drew closer and gently parted one side of the hair.

“Please... kill me.”

The plea had Ezra snatching his hand away as if burned. His heart splintered, and tears filled his eyes.

*Segreti...*

How...? Ezra scanned the chamber around him and realized he was in a cell. Could it be? He had heard tales of Segreti's capture. How he'd been tortured and barely escaped with his life. Ezra turned to Segreti and clamped his hands over his mouth to stifle the sob threatening to break free.

*What have they done to you?*

Ezra held his palm up, and the light in Segreti's soul showed itself to him. It was a beautiful blue, steady and honorable, but it was fading, the desire to depart their world growing with every heartbeat. Segreti would never surrender

his life willingly to an enemy. What would cause his soul such agony as to wish its own demise?

“Have you learned your lesson yet?”

Ezra’s blood turned to ice, his worst fears come to light. Segreti had *not* been captured and tortured at the hands of an enemy, but at the hands of his own king.

Pavoni’s face twisted in rage as he mercilessly beat Segreti, saliva flying from his jowls as he snarled and spat his displeasure.

“You *dare* defy me?” Pavoni roared, placing his blade to Segreti’s back and slicing into his skin. “I gave you orders. You are mine to command. You’re nothing but a rabid beast. The only reason I don’t kill you is because of your men and the power you seem to wield over them, but you forget this is *my* army, not yours! If I command a village burned to the ground with everyone in it, then you do as I blasted command! I don’t care if it was infested with cubs. It would teach them to cower before me!” Pavoni tossed the bloodied knife to the floor. He wiped sweat from his brow as he paced. “Did you think I wouldn’t discover your treason? That I don’t have Orso soldiers loyal to me? The moment you transported those filthy villagers to another realm, my faithful servant informed me of your treason.”

A shadow loomed in the cell, another Orso, his soul a murky brown tinged with red. Evil filled his soul, one akin to Pavoni. Ezra couldn’t see his face but felt his perverse joy at Segreti’s pain. He’d helped Pavoni slice at Segreti’s skin, reveled in his assault.

“Please stop,” Ezra begged. How much more could Segreti take? He’d been burned, stabbed, cut, beaten, and whipped.

Pavoni stopped in front of Segreti and grabbed hold of his chin, forcing his head up. Segreti was barely conscious.

“Look at me,” Pavoni demanded.

Segreti forced his eye open, the fiery amber Ezra had come to admire barely visible.

“You will not forget this day,” Pavoni promised. He pulled at the pins holding Segreti’s shackled wrists, and Segreti fell onto his knees before Pavoni. With a curl of his lips, Pavoni unfastened the belt of his tunic.

“No.” Ezra shook his head. He pushed at Pavoni, but nothing happened.

Pavoni reached under his tunic and unfastened his trousers.

“Stop. Please.” Ezra took a step back, the light inside him threatening to burst free. He couldn’t let Pavoni do this. Pavoni dropped his trousers and grabbed a fistful of Segreti’s hair.

“Perhaps this will remind you that you are nothing but my whore.”

“No!” A roar tore from Ezra’s throat, and the Soldati light within his soul flared, exploding out of him, plunging everything into white light. He couldn’t allow Pavoni to further hurt Segreti. Ezra harnessed his powers and called on the Soldati Eye. Death was too good for Pavoni. He wished to see wrath? Ezra would show him wrath. And send him to the very pits of hell where he belonged.



A horrific cry startled Segreti from his slumber, and he scrambled to his feet, a sharp pain piercing his heart, as if someone had driven a knife through it. The earth trembled beneath his feet, and he took a quick step back, a gasp escaping him at the sight of his sweet Ezra.

“Ezra? Love?” Segreti inched closer and carefully placed a hand on his arm, then hissed when the touch burned his skin. What the bloody hell happened? Another wave of pain, fear, and nausea rolled through Segreti. Terror washed over him, and he shifted into his bear form, releasing a ferocious roar to alert the Soldati king and his council. Shifting back into his



human form, he was relieved when he spotted Khalon and the others speeding toward him in their tiger forms.

“Khalon!”

Khalon arrived with the prince and their council in tow, along with several Soldati warriors. They quickly shifted into human form.

“What the hell is happening?” Riley asked.

Ezra stood by the tree where Segreti had been asleep only moments ago. He was exceptionally still, his eyes completely white and his arms at his sides, fingers splayed. His face was ashen, but it was his expression of terror that would haunt Segreti for the rest of his immortal life. Whatever was happening, Segreti could feel it, or at least partially, which made no sense. They weren't mated.

Khalon turned to Segreti. “What happened prior to this?”

“Ezra sat with his back to the tree. I lay on the grass, my head on his lap, dozing as he read to me. Next thing I know, I hear him gasp and open my eyes to find the Soldati Eye hovering over me, glowing. I heard a voice in my head say ‘sleep’ before everything went dark. Then I was startled awake by Ezra’s scream and a sharp pain to my heart. I quickly got up, and he stood. I tried to get his attention, but it’s as if he can’t hear me, and when I tried to touch him, it burned.”

Khalon cursed under his breath. “Did he touch you? Before any of this happened, did he touch you?”

Segreti frowned. “Before I fell asleep, I felt his palm on my brow.”

“Blasted hell.”

“What is it?” Segreti asked, concerned.

“He’s having a vision, but not of the future, of the past, something the Eye needed him to see. I fear it did not take Ezra’s possible reaction into consideration. Ezra is a healer, as you know, but there are times when he’s not in control of his gifts.”

“What do you mean?”

“When Ezra touched you, his soul found a source of great pain, and it triggered a vision. The power of the Eye flows through him. Its knowledge is infinite, and as it’s connected to Ezra’s soul—a soul whose purpose is to heal—it’s drawn to great suffering. It’s taken his mind to the source of your pain. Unfortunately, his gifts can’t distinguish between pain of the body and pain of the mind. Ezra can’t heal wounds to the mind, only to the body. When an attempt to heal the mind through a vision occurs, the Eye quickly pulls Ezra back.”

“So why isn’t it pulling him back now?” Riley asked.

Khalon shook his head sadly. “Because Ezra isn’t allowing it. He’s called on the power of the Eye, determined to stop whatever he’s witnessing, keeping him stuck in that vision.” Khalon’s eyes filled with concern and heartache as he turned back to Segreti. “He cares for you, my old friend. Whatever pain he’s found inside of you, it’s taken hold of his heart and won’t release him.”

“No.” Segreti shook his head, the horror of what he knew his sweet Ezra was witnessing making him feel sick to his stomach. He blinked back his tears and grabbed Khalon’s arms. “You must do something. We must wake him from that nightmare.”

“I don’t know how,” Khalon admitted. “This has never happened before. Ezra is nothing but steadfast and rational. He doesn’t make connections of the heart easily.”

“Um, guys,” Riley said, taking a step back. “Something’s happening, and I don’t think it’s good.”

They turned their attention back to Ezra. The pain in his beautiful face had been replaced with anger. He lifted off the ground, arms held out at his sides as a gust of wind swept through the trees. It quickly turned into a squall, the howling like agonized wailing.

“Ezra,” Khalon shouted over the wind. “Ezra, listen to my voice!”

Ezra placed his arms over his chest in a cross, and Rayner grabbed Segreti. “Everyone, get down!”

Before they could do as Rayner ordered, Ezra threw his arms out, and the blast knocked them all off their feet. Trees were torn from the ground and fell onto their sides. Black clouds swallowed the sun, pitching them into darkness, as if the sun had set. The boom of vicious thunder resounded in the sky, and lightning struck down from the heavens.

“Perhaps Riley can reach him,” Toka shouted over the blustering wind. “He is Sauger.”

Riley shook his head. “I don’t think I’m the voice he’s waiting to hear.” He met Segreti’s gaze. “He’s trying to stop your suffering, Segreti. You’re the one he needs right now.”

Segreti nodded. He forced himself to his feet—no easy task when the wind kept trying to tear his limbs from his body. All this... for *him*? Segreti pushed forward, one foot in front of the other until he was almost close enough to touch Ezra.

“Ezra,” Segreti called out. “Love, listen to my voice.”

Ezra tilted his head in Segreti’s direction.

“I’m here. Please, come back to me.”

“He is causing you great suffering,” Ezra replied, his voice echoing as if several voices were speaking along with his. Was it the Eye speaking through him?

“He’s dead, remember? He can’t hurt me anymore.”

Ezra threw his head back, an agonized wail echoing through the gardens. Damnation, what had he done now?

“Ezra?” Segreti hoped Ezra, or the Eye, or both, were listening.

“He must pay for what he’s done, even if it means going to the veil beyond. That vile creature belongs in the farthest depths of hell, his soul to be ripped apart by demons for all eternity!”

“No!”

Ezra lowered his head, his eyes glowing a bluish white. “Do you not wish for retribution?”

Segreti placed his palms together, pleading. “I wish for you to stay here with me and help heal me with your soft touch and tender smile. Let’s fill our hearts and our lives with warmth and love. That is what I wish.”

Slowly, Ezra descended, until his boots were once again on the ground. Segreti dared to take a step closer. He placed his hand to Ezra’s cheek.

“You once told me not to damn my beautiful soul for a beast so undeserving of me. I’ve taken your words to heart, and now ask the same of you. That foul creature has taken so much from us. Let’s not allow him to take our future.”

The wind stopped, the trees set themselves to rights, and the sun once again shone in the brilliant blue sky. Ezra closed his eyes, and when he opened them, they had returned to their former beauty. Tears quickly filled them, and Segreti caught Ezra before he crumpled to the ground. Ezra buried his face against Segreti’s chest, his body wracked with shivers and quiet sobs, and Segreti lifted him into his arms. Riley appeared before them and silently motioned for Segreti to follow.

Ignoring the concerned looks of the castle’s court, Segreti accompanied Riley into the royal wing of the castle to a vast bedchamber he knew immediately to be Ezra’s by its rich blue hues and walls lined with bookshelves from floor to ceiling.

“My chair,” Ezra mumbled against Segreti’s neck.

Riley pointed over to the fireplace and the large wingback chair with plush pillows that sat before it.

“I’ll be close by if you need me,” Riley said softly before leaving the room and closing the doors behind him.

Segreti prepared to place Ezra in his chair, but Ezra tightened his arms around Segreti’s neck, his voice almost a whisper when he spoke.

“Please don’t leave me.”

“Whatever you wish, love.” Segreti took a seat on the chair, grateful for its enormous size. It was soft, warm, and wonderfully comfortable. He imagined Ezra spent a great deal of time in it as he read one of his many books. Segreti put his

feet up on the large footstool so he was better situated, and Ezra curled up against him. He held Ezra tight and laid his cheek against Ezra's soft hair, running his hand in soothing circles over his back.

For hours they remained huddled together, and a sense of peace washed over Segreti. He'd never felt so at ease. This was what he'd always secretly dreamed of—to curl up in front of the fire with a kind mate who looked upon him with affection, someone he could share his life with. He didn't know how long this would last. Ezra might wake up and decide Segreti was far more trouble than he was worth. He might never forgive Segreti for what he'd witnessed. Segreti's heart squeezed in his chest. He would have given anything to spare Ezra the vileness.

For now, he would bask in this moment. He inhaled Ezra's sweet scent and let himself drift in and out of sleep, with Ezra's soft body cradled in his arms. Together they dozed, huddled in each other's warmth. At one point, Segreti stirred to find moonlight filtering in through the balcony doors, a cozy fire flickering in the hearth causing dancing shadows across the room.

Segreti had started to doze off again when Ezra's quiet voice met his ear. He almost hadn't heard him with how soft he murmured the words.

"I have never wished harm upon anyone, no matter how wicked, but *him*..." Ezra sniffed. When he next spoke, his voice was low and full of disdain. "Had I known what he'd done when he'd stepped foot in this castle, I would have torn his throat out with my own jaws."

"There is no need for you to shed blood on my account, my Ezra. That foul beast is where he belongs." Segreti kissed the top of Ezra's head before releasing a heavy sigh. "I wish you'd never seen such repulsiveness. What you must think of me."

"Of you?" Ezra pulled back, his frown deep.

"Knowing I... What I allowed him to do." A tear managed to escape, and Segreti swiftly wiped it away. "I should've

chosen death. It would've been more honorable, but I was a coward.”

The anger that filled Ezra's gaze surprised Segreti. “There was no ‘allow’ in the horrors forced upon you. Pavoni stole your right to choose. The only coward in that cell was that repulsive beast.”

“I would've spared you, and you wouldn't have seen me degrade myself in such a fashion. How can you bear to look at me?”

Ezra cupped Segreti's face and gently lifted it to meet his gaze. The heartbreak in Ezra's eyes took Segreti's breath away. “Do you know what I see when I look at you?”

Segreti pressed his lips together in a thin line and shook his head. He didn't deserve such tenderness.

“I see a beautiful warrior. A savior of many. I see an Orso general who sacrificed himself to save others. You knew Pavoni's wrath would fall upon you, yet you spared those villagers because your good heart wouldn't allow you to carry out such barbaric orders. I see before me the soul of a warrior whom I have come to admire and would be proud to call my mate, should he choose to have me.”

Segreti stared at him. “You... you would take me as your mate?”

“I would be honored, and humbled, to be the mate of such an honorable Orso.”

It was the happiest yet saddest day of Segreti's life. “I have waited so long to hear those words, but I can't in good faith allow you to bind yourself to me.”

“I don't understand.”

“It's not *you* who's drawn to me, but your gentle healer's soul. You wish to heal the pain inside me, and I'm touched, but that's not the reason I'd hoped you would give for taking me as your mate.”

Realization seemed to dawn on Ezra. “Love. You wish the reason to be love.”

Segreti nodded. It was a lot to ask of any creature. To love someone like him. Yet, with Ezra, he couldn't imagine less.

“Do you love me?”

The matter-of-fact question caught Segreti off guard, but surprisingly, the answer didn't elude him. “I find myself spiraling toward that sentiment with every smile you gift me.”

“I hold a deep affection for you, Segreti. Perhaps it's too soon to call it love, but would you deny us the chance to explore the depths of our feelings for each other?” Ezra slipped his fingers into Segreti's hair and smiled warmly. “In such a short time, I've come to see you as my champion. My general. You've ensnared me with very little effort. I believe it wouldn't take much more for you to make off with my heart.”

“You truly believe that?”

“I do. It's rather frightening.”

His conviction squeezed at Segreti's heart. “Oh?”

A teasing light came into Ezra's eyes, and it spread a beautiful light through Segreti, one he felt down to his core. Was it coming from Ezra? How was this possible?

“I've never had my heart stolen before. What would you do with it?”

“Cherish it,” Segreti replied without hesitation. He swept Ezra's hair away from his face.

Ezra smiled brightly. “Then it's yours.”

“And what would you do with mine? I fear it's stitched together quite roughly.” Segreti took hold of Ezra's hand and placed it over his heart. “Do you think you could mend it?”

Ezra nodded. “But not through magic.”

“Then how?”

Ezra leaned in to place a tender kiss to Segreti's jaw, followed by another, and then another. He trailed butterfly kisses over his cheeks, nose, and chin.

“I think I rather enjoy this form of healing.”

Ezra laughed softly. “Despite what you may believe, it is not merely my soul which is drawn to you, but my mind, my heart, and... my body.”

Segreti met Ezra’s gaze, and he was struck by what was reflected in his eyes. Genuine affection shone through that brilliant blue. Ezra was nothing but sincere. He didn’t know how to be any other way. Some might think him brash, or perhaps insensitive, but Ezra saw no purpose in playing games or being untruthful.

“You truly wish to be my mate?” If Segreti sounded a little awed, he was.

“I’ve never been more certain. You’ve pledged your fealty to Khalon and have been invited to live in our kingdom.” Ezra lovingly stroked Segreti’s hair. “It would bring me great joy to have you at my side. To see your handsome face every morning and night. If you don’t mind my sharing my heart with another.”

Segreti peered at him. “Another?”

Ezra motioned to the wall of books behind him. Segreti threw his head back and laughed. He kissed Ezra’s cheek, loving the flush he brought on.

“I would never think to come between you and your beloved books.”

“See? You’re the perfect mate for me.”

“On one condition,” Segreti said, his expression mockingly stern.

“And what’s that?”

“That when you sit to read your book, you allow me to rest near you. As an Orso, we do enjoy a good nap, especially in the winter. Your lap is far more comfortable than any den.”

It was Ezra’s turn to bark out a laugh. Joy filled his eyes, and Segreti’s heart overflowed with emotion, knowing he was the cause of it.

“My lap and I accept,” Ezra replied, snuggling close.



As Segreti wrapped his arms around Ezra and kissed the top of his head, he committed this moment to memory, from the crackling sounds of the fire to the soft breaths of slumber exhaled by his beloved. His mate. Segreti had never felt so blessed. Ezra sighed quietly, his face nuzzled against Segreti's neck.

One threat remained—the Orso who plotted to destroy everything around him, including his beautiful mate. He prayed to the Goddess that Ezra might forgive him, for the task that lay ahead would be hard to face. He'd finally been blessed with a mate. He couldn't lose him.

## CHAPTER SEVEN



EZRA HAD NEVER FELT SO unsettled.

As the Soldati Summer Solstice Festival continued, the time of Riley's prophecy grew nearer. Although they didn't know exactly when the attempt would occur, it was to happen during the full moon while Khalon was vulnerable. Segreti had left Ezra's chambers early that morning, determined to find the traitor. Ezra had taken the Eye into the festival, all the while feeling a presence close by. Someone had been following him, watching him, all morning, though he hadn't caught any one scent that had been constant, which was odd. The Eye had offered no insight, much to Ezra's growing frustration. None of it made sense, and with each hour gone by, his unease grew. Khalon was unusually elusive, and the Eye took off without notice far more often than Ezra liked. They were running out of time, and he was no closer to unearthing the conspirators. He hoped Segreti was having better luck than he was.

The thought of Segreti momentarily distracted Ezra, and he couldn't help the smile that spread across his face. He had a mate. Well, sort of. Segreti was his mate in name only until he claimed Ezra. The very thought sent a fierce heat rushing through him.

Last night had been heavenly. Ezra had pulled Segreti to his bed, but no thoughts other than comfort had entered his mind, and Segreti sensed it. He'd tenderly kissed Ezra and accepted his invitation. Together they'd held each other in bed, dozing in and out, murmuring sweet nothings and kissing sweetly before drifting off again. Ezra had never experienced

that before. Never been simply held by another. Segreti appeared content to do nothing more than stroke Ezra's arm or hair, to kiss him and nuzzle him. Ezra's Soldati soul yearned to be claimed, but the time had to be right. Once a Soldati lay claim to a mate or was claimed, it couldn't be undone. A Soldati loved deep and mated for life, and although it was too soon to speak of love, Ezra knew in his heart he'd belong to only one mate. It was simply who he was.

"Someone looks happy."

Ezra worried his bottom lip, then came to a decision. After a frustrating morning of investigating with no help at all from the Eye, he could use a little break. He sat cross-legged on the grass beside his prince. "May I confide in you, Your Highness?"

"Of course." Riley appeared hurt, as if the answer were obvious. "You know you can tell me anything."

"You are still the prince and king's mate," Ezra reminded him. As much as Riley saw those around him as friends and family, he was still Soldati prince and had responsibilities greater than himself.

"Right. I gotcha. So what's up?"

Khalon always met with the villagers during the festivities, and Riley accompanied him for most of it, but after a few hours, the noise and activity became difficult for his prince, so Khalon insisted he spend some time in his garden. Riley never argued. He called it his "quiet time." Despite his great Soldati and Saugur powers, Riley had a gentle soul that still believed itself to be human, but that only made everyone love him all the more.

"Segreti has accepted me as his mate."

Riley blinked at him. He opened his mouth to reply, but no sounds came out, so he closed it a moment before finally speaking up. "I'm sorry, can you repeat that? For a second I thought you said Segreti was your mate."

"I did. Well, sort of. He hasn't claimed me yet, and I'm a little nervous about that part, but I'm certain it will happen in

the appropriate moment, and—”

“You have a mate,” Riley replied, stunned.

“Yes. That’s what I said. Are you all right?”

Riley seemed to shake himself out of it. “Yeah, sorry. Oh my God, you have a mate!” He scrambled to his feet, and Ezra did the same, uncertain of what was happening—he often didn’t when it came to his prince. “That’s amazing!” Riley threw his arms around Ezra and hugged him tight. “I’m so happy for you.”

“Thank you, Your Highness.”

Riley pulled back and peered at him. “Wait. We’re happy about this, yes? This is something you want? Because if he did something or he thinks he can force you, I will rip his nads off and feed them to him.”

Ezra gaped at him. “Good heavens, no! I want this. Please don’t... rip his nads off and feed them to him. What are nads? You’ve said this word before, and I’ve tried to find it in my books, but I’ve had no luck, and why are you laughing?”

“Because you’re too cute,” Riley said, wiping a tear from his eye. “Nads are your boys.”

“My... boys?”

“Testicles, Ezra. Your testicles.”

“Oh!” Ezra’s face went up in flames. “No, please don’t, um... Please leave his testicles alone.”

“Okay, but only because I love you. So if you’re happy about this, why do you look so freaked?”

Ezra clasped his hands together and glanced around, making sure the Soldati guarding Riley weren’t close enough to hear. He leaned in to murmur quietly, “He has yet to claim me.”

“I know. You said that already.”

Ezra huffed. “What did Khalon do when he claimed you?”

As if on instinct, Riley touched his neck. “Well, he bit me.”

“While...?”

Riley studied him and realization dawned. “Oh! Right! We were having sex!” He cringed. “Wow, I said that kinda loud, huh?”

Judging by the snickering Soldati nearby, Ezra would say so. He glowered at the Soldati, who quickly stood at attention.

“Sorry. Right. Sex.” Riley tilted his head to one side. “You worried it won’t fit? I mean, the guy is kinda—*very* big. Like huge. Holy shit!” Riley put a hand to his lips, then whispered hoarsely, “You think it won’t fit?”

Ezra covered his face with his hands, reminding himself he loved his prince and strangling him would be frowned upon. “No,” he murmured. “I’m certain... That doesn’t matter. Well, it does, but that’s not what I’m attempting to say.”

“Then what?”

Ezra threw his arms up in frustration. “Bloody hell, Riley. I’m a virgin!”

Riley winced. “You said that kinda loud, buddy.”

Ezra glared at him.

“Hey, there’s nothing wrong with being a virgin.”

“Yes, I know this,” Ezra replied. He felt no shame. “The Soldati don’t shame virginity or the lack thereof.”

“As it should be. I was a bit of a late bloomer myself. There’s no rule that says you have to lose your virginity by a certain time. There’s no expiration date. Also doesn’t mean you can’t have a hell of a time without penetration. Believe me.” Riley waggled his eyebrows.

Ezra spun on his heels to scurry away before he perished from embarrassment. This was not a proper conversation to have with his prince.

“Wait, don’t go. Come on. Sit down. Talk to me. You’re really worried about this, and you don’t need to be.”

Riley sat, and reluctantly Ezra did as well. He tried not to fidget as he spoke. "I'm not accustomed to discussing these sorts of matters."

"That's okay. The first time can be a little awkward and uncomfortable, which is why it's important you're with someone who'll take good care of you. Do you think Segreti will do that for you?"

"Without question."

"So what's your biggest concern?"

Ezra worried his bottom lip with his teeth. He could do this. He'd never been one to mince words. "I'm afraid he'll be disappointed. I... wish to please him."

"Ah, okay." Riley's expression softened. "You might not have a lot of experience, but you know what you like, right? You've told me you've... taken matters into your own hands and that you have some experience in other areas."

"Correct."

"Well, try that with Segreti. Explore. Don't be afraid to try things or ask him. Communicate with him. He cares about you, and he's going to be looking to please you as well. I bet he has the same fears you do."

Ezra stared at him. "Segreti?" He couldn't fathom Segreti being afraid of anything. "You really think so?" Now that he thought about it, about what Segreti had lived through, it dawned on him that Segreti might have his own insecurities where intimacy was concerned.

"I have a question, though," Riley said, appearing thoughtful. "Why is Segreti claiming you? Usually the Soldati are the ones who do the claiming."

"Oh, I can't claim a mate."

"Why?"

"Because of the Eye. Only one chosen by the Eye can contain its power. No other form can sustain it. Claiming a mate means sharing your power, but in my case that isn't possible. My mate could be killed."

“Yeah, I can see how that might put a damper on your relationship. Anyway, I wouldn’t worry about Segreti. The guy’s crazy about you. Speaking of sexy bears...” Riley nodded behind Ezra, and he turned to find Segreti and Khalon deep in conversation as they slowly headed their way. A shiver went through Ezra at the mere sight of him looming so large, his long hair blowing in the breeze, his tunic accentuating his broad shoulders and wide chest down to his tapered waist. His legs were strong, and Ezra pictured himself between those muscular thighs.

“You’re not going to pass out, are you?” Riley put a hand to Ezra’s shoulder. “Breathe, Ezra. Suck in some oxygen.”

Ezra laughed softly and playfully batted Riley’s hand away, making him laugh. Ezra had been so transfixed on Segreti’s handsome form, he hadn’t noticed the books in his hand until Segreti stopped in front of him. He bowed in greeting for Riley, then knelt in front of Ezra.

“You’re a vision,” Segreti said, taking hold of Ezra’s chin and kissing him sweetly. “I have something for you.” He held out the books, and Ezra’s heart did a little flip.

“You bought me books.”

“I spoke with the foxlings who set up the tent of rare books. I asked them if they had any special books I might gift to my mate to mark a very special occasion. They had a few in their collection not on display concerning rare herbal teas and medicines.” He showed Ezra one of the books, and Ezra gasped at its beauty. “They also had this story. It’s quite old, I’ve been told, about a sweet young healer who goes on an adventure and finds love along the way.”

Tears welled in Ezra’s eyes. He took the books from Segreti and reverently ran a hand over the intricately detailed covers before handing them to Riley. “Could you hold these for a moment?”

“Um, sure.”

No sooner had Riley taken the books than Ezra launched himself at Segreti. With a boisterous laugh, Segreti fell back

with Ezra against him, their arms around each other. Ezra kissed him soundly, his heart all but ready to burst from his chest. No one had ever given him such a thoughtful gift. When he pulled back, Segreti brushed Ezra's hair from his face, his smile reaching his eye and forming little creases at the corner.

"I take it you like your gift?"

Ezra nuzzled Segreti's neck. "I cherish my gift, but no more than I cherish you for knowing my heart."

A distinct clearing of the throat reminded Ezra he wasn't alone with Segreti. With a rueful smile, he sat up. He took the books from Riley and held them close to his chest. "Thank you."

"Sure." Riley leaned against Khalon, who now sat with Riley tucked at his side. "Maybe you two should, um, head indoors to... discuss books."

Ezra stood and held his hand out to Segreti. "A wonderful idea. I think we'll do just that. Would you like to join me, Segreti?"

Segreti took hold of Ezra's hand and kissed the back of it, then pushed himself to his feet. "I would love nothing better."

"Thank you for your council, Your Highness."

"Anytime, Ezra."

As Segreti accompanied Ezra on his stroll to the castle, Ezra felt as though he floated on air. Anticipation thrilled him in a way little else had. Segreti held Ezra's hand and laced their fingers together, settling Ezra's nerves.

"Did you have a fruitful morning?" Ezra asked. He greeted the guards at the door as they walked through, receiving a bow from each one.

"Not as much as I'd hoped. Lazzari is still arrogant. Vestri continues to shy away from confrontation. Gori follows Lazzari like a newborn cub. Coiro and Basso are as elusive as ever, and Fausti... Fausti I worry about."

Ezra paused outside his bedchamber. "You think he could be involved?"



“Never,” Segreti replied, his conviction easing Ezra’s mind. “He’s young and noble, with a big heart. He’s fearless, and at times foolish. His hatred for Pavoni is no secret. Like many, Fausti was forever wounded by Pavoni. His story is not mine to tell, but were Pavoni alive, he would be among the many out to seek his revenge. Had Rayner and Toka not carried out the deed when they did, the Orso would have had a different war on their hands.”

“Then we must help Fausti should he need the assistance.” Ezra headed into his room, pausing when he noticed Segreti hadn’t followed. He turned and cocked his head to one side. “Do you not wish to enter?”

With an almost timid smile, Segreti entered the room. “I would never assume you’d want me to.”

After placing the books ever so carefully on the small wooden table by his favorite chair, he left them and went to the chamber door to close it, then stepped in front of Segreti.

“Are you having second thoughts regarding our mating?”

“Never.”

“Then you are welcome to go where I go. The king’s private meetings are the only exception.”

“Understandable. I know we haven’t discussed much of the practicalities yet. I confess, I’m not very good with this sort of thing.”

“Neither am I.” Ezra stepped closer, drawn to Segreti’s warmth like a hummingbird to nectar. “We’re quite the pair, aren’t we?”

Segreti chuckled. “That we are.” He looked around the chamber before his gaze once again landed on Ezra. “Would it sound silly if I said I missed your company this morning?”

“No.” Ezra placed his hands on Segreti’s chest. “I confess I struggled to keep my mind from wandering to thoughts of you while I investigated the festival grounds this morning, and more than once. The Eye was most vexed.” He lifted his gaze to Segreti’s. “Please kiss me.”

“I thought you would never ask.” Segreti drew Ezra into his strong arms, kissing him as he’d never been kissed before. The hunger and heat that radiated off Segreti was a heady thing, and Ezra threw his arms around Segreti’s neck, his mouth and tongue demanding more from his new mate.

Where had this sudden boldness come from? The urge to see and feel Segreti’s naked form became as imperative as breathing. The more Segreti kissed him, the more Ezra desired. His body thrummed with need in a way he’d never believed himself capable of. He’d found other Soldati attractive, but he’d never experienced this feral desire for them. He made quick work of unfastening Segreti’s belt and dropping it to the floor before hastily pulling at his tunic. Segreti removed it the rest of the way, discarding it near his belt as Ezra scurried to do the same with his own belt and tunic. Ezra led Segreti to the bed, where Segreti sat on its edge. When Ezra reached for the hem of Segreti’s shirt, Segreti stilled his hands.

“It’s not necessary,” Segreti said, his eye lowered.

“There is no need for fear,” Ezra murmured softly as he caressed Segreti’s cheek. “No part of you inspires anything less than a sense of wonder and desire to worship.”

Segreti lifted his gaze, searching Ezra’s. “I often find myself wondering what to do with your kind words.”

“Hold them close and believe in their truth.”

With a nod, Segreti released Ezra’s hands. He sat exceptionally rigid as Ezra divested him of his shirt and dropped it to the floor.

“You are magnificent.” Ezra traced a finger down from Segreti’s thick neck to his muscular chest, a thrill going through him when his nail scraped against Segreti’s nipple, making his large body shudder. Wishing nothing more than to bring Segreti pleasure, Ezra trailed kisses down Segreti’s chest, stopping to tongue one of the sensitive buds. He shivered at Segreti’s deep moan and loved the feel of his large hand placed ever so gently on the back of Ezra’s head.

Needing to hear more sounds of pleasure from Segreti, Ezra licked and sucked at the pebbled bud before lavishing attention on the other one. He teased and taunted Segreti's nipples with his tongue, his finger slipping into the silky curls on his muscled chest before he continued to trail kisses over the hard ridges of muscle. He knelt and took hold of Segreti's trousers.

"Lift up," Ezra commanded gently.

Segreti lifted himself, allowing Ezra to remove his trousers and set his beautiful length free. Ezra had been too lost in his lust during their encounter in the cottage to admire Segreti's large shaft. His mouth watered, and he ran a thumb over the leaking rosy tip. He might not have much experience, but he knew what he liked—and was also a quick learner. Every hitch of breath, every gasp to leave Segreti's lips, Ezra stored away, learning what made Segreti writhe with need.

Taking hold of the thick base, Ezra brought the tip to his mouth and licked at the pearly drop, loving the way Segreti jumped. Overtaken by desire and boldness, Ezra swallowed Segreti.

"Goddess above!"

Ezra moaned in delight. He moved slowly at first, up toward the tip before taking more and more of Segreti's delicious length. With every groan Segreti released, Ezra grew even more painfully hard. He bobbed his head, alternating between sucking, licking, and nipping at Segreti's sensitive flesh until Segreti placed a hand to his cheek.

"Easy, my sweet. I fear any more and I'll spill myself too soon."

"I want to feel and taste every inch of you," Ezra admitted. He lifted his gaze to Segreti's, and Segreti stared back, his pupil blown. "Will you let me?"

"I will gladly surrender to your every whim."

Ezra smiled and kissed Segreti, his heart feeling as though it was too big for his chest. He climbed onto the bed and knelt behind Segreti. Tears threatened to spill, but he refused to

allow that bastard into this room with them. Instead, he resolved to create new memories for Segreti. He brushed his lips over one particularly painful-looking scar before delivering a tender kiss. With a gentle touch, he caressed Segreti's back, running his fingers along the raised skin as he rained kisses across his broad shoulders. He took his time, kissing each and every mark. There were many. Segreti's entire back was covered in scars, some long and angry, others smaller and faded. Not one inch of his skin remained unscarred.

“You are magnificent, my champion.”

Segreti stood, and Ezra sat back on his heels, worried he might have offended Segreti in some manner. He cocked his head to one side in question.

“Forgive me, but I'm close to losing what sanity I have left.” Segreti placed his hands on the bed and leaned in, his lips so close to Ezra's he could feel Segreti's warm breath.

“What do you desire most?” Ezra asked, brushing his lips over Segreti's.

“To be inside you, feel your tight heat around my length. To have you ride me.”

Ezra ran his tongue over his bottom lip and nodded fervently. “I would very much like that.” Segreti joined him on the bed, and Ezra pointed to the nightstand. “Oils.”

Quickly reaching into the drawer, Segreti removed the small glass bottle. He placed it on the nightstand before removing his boots and trousers, then stood gloriously naked before Ezra.

“You truly desire me?” Segreti asked, his voice hoarse and filled with need.

Ezra pushed his trousers down to his thighs, revealing his hard, leaking cock. “Simply the thought of you, of your touch, your mouth, your shaft, makes me this painfully hard. Should it take me a lifetime to show you and have you believe it is so, I'll happily oblige.” Ezra held his hand out, and Segreti

returned to his side. He helped relieve Ezra of what clothes remained then ran his hands over Ezra almost reverently.

“Forgive me. It’s not that I distrust your words, but when faced with such youth and beauty, I struggle to understand what you see in an old battle-scarred soldier.”

Ezra pulled Segreti down onto the bed and straddled his lap. He leaned in and smiled wickedly as he kissed Segreti. “Then allow me to show you.” He sat back and gave Segreti a pointed look. “Besides, you’re not *that* much older.”

“I certainly feel it at times.”

“Well, allow me to help you gain back some of that lost... virility.” Ezra took Segreti’s finger, slipped it into his mouth and whirled his tongue around it before guiding it to his passage, instructing Segreti to prepare his entrance. Leaning forward, he palmed one cheek, spreading himself for Segreti and receiving a deep groan for his efforts. Gently, Segreti pushed a thick finger against his entrance, and Ezra moaned. He slipped his fingers into Segreti’s long hair, holding on tight as Segreti pushed his finger down to the knuckle before slowly retreating. He repeated the move, slow at first, then a little quicker. Soon a second finger joined in, and with every small thrust, Ezra grew more desperate to feel Segreti’s hard shaft inside him.

After removing his fingers, Segreti reached for the glass bottle and handed it to Ezra. Quickly, but mindful not to spill the liquid, Ezra poured some into his hand before giving the bottle back to Segreti. He palmed Segreti’s cock and slowly stroked him, loving the deep rolling groan Segreti released, his head thrown back against the pillow as Ezra quickened his strokes.

“Ezra,” Segreti pleaded roughly.

Unable to take any more, Ezra positioned himself over Segreti’s flat stomach and lined the tip to his entrance. Slowly, he pushed back, lowered himself onto Segreti’s engorged shaft, closing his eyes as he breathed deep. A sharp burn had him biting down on his bottom lip as his entrance struggled against the intrusion before gradually yielding, enveloping

Segreti. Ezra opened his eyes, his gaze meeting Segreti's. A grin formed on Ezra's lips as he sat fully against Segreti.

"So full," Ezra said, awe in his tone. He hadn't expected it. Gingerly, he tried moving, rocking back and forth. "Oh," he groaned. "I like that."

"As do I," Segreti replied with a soft chuckle. He took hold of Ezra's backside, spreading his cheeks and drawing him up and back again.

"Oh!" Ezra liked that even more. He rose leisurely before dropping onto Segreti, surprising a gasp out of himself and a curse from Segreti. That was absolutely sinful!

"You have a mischievous look about you."

"Well, my fierce warrior, I plan to make it so you never question my desire for you."

Segreti threw his head back and laughed. When he met Ezra's gaze, his eyes were filled with passion and tenderness. "I'm eager for this lesson," Segreti replied as he stroked Ezra.

"Take me in hand," Ezra commanded breathlessly.

Segreti poured some oil into his hand, then palmed Ezra's hard cock. He stroked Ezra, making him feel as though he'd go mad from the pleasure. He rose and impaled himself on Segreti's iron rod over and over until he couldn't distinguish Segreti's heartbeat from his own. All the while, Segreti pumped Ezra's shaft, and as Ezra began to lose his pace, so did Segreti. Ezra dug his fingers into Segreti's shoulders, riding him madly, the sweat trickling down his brow and neck. His skin was too tight for his body.

Leaning forward, Ezra brought their lips together, a shiver wracking his body as Segreti released Ezra's shaft and spread his cheeks once more to lift up, pounding into him over and over while Ezra pumped his cock.

"*Ezra*," Segreti roared, his hips bucking as he continued to thrust into Ezra, their bodies finding the perfect rhythm together. Segreti changed his angle, hitting some part of Ezra that had him all but bursting at the seams.

“Segreti... I can't... please.” Ezra felt as if his body were about to come apart. Segreti continued to hit that sweet spot, his thick shaft driving inside him, their bodies smacking together and the bed moving beneath them. Ezra dug his fingers into Segreti's shoulders.

“I'm going to spill myself inside you,” Segreti warned.

“Yes, please. I want all of you.” Ezra had never been more certain of anything in his life. He wanted Segreti, all of him, for however long Segreti wished Ezra to have him. Just when he thought he couldn't take any more pleasure, Segreti roared with his release, liquid heat filling Ezra and sending him tumbling over the edge. He shouted Segreti's name, the light from his Soldati soul erupting from him and filling the room as he spilled himself over his hand and Segreti's chest. He rode madly until the explosive heat and light faded, leaving him spent and exhausted to collapse on Segreti's chest, uncaring of the sticky wetness beneath him.

A contented sigh escaped Ezra, and he snuggled close, loving the much larger body beneath his, the weight of Segreti's arm wrapped around his waist as Segreti caressed him. Was this what it was like to have a mate? One who held your heart with theirs? No wonder Riley looked upon Khalon as if he hung the moon. Ezra could easily lose his heart to Segreti. A part of him believed he'd already lost pieces of it to his strong and noble warrior.

“How are you feeling?” Segreti asked tentatively.

Ezra hummed in satisfaction. “I can't recall a time when I felt more at peace than at this moment.” A thought occurred to him, and he bolted upright.

“What is it?”

“You didn't claim me.” Ezra couldn't help the concern in his voice. They'd discussed how Segreti had to be the one to claim Ezra, and Segreti had happily accepted. He hadn't been the least put off by the mention of Ezra's powers being a threat.

Segreti brushed Ezra's hair away from his face. "The time wasn't right, my sweet."

"Oh."

"I've disappointed you."

Ezra shook his head. "You could never disappoint me." He leaned forward, his chin resting on his hand as he ran a finger over Segreti's jaw. "I am puzzled, though, as to why your inner bear still feels unready to claim its mate."

Segreti took hold of Ezra's hand and kissed the tips of his fingers. "All will be revealed in time, I'm certain. Do you regret what we've done?"

"I have no misgivings in my heart where you're concerned."

"I'm happy to hear that." Segreti kissed the top of his head, and Ezra begrudgingly removed himself from Segreti. He smiled against Segreti's lips.

"Stay right there. I'm simply going to get a washcloth so we don't stick together. As much as I'd like to have you at my side at all hours, at some point, I suspect, one of us will need to use the facilities."

Segreti chuckled, and Ezra forced himself away long enough to enter his washroom and clean himself up. He dampened a clean cloth and delivered it to Segreti with a kiss, then climbed onto the bed next to him. His heart danced with delight as he kissed his way down Segreti's jaw and combed his fingers through his untamable mane.

Ezra had been about to tease Segreti about being ready for another bout of sensual activity when a chill engulfed him and he gasped, the world going bright around him.

*No, please. Not now.*

The power of the Eye pulsed through Ezra, throwing him into a vision. He stared up at Segreti, who stood tall in the moonlight, but he wasn't Ezra's Segreti. His lips curled in a snarl, anger filling his dark eye as shadows enveloped his handsome features. He swung back his arm, a sword in his



hand, but Ezra no longer stood in the path of the weapon intent on murder. Instead, another figure took his place. Segreti swung his sword and sliced a deadly blow, blood spraying his clothes. He loomed over the fallen figure, and Ezra lurched forward, his heart lodged in his throat and tears in his eyes as an agonized wail tore from him.

Khalon lay dead.

## CHAPTER EIGHT



“EZRA? LOVE? WHAT’S WRONG?”

Ezra’s eyes flew open, and he lifted a trembling hand to his lips as he shook his head. No. He refused to believe it. The Eye was wrong. It had to be. Tears welled in his eyes, the scene replaying in his head. Perhaps he’d drifted off and had a nightmare. A terrifying, heartbreaking nightmare. He scrambled out of bed and grabbed his trousers and tunic. Segreti quickly did the same.

“The Eye.” Recognition seemed to dawn on Segreti. “You had a vision.”

Ezra nodded. The Eye, which had at some point entered the room and been dormant, resting on its velvet pillow, pulsed with golden light. It lifted off the pillow and hovered near Ezra.

“Please,” Ezra begged of it.

“Can you tell me?” Segreti asked softly. “You needn’t carry this burden yourself. Not anymore. Let me help you.”

How could Segreti help when he was the cause of the vision? “For the first time in my life, I’m at a loss of what to do.” Ezra knew what he was *supposed* to do, what his mind demanded he do, but his heart declared war against him. The love in his heart overflowed for both his king and now... Segreti. How was this possible? How could he have lost his heart to Segreti so quickly? They weren’t fated to be together, not like Khalon and Riley. He shouldn’t feel so strongly, and now...

Ezra glared at the Eye. “How can you be so cruel?” The Eye itself had brought Segreti to Ezra over and over. *Why would you bring him to me only to rip him from my life?*

“That terrible?”

“Yes,” Ezra whispered, unable to stop the tear from rolling down his cheek. “I am torn.”

“Between?”

Ezra lifted his gaze to meet Segreti’s. “My duty and my love.”

Segreti sucked in a sharp breath. He closed his eye and hung his head. When he opened his eye, he lifted his gaze to Ezra’s, his smile breaking what remained of Ezra’s heart. He took Ezra’s hand in his and kissed his palm.

“Words I never believed I’d hear from another, much less someone as beautiful and enchanting as you. I wish I could have spared you the pain to your heart. Never had I expected to lose mine.”

“Segreti...”

“I won’t be the reason your heart breaks.”

“You already are.”

Segreti looked puzzled.

“Please forgive me.” He placed his hand to Segreti’s cheek. “We’ll see each other through this.”

“Ezra?”

Ezra drew on his Soldati power and sent the Eye to Khalon. Within seconds, Soldati flooded his bedchamber, followed by Riley and Khalon, both in their evening robes. Adira, Rayner, and Toka appeared soon after.

“What is the meaning of this?” Segreti demanded. He turned to Ezra. “Ezra?”

“The Soldati Eye has shown me a new vision of Khalon’s death.” Ezra wrapped his arms around himself in a feeble attempt at comfort. “At your hands.”

“No.” Segreti shook his head. “I would never harm Khalon, or anyone.”

Ezra took hold of Segreti’s hands. “I couldn’t keep my vision from my king. Had I wanted to, the Eye wouldn’t allow it. Please forgive me.”

“The Eye is never wrong,” Khalon replied, his voice laced with hurt and regret. “I’m afraid I have no choice, my old friend.” He closed his eyes and turned to embrace his prince. “Arrest Segreti. Take him to the cells.”

Ezra released Segreti and spun to face Khalon. “You’re arresting him?”

“It’s only a precaution,” Khalon replied gently.

“If I’m foreseen to kill you, why would the Saugur not have the same vision?” Segreti asked as the Soldati approached.

Khalon let out a heavy sigh. “If you’ll recall, in his vision, Riley never saw the face of my killer, only that he was big. Regardless of whether my murder was foreseen to be committed by you or a different Orso, my death would lead to the fall of the Soldati. I can’t take the risk. Until the full moon is over, you’ll be imprisoned for the safety of all. I’m sorry.”

The Soldati took hold of Segreti, forcing his arms behind him. Segreti closed his eye and shook his head, letting it hang in defeat as he was led toward the door.

“Wait!” Ezra turned to Khalon. “Your Majesty, perhaps the Eye is mistaken.”

“I wish it were so, but you know as well as I do what’s at stake.”

“You truly believe him capable of murder?”

Khalon appeared to give his question considerable thought. “I wish I could give you the answer you seek.”

“He’s a gentle, noble Orso. His heart is filled with kindness and honor. He’s fought at your side, Khalon.”

Khalon stared at him. “You’re in love with him?”

“I am.” Ezra moved his gaze to Segreti, who smiled despite the heartache in his eyes. “There must be another way.”

“I’m afraid your love blinds you,” Rayner said softly. “Your duty is to your realm. I’m sorry, Ezra.”

Ezra gaped at Rayner before anger flared through him. The audacity! “My *duty*? My duty! How dare you! You who defied your king and your entire realm to be with your mate! You dare speak to me of duty?”

“Ezra, please,” Rayner said softly, his expression filled with regret. “Forgive me, that’s not what I meant.”

“Oh? And what did you mean? You almost started a war for your mate! And yet you speak to me of duty?” Ezra held his arms at his sides, his fingers spread as magic pulsed through him, crackling from finger to finger.

Khalon held up a hand. “Ezra, please calm yourself.”

“And you, my king”—Ezra’s vision flashed white as he called upon his Soldati powers—“I needn’t speak the words.” They knew what Khalon had done. How he’d blindly accepted whatever price the priestess declared to have Riley returned to him from the dead. Ezra hadn’t called his king to have Segreti imprisoned like a murderer. He’d expected more from his dearest friends. “You chose love above all else, and now when I seek mercy for my own mate, I’m denied.”

“Ezra, it’s only until the full moon is over,” Khalon explained.

“Then why imprison him? Why not leave him in my care? Put guards outside the door, have them follow us, but put him in a cell?” The more he thought of Segreti imprisoned, the more his anger consumed him. His thoughts went to his vision of a different cell. *No*. The windows slammed open, a howling wind sweeping through the room.

“He’s right,” Riley said, turning to face Khalon. “If we imprison Segreti, we’re being hypocrites.”

“Riley,” Khalon began, only to have Riley put a hand up to stop him.

“No. I’m not going through this again.”

Khalon let out a heavy sigh. “Riley, please.”

“I have as much power as you do, if not more.”

Khalon blinked at Riley.

“I’ve read the laws, every scroll, every damned book. I’m a Soldati prince, and Saugur. I love you, Khalon, more than anything, and I might not be familiar with hundreds of years of Soldati tradition, but I know my part. I won’t be a prince in name alone. *We* will find a way to fix this, and that’s all I’m going to say.”

Khalon eyed him, and Riley crossed his arms over his chest, an eyebrow arched.

“Enough,” Segreti growled, jerking his arm out of the Soldati’s hold. He held his hand out to Ezra, who took it, warmth washing over him. He withdrew his power and allowed himself to be embraced. “It’s one day. Then I’ll be back in your arms, and we can discuss our future.” He kissed Ezra, and Ezra didn’t care who was in the room. He melted against Segreti, basking in his light. Segreti pulled back and brushed his fingers down Ezra’s cheek. “I love you.”

“And I love you,” Ezra replied quietly. “I’ll be waiting for you.”

With another sweet kiss to his lips, Segreti turned, allowing himself to be secured by the Soldati, his narrowed gaze on Khalon.

“I’m ready, Your Majesty.”

The Soldati escorted Segreti from the room, and Ezra balled his hands into fists at his sides. Khalon turned to Ezra, regret in his amber gaze. “I hope that when all this is done, you’ll find it in your heart to forgive us, my dear friend.”

Ezra couldn’t bring himself to reply. He stood as everyone left the room except for Riley, who placed a hand to Ezra’s cheek.

“It’ll be okay.”

Ezra nodded. Silence filled his room once Riley departed. How had it come to this? He'd barely had a moment to understand his own sentiments. He was in love. His heart swelled, then sank. Turning, he spotted the orb floating nearby, a low pulse radiating from it. Grabbing one of his pillows, he hurled it at the offending relic.

"Get out of my sight. The only traitor around here is you. I've never regretted being your voice until this moment." Ezra wiped at his wet cheeks, his face hot and flushed. With a frustrated grunt, he stormed off into his washroom. Perhaps a nice cool shower would help calm his nerves.

Inside his washroom, he lost himself to the fog of his mind. He took his time washing himself, ignoring the floating oversized marble. Dressing in his nightshirt and trousers, he climbed into bed. It was still early evening, but he couldn't bring himself to face anyone. Instead he lay where Segreti had in his bed and inhaled deeply, Segreti's heady scent still in his sheets. He closed his eyes and clutched at the blankets, bringing them close against him. It was only for a little over a day. He tried to comfort himself by repeating the thought. Only for a short while. Then his love would be at his side.

Would Segreti still wish to live in their kingdom? What of the trust and friendship between him and Khalon? Segreti had looked so hurt and angry when he'd met Khalon's gaze. What if their relationship was forever lost? Would Ezra be forced to choose between his kingdom and his love?

"Ugh, this is torture!" Ezra buried his face in his pillow. He refused to dwell on this a moment longer. Instead, he dwelled on it until the sun rose, its soft light filtering in through his windows, announcing a new day. "Bloody hell," he said through a groan. Forcing himself to get up, he went to his washroom, grunting at his reflection. His eyes were puffy and red, his hair sticking up in all directions. He was a mess. The minutes seemed to go by like droplets of molasses in their near stillness.

Showered and dressed, he left his chambers and skipped the dining hall. He couldn't so much as think of ingesting anything. The sound of revelry floated up through an open

window in the hall, and he frowned. Outside, the festival carried on as normal with everyone eating, drinking, and joining in the festivities. Perhaps some fresh air might help ease his stormy thoughts. He had wandered the gardens for what seemed like an eternity when he spotted a lone figure sitting on a stone bench, his chin lifted to the sky and his eyes closed. An Orso.

Ezra approached and was greeted with a sad smile as he stopped in front of the Orso, who stood and bowed.

“You’re Ezra, the healer,” the Orso said. “I’m Fausti.”

“Oh!” So this was young Fausti. He appeared as young as Segreti mentioned, though nearly as big, with handsome features and amber eyes with creases at the corners that showed he smiled often. “Segreti often speaks of you.”

Fausti blinked at him. “He does?” His cheeks went pink. “I fear you must think me a cad.”

“On the contrary. He speaks very highly of you, of how honorable and good you are. He’s clearly quite fond of you.”

“Oh.” Fausti beamed brightly. “He’s always been good to me. A grumpy older brother of sorts.” His smile dimmed. “And now there is nothing I can do to return his kindness. The Soldati king won’t even see me to plead Segreti’s case.” He dropped onto the bench with a frustrated sigh. “How can Queen Verity allow this injustice?”

“It’s only for a day. He’ll be with us again very soon.” Ezra wasn’t sure who he attempted to console, Fausti or himself.

Fausti’s frown grew deep as he regarded Ezra. “A day?”

“Yes. Until, um, the matter is cleared.”

Fausti shook his head, his expression puzzled. “Then the trial is cancelled?”

“Trial?” Ezra’s blood turned to ice. “What trial?”

“Segreti will be on trial for treason against the Soldati. Word is, a plot to murder the king was discovered by his second this morning. Rayner intercepted a letter from Segreti



to one of his supposed conspirators, a letter which is to be presented as evidence against Segreti. They say it describes his hesitancy in carrying through with the assassination, as circumstances have changed.”

“Lies!” Ezra refused to believe it. Segreti plotting to murder Khalon? Absolute madness! “Excuse me. I must go.”

“He would never do what he’s been accused of,” Fausti insisted, his eyes glassy. “Segreti is the best of all of us. Believe in him.”

“I do. I will see to this. I promise you.” Spinning on his heels, Ezra ran for the castle, but instead of searching out Khalon or Rayner, he made straight for the winding stone staircase that led to the small prison beneath the castle. The cells were all empty but one. Segreti sat on the cot, his broad shoulders slumped and head lowered, fingers laced between his knees. His clothes had been brought to him, the same clothes he’d worn in Ezra’s bedchamber before they’d made love. His hair fell over his face, shielding him from Ezra’s view as he approached.

“Segreti.”

“My love.” Segreti lifted his head at the sound of Ezra’s voice and smiled, but it quickly faded. “You shouldn’t have come.”

“How could I not?” Ezra held on to the cold bars, standing as close to them as possible, trying his best to be as near to Segreti as he could. Segreti stood and came to him. He placed his hands over Ezra’s.

“Then you’ve heard.”

“It’s not true. I know it isn’t.”

“Your king believes otherwise,” Segreti growled.

“I’ll speak to him. Demand your release. He can’t possibly believe this farce.”

“He has *evidence*.” Segreti all but spat the word.

“Did you write it?”

“Of course not.”

“Then you’ll be found innocent.” Khalon was reasonable, always had been. His compassion was renowned throughout the land. Ezra refused to believe he would condemn Segreti so quickly and ruthlessly. Something sinister was at work here; Ezra felt it down to his soul.

“You can’t be so foolish.” Segreti released Ezra and returned to the cot, where he resumed his seat.

“What?”

“Khalon will never release me. I’m a threat to him and his realm. He won’t trust me again after this.” He closed his eye and shook his head. “I should never have come into this damnable kingdom.”

“Why did you?”

Segreti glanced in his direction. “It no longer matters.”

Ezra flinched. “And what of me? Do I no longer matter?”

“You were a fairy tale,” Segreti replied hoarsely. “One I should’ve known better than to believe in.”

“You don’t mean that.” Ezra’s words were almost a whisper. How much more could his heart take?

“You... you would do best to forget me.”

“How can you say such a thing?”

“It’s over, Ezra.” Segreti motioned around him. “My fate lies in the hands of your king.” His gaze grew hard. “And you’ve seen for yourself where it’s led me.”

Ezra gasped. “You can’t possibly compare Khalon to that bastard.”

Segreti released a heavy, weary sigh. “No, but that doesn’t mean I can trust him.”

“Please don’t give up. We’ve—”

“You should go.”

Ezra sucked in a sharp breath, tears stinging the backs of his eyes. That was it? This was as far as Segreti’s love went?

“I was wrong.”

Segreti glanced at him but remained silent, his expression guarded.

It pained Ezra to say the words, but he forced them out regardless. “When I said you could never disappoint me.” He angrily wiped at the tear that rolled down his cheek. “All this talk of mates and love was simply pretty words. You never meant them.”

Segreti closed his eye, his brows furrowed as he averted his face. “Ezra, please.”

“No. You lied, General. You told me you read those stories because you could lose yourself in the notion that someone might love another so completely they’d face any threat, no matter how great.”

“Please, stop.” Segreti’s pleas were barely audible, but Ezra heard them clearly as if he’d shouted them. He heard the words not spoken.

“And yet here you are, surrendering.”

Segreti launched to his feet, the agony written across his features almost too much for Ezra to bear. “And what would you have me do?”

“Something! Anything but merely accept your fate! You’ve spent centuries at war, yet when the time comes for you to fight for love, you yield.”

“As you pointed out,” Segreti said with a sigh, “I’ve spent centuries at war. I’m tired of fighting.”

Ezra shook his head, unable to understand. Nothing made sense to him. He stepped away from the cell, refusing to surrender to the anguish in his heart. How could he have been so foolish? He needed to be alone. To think. With one last look at Segreti, he shook his head before leaving.

He didn’t bother seeking out Khalon, Rayner, or even Adira. If Segreti refused to help himself, what could Ezra do? Not able to bear being in his room, he sought the comfort of his cottage. Although touched by memories of Segreti, Ezra

could lose himself in his herbs and books. By sunset he was so exhausted, he fell asleep on the love seat, a book in his hands. When he woke, he found Riley sitting at the end of the love seat, staring off at nothing in particular.

“Your Highness.”

Seeming to snap himself out of it, Riley gave him a sad smile. “Hey. Sorry if I woke you.”

“No, you didn’t.” Ezra placed his book on the table next to him.

“How are you holding up?”

“I can see why some have sworn off matters of the heart. It’s unbearably painful.”

“Yeah. I’m sorry things have turned out this way.”

Ezra nodded his understanding. “Thank you for trying to help.”

“I had a long conversation with Khalon. I know there’s been a bit of a learning curve. Okay, a lot of a learning curve, and it’s partly my fault. I’ve been so afraid of failing that at some point, I stopped trying. I accepted my title. It’s time I acted like it. Khalon may be king, but I’m his mate, the prince, and Saugur. By hiding away in my garden, I’ve been letting the Soldati down. I won’t do that anymore. What good are my powers if I don’t use them?”

Ezra smiled despite his heartache. He held great admiration for his prince, always had.

“Khalon’s used to being the one who makes all the decisions, and I get it. Change is hard.” His eyes widened. “Boy, do I get it. But guess what? We either embrace them and adapt or get left behind, and I refuse to be left behind. From now on, we make decisions together, and if we don’t agree, that’s what the council is for. You, Rayner, and Adira, your positions are critical to the Soldati monarchy; don’t ever forget that. Anyway, I’ve babbled on long enough. We’re going to get through this. Something about this whole mess reeks.”

Ezra sat forward. “You sense it as well?”

“You bet I do.” Riley folded his arms over his chest, his eyes narrowed. “The visions haven’t changed, and none of us have had any luck finding the traitors. There might not be a whole lot we know about my powers, but the Eye? How are these assholes hiding from the Eye?”

“Do you think they have help?” Ezra asked, the pieces starting to come together. It would explain why the conspirators had remained out of their grasp for so long. If they were receiving some kind of help from someone or something, whatever it was would have to be powerful enough to interfere with the Eye’s power. There was nothing he knew of with such power. Not anymore.

“It’s the only thing that makes sense. Has the Eye ever been wrong?”

Ezra shook his head. He’d never been so miserable in all his life.

“If Segreti’s found guilty... what will they do to him?” Riley asked.

“He will be presented to the Goddess. She will decide his punishment.”

“Meaning...?”

Ezra swallowed past the lump in his throat and closed his eyes. “I’ll never see him again.”

Riley grew silent, which was very unlike him. Something was wrong.

“Your Highness?”

“I think it’s time.” Riley turned to face him, his expression determined.

“Time for what?”

“Time for you to know the truth we’ve been keeping from you.”

## CHAPTER NINE



SEGRETI SAT ON THE COT, his head against the stone wall as the first rays of moonlight entered his cell through the small window. He'd been here for hours, and with every passing moment, the ache in his heart grew deeper. Why hadn't he foreseen this? He should have known such a complex plot would bring about complications. Of course, he'd never expected the complication to come in the form of his beautiful Ezra.

With a frustrated growl, he stood and paced the cell. Never would he have imagined losing his heart so completely in such a short time. Perhaps he'd lost his heart to Ezra centuries ago and hadn't realized? Or perhaps his inner bear had known all along that Ezra was destined to be his. Patience he had, more than most, but now, knowing the pain he'd brought to Ezra, his conviction wavered.

No, he must be strong. Ezra was the reason he was more determined than ever in his mission. He'd see this through, no matter the outcome.

"The rumors are true."

Segreti turned to find Vestri standing outside his cell. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to see for myself." Vestri approached the cell door, his brows drawn together in concern. "Are you really to be tried for treason against the Soldati?"

Segreti scoffed. "Tried for a crime I didn't commit."

Vestri glanced toward the end of the corridor to the entrance, where Soldati guards stood at attention. He drew closer, his voice lowered. “You didn’t plot to murder the king of the Soldati?”

Segreti hesitated. “Were I involved in such a plot, I would never have done something so foolish as to confess to it in a letter.”

Vestri studied him. He seemed to give Segreti’s answer considerable thought. “Khalon is your friend.”

“Khalon *was* my friend, and in name only apparently,” Segreti growled, joining Vestri by his cell door. “A true friend wouldn’t have condemned me so quickly. Pavoni may have been a bastard, but at least he never pretended otherwise.”

“What will you do?”

Segreti cast a glance in the direction of the Soldati guards, his words hushed as he spoke. “Certainly not sit idly by while I get convicted of a wrong I’ve not committed. Blasted floating orb. I should’ve known the healer was trouble the moment I laid my eye on him.”

“You blame the healer?” Vestri appeared surprised. “Word is you took him as your mate.”

“I was a fool, believing he’d come to care for me. He’s the reason I’m in here. The moment I let down my guard, he betrayed me. No warning. Simply called the guards on me.”

“Cowardly.” Vestri grew quiet, and Segreti laid his head against the bars.

“Pavoni was right about the Soldati. Nothing but arrogant, haughty cowards who believe themselves greater than the rest of us.”

“This is a travesty. An absolute insult,” Vestri replied with a growl. “How can Queen Verity stand for this?”

“You forget Khalon made Verity queen. She owes him a debt. My life seems to be the price of that debt.”

“There must be something we can do.”

“I appreciate the sentiment, my friend, but I won’t allow you or any other Orso to risk themselves for me.” Segreti resumed his seat on the cot. “I’ll think of something. I won’t stand for this humiliation.”

Vestri nodded. “I shall pray to the Goddess for you, my friend.” With that, he left Segreti to the stillness of the empty prison. It was clear the cells had not been occupied in a very long time. Segreti couldn’t remember hearing of the last poor creature to end up down here. Only a few more hours and this ordeal would be over. Would Ezra return to him?

The night sky filled with stars, the moonlight growing brighter as the evening continued. Several hours later as the guards changed, Gori arrived. Segreti was surprised to see he wasn’t accompanied by Lazzari.

“Vestri came to me.”

To see him? Why would Vestri report anything to Gori?

“He told me everything.” Gori’s intense gaze told Segreti exactly what Vestri had relayed to him, and suddenly the pieces began to fall into place. Quiet, unassuming Gori, who never seemed to have a thought of his own and followed Lazzari around like a lost cub. A clever ruse.

“It’s all true,” Segreti said, coming to stand at the iron bars beside the cell door. He shook his head, his voice lowered when he spoke. “Khalon will regret this day.”

Gori seemed to consider something before coming to some decision. “Take me hostage.”

“Pardon?”

“My knife.” He dropped his gaze to the knife sheathed in the scabbard at his belt.

“Are you certain?” Segreti asked, voice low.

Gori met his gaze. Gone was the uncertain insipidness, and in its place a darkness filled with machination. “Are you prepared to carry through with your plot?”

“Kill Khalon.”



“Well?” Gori’s gaze never wavered.

Segreti nodded, his gaze hard. “He’s shown his true colors. His deceit will cost him.” He slipped his arm through the bars as if to hug his friend, ignoring the shout of the Soldati guard who took off in their direction. Grabbing Gori’s knife, he spun Gori to face the guards, an arm around his neck and the tip of the knife pressed to his flesh.

“Please, Segreti, no!”

“Open this door!” Segreti glared at the two guards, swords brandished in their hands.

“Release him,” one demanded.

“Throw him the key to the cell or I’ll slice his throat. You’ll have an innocent Orso’s blood on your hands.”

The guards hesitated.

“Fine. Start a war with the Orso. I’m certain the countless deaths will be worth it.” Segreti made to cut Gori’s throat when one of the guards quickly unlatched the key from his belt and threw it at Gori, who caught it. He held it up, and Segreti growled at Gori. “Unlock the door.”

Gori fumbled from his awkward position, but they’d purposefully stood right at the door’s edge.

“No one moves,” Segreti warned as Gori struggled with the lock but finally managed to get it open. Segreti kicked at the cell door, then reached around to move the knife to his other hand and slowly step outside the cell, his gaze never leaving the armed Soldati. “Move,” Segreti ordered Gori. “Slowly.” He kept Gori in front of him as he backed them up toward the exit, the Soldati following him. Segreti had just reached the prison’s doorway when one of the Soldati shifted and roared, sounding the alarm. *Blasted hell.* Segreti grabbed Gori and dragged him along as he ran out and slammed the prison door closed, locking the guards inside.

“Stop!”

Several guards on either side of the corridor they stood in shouted, and Gori grabbed his arm. “This way.” They darted

into a small corridor that appeared to be a dead end.

“Are you mad? We’ll be skewered!”

“Trust me.” Gori threw a hand out, pushing against the wall. To Segreti’s astonishment, a door appeared. “Quickly, before they see us.”

Segreti ran in after Gori, the door swiftly closing behind them.

“How did you know this was here?” Segreti asked, following Gori down the dimly lit passage. It was wide enough for two and seemed to stretch out for miles, with several dark tunnels every few feet on each side.

“We’ve been studying this castle for months.”

*We?* Segreti followed Gori through a maze of darkened corridors, the only light coming from wall sconces lit by magic that had been placed along the way. Segreti had never heard of there being secret passages inside Soldati Castle, but then he supposed if everyone knew about them, they wouldn’t be secret.

“I don’t understand,” Segreti murmured as they hurried down twists and turns.

“You will.”

Gori turned left into one of the tunnels. A door sat at the end, and Gori opened it for him. Inside was a small stone room with wall sconces, an old table with several maps laid out, and two familiar faces.

“Lazzari? Vestri?” Segreti scanned the small room. “Where’s Fausti?”

“We know you care for the cub, but he’s not one of us and can’t be trusted. He’s too naive and weak-willed.”

“For what?” Though Segreti already knew.

“To kill the Soldati king,” Gori replied, coming to stand at the head of the table. These were the conspirators Khalon had spent months looking for. As they’d suspected, the traitors had

been right under everyone's noses. It didn't explain how they'd managed to evade capture this long.

"No one can kill the Soldati King," Segreti grumbled. "Shouldn't we be finding a way out of the castle?"

"We have time," Gori assured him. "Few know of these tunnels."

"How do *you* know of them?"

Vestri grinned broadly. "The fennec foxling servant."

"Sansone." Segreti shook his head. "How? The foxlings are loyal to Khalon. They'd never betray him, especially after he marched into our realm to rescue one of their own." Sansone, like all foxling servants of the Soldati, had inherited his position from his father, the honor being passed down from generation to generation. Sansone would never betray the Soldati. Unless...

"We kidnapped his twin and have been holding him hostage for months. Given our allegiance to Pavoni and our king's reputation with servants, Sansone was quick to give us what we wanted." Lazzari's lecherous gaze made Segreti feel sick to his stomach. He knew exactly what Lazzari inferred. Sansone either betrayed his king or these monsters would force themselves on his brother.

"Is the foxling still alive?"

"Of course," Vestri said with a snort. "No use killing a good servant. Once we've killed Khalon, taken the Soldati realm, and dethroned Queen Verity, the foxlings will become our slaves."

Segreti folded his arms over his chest. "You seem to be forgetting two rather important obstacles in this grand scheme of yours. Even if we somehow manage to kill Khalon, there's the Saugur and the Eye, which are also the two reasons we won't be able to get near Khalon."

"The dark demons will take care of them and leave the Soldati realm to us."

Segreti's blood turned to ice, and he stared at Gori. "Dark demons? You've made a pact with dark demons?"

A wicked gleam filled Gori's power-hungry eyes. "The moment we discovered all was not as it seemed with Khalon, we sought them out. They were eager to give us whatever we asked for in exchange for Khalon's death. With the Soldati king gone, the demons can harvest all the souls from the human world they desire, and we shall live as kings for the rest of our immortal life. Once Sansone informed us the Saugur had a vision of his and Khalon's death, we knew we'd succeed in our plot. We only had to devise it. And then the healer presented us with the perfect weapon." Gori motioned to Segreti.

"You know all is not well with Khalon," Vestri said. "You almost admitted as much the day we arrived. At first, I thought nothing of it. You said the prince was powerful and would protect his king at all costs. I found that strange. You then made sure to quickly add 'not that Khalon needs protecting.' In that moment, we knew the king was vulnerable. It didn't matter how, only that he was."

"And he is, isn't he?" Lazzari asked, excitement in his voice.

Segreti nodded.

"Which is why we have a small army of demons surrounding the Soldati Woods, waiting on our word."

Gori was a fool if he believed he could trust the demons to spare them. Demons were foul creatures. They'd outnumber Gori and his followers, but he'd worry about that later.

"Even if Khalon is vulnerable, how are we going to get to him? There's an army of Soldati looking for me, and the Saugur, the Eye, and the council are all protecting him. We'll never get anywhere near him."

Lazzari nodded his agreement. "Which is why we must bring him to us."

"How?"

"The healer," Gori replied, sounding certain.

Segreti scoffed. “You’re mad.”

“We’ll use the healer to draw the prince away from his mate.”

“The Eye will see you coming,” Segreti replied with a shake of his head.

“What the Eye sees, we see,” Gori replied.

Segreti stared at him. “Impossible.”

Gori reached beneath the collar of his tunic and pulled at a black cord to reveal a golden stone with black lines.

“What is it?” Segreti asked, his blood turning to ice, their fears confirmed. Khalon had been right. They’d found it.

“The Soldati Tiger’s Eye.”

“Where did you get it?” The Soldati relic had been gifted to Pavoni’s father by Khalon’s father back during a particularly devastating war against the demons. It was a powerful artifact capable of seeing “echoes” the Soldati Eye pulsed during a vision. It had been gifted to the old Orso king to protect him and his warriors. Segreti hid the rage coursing through him. The relic had been buried with the old Orso king.

“We have an ally in the queen’s court. The artifact had been buried with the old king, but Pavoni had exhumed the body and taken it when he was informed of its power.”

Vestri let out a grunt. “Pavoni foolishly tossed it aside, believing it had lost its power, when in truth, he simply didn’t know how to use it.”

“Thanks to our ally,” Gori said, tucking the stone back into his tunic, “we received letters from the former Soldati King to the old Orso king revealing a hidden clue. The reason it didn’t work for Pavoni was that it only works if it’s near the Eye.”

“That’s how you’ve managed to remain hidden,” Segreti said. “Because you can see what Ezra sees.”

“The healer is in his cottage, mourning your loss,” Gori replied, his words striking Segreti’s heart. “At first we’d intended to rid ourselves of him, but with you joining the fight,

you can have him to yourself. If you do this, the demons will allow you to keep him if you wish it. Convince Ezra to join you, kidnap him, hell, drug him for all I care. Think about it. He can be yours. Take him away from here and do what you will with him.”

Segreti pretended to give the matter thought. He leaned his arms on the table, studying the maps that had come from the Soldati’s map room, no doubt retrieved by Sansone. He lifted his gaze to Gori. “What do I need to do?”

“Go to your healer. Get him to the south gardens. Sansone will use the passages to get to the prince and speak privately with him at the same moment your presence in the castle near the king’s chambers is ‘discovered.’ In the commotion, the prince will slip into the secret passage with Sansone.”

“And why would he do that?”

“Because Sansone will inform him that if he doesn’t come, the healer will be killed.”

That made no sense. “Why would Ezra simply not use his powers?”

Gori sighed. “Because you will make certain he doesn’t. Love is a weakness, Segreti. Use his love for you.”

“You honestly think the prince will come?” Segreti asked, sounding uncertain.

“The prince is still very much human and soft-hearted. Unlike his king, he’s not willing to sacrifice anyone, much less someone he cares deeply for, no matter the consequences. He doesn’t know we have the Tiger’s Eye.”

Vestri nodded his agreement. “Once we have the prince where we want him, Sansone will inform Khalon of the danger the prince finds himself in. Khalon will fight for his prince, vulnerable or not. His love for his prince will be his downfall. You will lay them all to waste in the garden.”

“Enough talk,” Gori declared. He met Segreti’s gaze. “Are you with us or not?”

As if Segreti had a choice. It wasn't as if they would let him walk away. They all knew it. He held out his hand. "I'll need a sword."

With an evil grin, Gori held out his sword to Segreti. "Let's go, then. There's a passage that leads to an exit a few feet from the healer's cottage. We'll be in the gardens, waiting."

Segreti made to take the sword, only to have Gori pull it back, his darkened gaze on Segreti. "We're counting on you, General."

The words didn't need to be spoken. Should Segreti think of betraying them or not following through, death would be too easy. He was under no illusion what they would do to hurt him most.

"Then let this be done," Segreti proclaimed, taking the sword from Gori. He motioned toward the door, following Gori, with Lazzari and Vestri on his heels. They headed out into the maze, walking for what seemed like an eternity but could only have been a few minutes. The passage grew cooler, meaning they were getting closer to the exit.

"Ready?" Gori asked, moving aside and making way for him.

"Yes."

"We'll meet you in the gardens. Oh, and General, should you change your mind, know we're listening."

"I'll get this done." Segreti cracked open the door and made sure the coast was clear before darting out into the shadows. He slipped the sword into his belt, then hurried toward the cottage, its soft light confirming Ezra's presence. Using the trees and shadows to conceal himself, Segreti circled the cottage, making certain no Soldati lay in wait for him. Peeking through one of the windows, his heart leaped into his throat at the sight of Ezra sitting on his love seat reading one of his books, a knit blanket about his shoulders and the fire crackling in the hearth. His beauty never failed to

steal Segreti's breath, and he yearned for the day they might sit like this together.

Heading for the door, Segreti crouched low to the side of it and took hold of the handle. He opened it and slipped inside, then locked it behind him. Ezra gasped and jumped from the love seat, his book falling to one side.

"Segreti? What are you doing here? How did you escape?"

Segreti ran to him and pulled him into an embrace. He inhaled Ezra's scent. "It's a long story, and we have no time. The Soldati are looking for me." Gori had alluded to the fact someone was listening. He had to be careful. "I needed to see you, to see your beautiful face once more and taste your sweet lips. Forgive me for the harsh words I said while in that damnable cell. I thought I'd never see you again." And he might not after this.

"I'm sorry as well, my love." Ezra met Segreti's gaze, his eyes intense. They flashed white before he bowed his head slightly, his eyes never leaving Segreti's. "This is a dangerous game we play. Know that I forgive your deceit, for I know your heart."

*He knows, and he forgives me.*

Segreti replied by kissing Ezra soundly, his heart all but ready to burst. "Come with me away from here."

Ezra appeared uncertain. "Leave my king and my prince?"

"You will see them again one day. Khalon has his Saugur. You needn't be tied to your duty. You're more than the Eye." He cupped Ezra's cheek. "We have a chance to be free and happy. I love you."

"And I love you. Yes. I'll go with you."

"Quickly, then." Segreti took hold of Ezra's hand and hurried to the door. He opened it and jerked back as the Eye darted past, disappearing through the trees.

"We must hurry!" Ezra said, breaking into a run with Segreti. "There's no telling what it will do."



“The south gardens,” Segreti said. “I’ve friends waiting to get us to safety.”

They ran for the gardens, the moonlight casting an ethereal glow across the lush greenery and hundreds of colorful flowers. It was almost time. Coming to a halt, Ezra turned to him, puzzled.

“Why are you stopping?”

“We’re here,” Segreti called out.

Vestri, Gori, and Lazzari stepped from the shadows and approached.

“I don’t understand,” Ezra murmured, his gaze going to the three Orso and then Segreti. “What is this?”

“What this is,” Gori explained, his eyes filled with darkness, “is that we’re taking your kingdom. When you wake, your king and your prince will be dead. Your world will be no more.”

Ezra whirled to face Segreti. “What have you done?”

“Forgive me, my love.” Segreti struck Ezra with the hilt of his sword, catching him as he crumpled to the ground. He lifted his gaze to Gori. “It’s time.”

## CHAPTER TEN



EZRA STIRRED, his head throbbing. Blasted hell, that hurt more than he'd anticipated. The scent of freshly cut grass and flowers filled his senses, but there was something else. A putrid, rancid odor that made him want to vomit. Slowly he opened his eyes and stared at the night sky, confused by the black clouds. Terror gripped him. Those weren't black clouds, but an ocean of demons blanketing the sky, waiting.

“What the fuck? You traitorous son of a bitch! Where's Ezra?”

Ezra rolled onto his side. Riley stood before Segreti. It had begun. Ezra pushed himself to his feet, running toward them just as Khalon emerged from the castle, Rayner, Adira, and the Soldati close behind.

“Segreti, no!”

Distracted by Khalon's shout, Riley hesitated just long enough for Segreti to plunge the sword into Riley's side. An agonized wail tore from Khalon, and a small army of Orso emerged from the garden, charging toward Rayner, Adira, and the Soldati while Khalon sped for Riley, only to be intercepted by Segreti.

“You cowardly traitor!”

Ezra gasped as the Eye appeared at his side and his vision came to fruition. Segreti swung his sword, slicing through Khalon's jerkin, blood splattering Segreti. The demons above them screeched and hissed in triumph. The gardens became both graveyard and battlefield as Soldati fought a small army

of Orso that had emerged from the trees while demons began to descend. Ezra shifted into his tiger form and joined the battle. He roared, the light from his Soldati soul incinerating the demons it touched.

“The Soldati king is dead,” Segreti bellowed, standing with sword in hand as Vestri, Gori, and Lazzari encircled him. “Can your men be trusted?”

“They have been helping since the beginning,” Gori confirmed.

“Are there any more?” Segreti asked, his gaze sweeping the Orso fighting the Soldati. “I wish to know how many I’ll be forced to share the spoils with.”

“The queen’s advisor and his personal guards are the only ones absent. He’s the one who gave us the Soldati Tiger’s Eye,” Vestri said. “He awaits word from us on our victory so he and his Orso can dethrone the queen.”

“Good to know.”

At the familiar voice, everyone turned, their eyes about to pop from their skulls and their jaws slack as Khalon stood. The demons screeched and froze, their empty eye sockets on Khalon and then Riley, who pushed himself to his feet. Ezra quickly shifted back to human form.

“What the hell is going on?” Vestri demanded, whirling to face Segreti. “It was a trap.”

Riley lifted his so-called bloody hand and licked a finger. “I’ve seen enough movies to know how to fake a good murder. Anyway, doesn’t matter. Point is, you’re done.”

An army of Soldati in tiger and human forms emerged from the trees, launching into battle with the now shifted Orso, their roars filling the night air. The demons above Ezra howled and dispersed, but not before dozens were disintegrated by the Soldati’s light. Segreti fought several Orso who’d remained in human form while Ezra summoned his powers. He thrust a hand to the side, sending an Orso who’d charged Segreti soaring against a tree. The wind howled, and Ezra hurried to his king’s side. As his brethren fought the Orso, Ezra kept his

king safe, the Eye funneling its power into him, sparks of white light bursting through him as he made quick work of anyone who would dare to harm Khalon.

Vestri, Gori, and Lazzari made a feeble attempt to escape, but it was Gori who removed a small crossbow from behind his back and aimed it at Segreti's back while Segreti fought one of the traitors.

How dare he attempt to kill Ezra's mate.

With a fierce roar, Ezra threw his arms out, the power of the Eye exploding through him. The blast thrust Gori off his feet, slamming him into a tree with such force the tree splintered. Gori dropped the weapon and gasped for breath, blood on the corners of his mouth as Ezra held a hand out, pinning Gori to the tree. As Ezra approached, a gasp escaped him, and bile rose in his throat.

Gori's soul... Ezra had seen that murky glow before.

"*You.*" White flashed before Ezra's eyes, and rage filled him. When he spoke, it was with the voice of the Eye. "You were in his cell that day with Pavoni, taking your pound of flesh. You reveled in his suffering."

Gori's lips curled in a vile grin. "And I loved every moment of it. Remember my face, healer. For I was the one who whispered the idea of your beloved's fate in Pavoni's ear."

With an agonized cry, Ezra threw his hand out, only to stop himself. As fiercely as he desired to end the miserable bastard's life, it wasn't his place. The Soldati and Queen Verity would ensure Gori paid for his crimes. With a grunt, he withdrew his powers, letting Gori drop to the ground.

"I would advise you enjoy the next few minutes of fresh air," Ezra growled as he turned away from Gori. "For it will be your final taste of freedom."

Gori's war cry echoed through the garden, nearly drowned out by Segreti's Orso roar as he sped toward Ezra. Spinning on his heels, Ezra threw his hand out, his powers disintegrating the knife Gori had hurled toward the back of his head. Gori

charged, rage and hatred in his wild eyes. Closing his fist, Ezra crushed Gori's windpipe. Segreti called to Ezra in the distance, his voice barely audible over the howling wind as Ezra released the full force of his power. The tree before him exploded into millions of tiny pieces, along with Gori's body, blood splattering Ezra, but he didn't so much as blink. Gori would never hurt anyone else, ever again.

"My love!"

Ezra lowered his arm. The wind stopped and the night grew silent once more as he turned to face the stillness behind him. Khalon and Riley stood in each other's embrace, the Soldati army surrounding them. The traitors were on their knees in shackles, the demons gone.

It was finally over.

"Ezra?"

At the soft word, Ezra fell to his knees, tears in his eyes. Segreti ran to his side and gathered him in his arms, cradling him close as the last of Ezra's power returned to the Eye. He laid his head against Segreti's chest, eyes closed as Segreti lifted him into his arms.

"I am safe and well," Segreti assured Ezra as he carried Ezra into the castle, murmuring a few words to Riley and Khalon before taking Ezra into his bedchamber and closing the door behind them. He placed Ezra on his feet in his washroom and prepared a bath. Ezra didn't quite know what to do with himself. Everything had happened so fast. He decided not to think on it but instead bask in Segreti's tenderness.

The heavenly aroma of lavender filled the washroom, and Ezra allowed himself to be undressed and helped into the tub of steaming hot water. The moment the water sluiced over his skin, he released a sigh that appeared to have come from his very core. A weight lifted off his shoulders, and he laid his head back, smiling softly at the feel of Segreti soaping his body.

"I wish I could have spared you that horror."

Ezra opened his eyes and lifted his head. He met Segreti's gaze and cupped his cheek. "It's done. His vileness was a stain upon this world. Never again will he hurt some other innocent as he did you."

Segreti turned his face and kissed Ezra's palm. "You truly forgive me for the deception?"

"When Riley said it was time for me to learn the truth, I had been prepared for all manner of platitudes and apologies. I hadn't expected to discover I was part of a clever plot to flush out the traitors." Ezra stroked Segreti's cheek with his thumb, the glow of the wall sconces and gentle lapping of the water as Segreti washed him bringing him peace. "Khalon confessed you'd agreed to help because of me, to keep me safe."

Segreti nodded. He leaned over the marble tub's edge and kissed Ezra sweetly. "For months I've been trying to find the traitors, growing ever closer to discovering their identities. I couldn't allow them to harm you."

Ezra's heart swelled. "My champion."

"As you are mine. My sweet Ezra, ready to battle any dragons that may threaten his love."

"Always." Ezra kissed him, melting into the taste of his tongue and the warmth of his mouth. He sat up and placed his hands to Segreti's face, their kiss deepening until they were panting. A groan of protest escaped him when Segreti pulled back, making Segreti chuckle.

"Come. The king and the prince wait for us. We'll see them, then return so I might finally claim my mate."

Ezra could barely contain his smile. "It's time?"

"Yes, my love." Segreti brushed his lips over Ezra's, his voice quiet. "The time has come. My bear would not allow me to claim you with the deceit between us. Had you not been informed of the plot by our prince, I would have told you the moment I could. I have been desperate to claim you as my mate, but there must never be anything but honesty between us."

“Yes,” Ezra agreed. He swiftly finished washing and stood, a wicked smile coming onto his lips when Segreti stood and adjusted himself, a low groan escaping him.

“We should make this a quick visit.”

Ezra laughed, then thanked Segreti for helping him out of the tub. He dried himself quickly, then dressed.

They soon stood in Khalon’s study along with Riley, Rayner, Toka, Adira, Fausti, and Sansone. Ezra turned to Sansone.

“How is your brother?”

Sansone’s eyes grew glassy. “He is well, thank the Goddess. His Majesty sent someone to find him the moment I informed him of Gori’s treachery.”

“So Khalon knew this whole time?” Ezra asked.

Khalon nodded from his seat behind his desk, Riley nestled at his side. “I had asked Segreti if he had an Orso who he trusted with his life. Someone who could carry out a perilous mission for me.”

Segreti turned his attention to Fausti. “You found Sansone’s brother.”

Sansone gasped, a hand flying to his mouth. “You?”

Fausti shrugged. “I knew Lazzari was up to something. That jackal has always been unscrupulous and vile. I followed him one evening and found the hidden den. When he left, I sneaked in and found the poor foxling shackled inside. I eased his terror and promised him we would free him soon. Then I reported my findings to Khalon. When given the orders, I fetched your brother.”

The tears in Sansone’s eyes spilled, and he launched himself at Fausti, who caught him. “Easy there, my little foxling,” Fausti murmured. He ran a hand over Sansone’s hair. “All is well. Your brother is safe and unharmed.”

Sansone nodded, his cheeks flushed as Fausti placed him on his feet. Ezra had a feeling they’d be seeing more of these

two, judging by the starry look in Sansone's eyes as he gazed upon Fausti.

"There's something I've been giving quite a deal of thought to, Your Majesty. How was it possible you and Segreti had this all planned, yet I still had a vision of your death at Segreti's hands?"

"Our spies discovered someone close to the queen was aiding the conspirators, but we didn't know how. They always seemed one step ahead of us," Khalon said. "How was it possible they were evading capture when we had the Eye to guide us? It soon became clear that the manner of help the Orso traitors were getting was of the magical kind. It was possible they'd gotten their hands on the Soldati Tiger's Eye."

Ezra gasped. That would explain how they knew. "They could see what I saw."

"Exactly. That's when we had the idea of using the Eye's visions against them."

Ezra whirled to face Segreti. "You and Khalon orchestrated a false death."

"Yep," Riley replied cheerfully. "We needed the Eye to see Khalon's death so Gori and his minions would see it. They'd believe Segreti was going to betray us and kill Khalon. He had no idea he was being fed false information, both from the Eye and Sansone."

Khalon nodded. "We had to make it believable in order to draw him and all his followers out once and for all. I would not have them roaming our realm, plotting our destruction."

"Which is why you waited to tell me," Ezra deduced. "You realized I was being watched and needed me to believe what I was seeing."

"We had one chance to draw the traitors out, to put an end to their plotting. We couldn't wait for them to catch us unaware. It was only a matter of time before the traitors foolishly asked the demons for aid."

Rayner snorted. "As if demons would keep a bargain." His expression softened. "Do you forgive us for keeping this from



you? Where prophecies and visions are involved, quite complex measures are required to control the situation.”

Ezra smiled warmly at his friend. “No forgiveness is required, my dear friend. It was a difficult time for all of us.” Ezra cocked his head to one side as he studied Adira. “What part did you play in all this? I’ve barely seen you for weeks.”

Adira arched an eyebrow at him. “Dear Ezra, who do you think was in charge of putting all the pieces into place on this blasted chessboard?” Ezra blinked at her, and she rolled her eyes. “Men.”

Khalon chuckled. “Adira was in charge of making certain everyone was where they should be when they should be. She had Verity extend the festival invite to her most trusted Orso warriors, a group which included Gori, Vestri, and Lazzari. We’d suspected them for some time of being involved, though we weren’t certain who was in charge. Adira kept our Soldati from getting in the way.”

“We needed to limit those who knew of our plans,” Rayner added. “We could hardly inform our entire army. But you know our brethren.”

Ezra laughed softly. “Quite stubborn, and very nosy.”

Adira huffed. “Worse than fledgling Soldati.”

“And then Segreti dropped the hint that I was vulnerable,” Khalon said. “Your vision of my death gave Gori what he needed to put a plan into motion. It was only a matter of time before Gori approached Segreti.”

“What happens now?” Ezra asked, his gaze going to Fausti.

Affection filled Khalon’s green eyes. “Queen Verity’s advisor has been arrested, the Soldati Tiger’s Eye is back in our armory, and I have spoken to Fausti and Queen Verity. Both he and Segreti have been released from their pledges and will be declared Soldati during a ceremony this weekend. They are our brothers now.”

Ezra turned to Segreti and threw his arms around him, his happiness ready to overflow. “You’re staying, then?”

Segreti chuckled at Ezra's enthusiasm. "I am."

Ezra's heart soared. "Will you stay with me, or would you prefer your own quarters? I completely understand if you'd prefer your own. You—"

Segreti silenced Ezra with a kiss so passionate and heated it made Ezra's toes curl. When he released Ezra, he was breathless. "What do you think?"

"I, um, I think I should give you a tour of your quarters."

Everyone cheered, and Ezra laughed joyously when Segreti scooped Ezra up in his arms. He threw a glance over his shoulder at Khalon. "May we be dismissed, Your Majesty? I have a mate to claim."

"Segreti," Ezra exclaimed through a gasp, ignoring the knowing laughs and chuckles around the room.

Khalon waved them off. "You're dismissed. We'll discuss your bounty for your part in this victory when you're less... busy."

Ezra was so happy to have his love back, he didn't care that Segreti still carried him. All he could think of was the love in his heart and the knowledge that Segreti would remain at his side.



They entered the bedchamber, and Segreti placed Ezra on his feet so he could lock the door. He'd barely turned around when Ezra was all over him, kissing him, undressing him, moaning his need. Segreti chuckled against his lips as he helped Ezra divest them of their clothes. Once they were naked, Ezra pulled Segreti to what was now *their* bed. He lay down, his arms held out and knees spread, and Segreti came to lie between them. Their lips came together as if starved, and Ezra tangled his fingers in Segreti's mane, arching up against him as need flooded him. His inner tiger clawed at his soul, roaring and demanding to be united with its mate.

"Segreti," Ezra pleaded.

“I know, my love. I know.” He released himself from Ezra’s grip long enough to fetch the small bottle of oil. “I was away from you only a few short hours, yet it felt like an eternity. I love you, my sweet Ezra. My mate. Are you ready to be claimed?”

“If I wait any longer, I fear I may shatter.”

“Then I won’t force you to wait any longer.” Segreti sat back on his heels, and Ezra marveled at his naked form, at his muscular, solid frame, his hair falling over his shoulders and his heated gaze taking in every inch of Ezra. Pouring some oil onto his fingers, he placed a digit to Ezra’s entrance, his gaze never leaving Ezra’s as he pushed a finger in. Ezra sucked in a sharp breath, his toes curling, and his back arched as Segreti’s finger sank deeper. With a moan and near panting breath, Ezra writhed at the intrusive digit, his own fingers clutching fistfuls of the blanket. A whimper he’d never heard himself make, came from his lips.

“Please.” A second finger joined the first and then a third, stretching Ezra impossibly wide. “Yes. I want all of you.” He wanted Segreti to fill him with his hard length and his essence. When he thought he couldn’t take anymore, Segreti leaned over him and guided himself to Ezra’s entrance.

“Breathe, my sweet.”

Ezra did, sucking in a sharp breath at the sudden pain of Segreti’s tip pushing inside him. He sank in slowly until Ezra was seated against him. They both stilled for a heartbeat before Segreti lowered himself on top of Ezra and lifted Ezra’s left leg over Segreti’s shoulder. He pulled out gingerly, then thrust back in. Ezra cried out, the delicious pleasure seeming to clear whatever hesitancy Segreti might have had. He moved his hips, thrusting in deep over and over.

Segreti kissed him, their breathless panting and bodies coming together the only sounds in the quiet room.

“Yes,” Ezra cried out, the friction on his rock-hard shaft caught between their stomachs painfully delicious. “Make me yours.” He dug his fingers into Segreti’s back as Segreti pounded into him like a feral beast, laying claim to his body as

he was about to do to Ezra's soul. Segreti moved his lips from Ezra's to Ezra's neck, then the muscle between his neck and shoulder blade. The anticipation almost undid Ezra. He closed his fingers around fistfuls of Segreti's hair, squeezing tight. "Do it. Please."

Segreti's fangs sank into Ezra's neck, transferring his Orso essence into Ezra. The scalding heat spread from his neck into the rest of him, flaring like an inferno. Ezra opened his mouth to scream, the light from his Soldati soul bursting into the room. Segreti's hips lost all rhythm as he chased his orgasm, Ezra's own thundering through him. Releasing Ezra's shoulder, Segreti roared as he spilled himself inside Ezra, filling him completely, or so it seemed. Ezra's release exploded, and he gasped as his power flared. The bed lifted several inches before falling back to the floor, then silence.

The white light in the room faded, and Ezra lay trembling. A tear rolled down his cheek, and he smiled. Carefully Segreti pulled out of him but remained where he lay.

"What's this?" Segreti asked, his quiet voice laced with concern.

"We are connected." Ezra brushed his lips over Segreti's. "My power may not flow through you, but my Soldati strength will always be with you."

Segreti peppered sweet kisses around Ezra's face and jaw. "What does that mean?"

"Should you need it, you can draw strength from me. No one will ever hurt you again, my love."

Segreti seemed to consider this. "Will I know if your life is in peril?"

"Yes. Just as I will know if yours is as well."

Segreti shook his head, awe in his expression as he ran a hand over Ezra's head. "We are one." The words came almost reverently. "You're my mate."

"And you're mine." Ezra kissed him, letting the love he felt in his heart overflow. This was where he belonged, right here in his Orso—no, Soldati general's arms. As they lay

facing each other, caressing skin, delivering sweet kisses, and murmuring promises, Ezra didn't need the Eye to see he'd found his true love.



Want to read what happened next with Sansone and Fausti? Join my Facebook reader group: [Donuts, Dog Tags, and Daydreams](#), or sign-up for my [Newsletter](#) for a free short story! You'll also get access to member exclusives!



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## A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR



Thank you so much for reading *The Soldati General*, the third book in the Soldati Hearts series. I hope you enjoyed Ezra and Segreti's adventure, and if you did, please consider leaving a review on Amazon. Reviews can have a significant impact on a book's visibility on Amazon, so any support you show these fellas would be amazing. Enjoying Charlie's shifter fantasy books? Check out the [\*Paranormal Princes\*](#) series on Amazon and KU.

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Thank you again for joining the Soldati on their adventures. We hope to see you soon!

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Charlie Cochet is the international bestselling author of the THIRDS series. Born in Cuba and raised in the US, Charlie enjoys the best of both worlds, from her daily Cuban latte to her passion for classic rock.

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 devouring a book, releasing her creativity through art, or binge watching a new TV series. She runs on coffee, thrives on music, and loves to hear from readers.

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