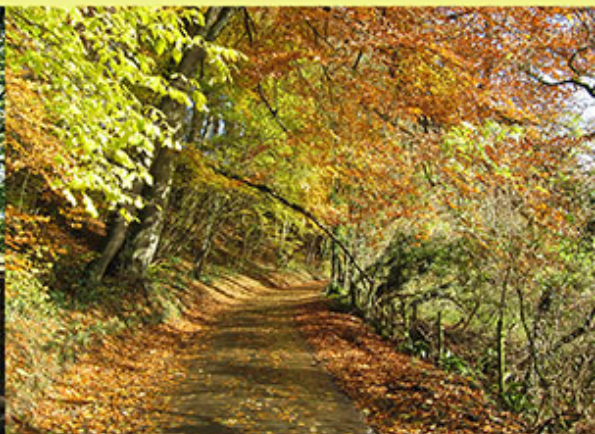


LOVE IS AN OPEN ROAD



Don't Read in the Closet 2015

DARKSOUL

Lexi Ander

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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

DARKSOUL: Part One

By Lexi Ander

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love is an Open Road* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love is an Open Road?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love is an Open Road*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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DARKSOUL: Part One

By Lexi Ander

Photo Description

A well-muscled young man lying face down on pristine white sheets. He's nude but the angle of the picture uses his body position to cover him. His fists are stacked on top of each other and his chin is resting there as he stares challengingly into the camera.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

He was beautiful, I saw him from afar one day. He would suit me, I think. He is funny, kind, and sweet. But he is also stubborn, fighting me this way; he isn't ready to give in to me yet but I want him, I need him. He would complement my warrior personality. He will be mine, he is mine, mine to love and mine to protect.

Oh my God, his tail, the first time I saw him, his tail caught my attention. The way he uses it on me, caressing me. So hot. His eyes glowed as he stared at me, I shivered with lust. He took me from everything that I knew but his love for me is really all I could need.

Please, no BDSM or Historical romance, though spanking is strongly encouraged. Something with Aliens would fit perfectly (Sci-Fi and/or Fantasy a plus) and of course some hot ass-pounding sex. M-preg would be very interesting. HEA is always desirable. Would prefer no invasion-like scenarios, but I would instead like to see the governments working together to help this species find mates but if your creative juices flow the other direction I am alright with that. And please, Author, have fun with it.

Sincerely,

Christina

Story Info

Genre: science fiction, fantasy

Tags: anthropomorphic cat/elf, nurse, warrior, spanking, interspecies mating, magick, hint at mpreg, political intrigue, HFN, secrets, versatile alpha male, royalty, smexy use of a tail

Content Warnings: cliffhanger, violence

Word Count: 45,431

Acknowledgements

Thank you, Christina, for writing such an excellent story prompt that wouldn't let me say no.

A wealth of gratitude to Jo, Andrea, and Caroline for your valuable feedback.

DARKSOUL: Part One
By Lexi Ander

Prologue

Prince Valiant flinched, hunching his shoulders to shield his fragile burden when the bark of the tree exploded. Splinters embedded into his exposed skin, but thankfully the babe was unharmed. That his pursuers weren't trying to kill him was little comfort. Panting heavily, he pushed off the tree he sought shelter behind and ran as fast as he could. His energy flagged, but if he pushed himself a little harder he could make the field where more of his knights waited with the gliders.

The babe he clutched to his chest hadn't made a sound since Valiant had picked him up. Had the newborn died, making this escape through the forest unnecessary? His keen hearing saved him once again as he ducked and spun left. The stunner blast missed him. Had all of his bodyguards fallen to the Elffin-ones of Nella? Had they succeeded in incapacitating all of his men? He heard people following him, but he couldn't risk stopping to verify the pursuers were his Pantherine knights.

He could hardly believe he ran through the Jade Forest from his wife's people. The Elffin-ones were a peaceful race. The arranged marriage between his people and the Elffin-ones of Nella was an age old tradition that had begun with a peace treaty. Valiant wasn't in love with Talia of Nella, Keeper of the Jade Forest, but he'd been fond of her and valued her friendship. That she became pregnant within the first year of their nuptials was considered a good sign from the Gods. On the eve of the birth, they'd left the capital of Wuxbury and traveled to Talia's homeland so the babe would be born near the forest.

All had gone well, or so Valiant had thought, until the child was born and wails of sorrow were raised within the enclosed room. He'd been pacing in the hallway outside the chambers, anxiously waiting for word of his firstborn. Talia's attendants burst from the room and roughly brushed by him in their haste to leave. Heart squeezing in his chest, he rushed into the birthing chamber, sure the newborn had passed through the veil only to discover the boy alive, whole and seemingly hale.

"No, Valiant. Don't touch him." Talia choked, her hand held up beseechingly. In the bed, she was propped up on a mound of pillows. Her corn-silk hair was bound high on her head, loose tendrils plastered to her sweat-slick coral skin. Grief ravaged her delicate features, and her cheeks were painted with her silver tears.

He glanced back into the bassinet. The boy's unusual gaze caught and held his. His gray eyes were each encircled by a brilliant red ring matching the crimson color of his already thick mane. Other than the child's coloring, pointed ears, and the slightly tilted angle of his Elffin-one shaped eyes, the babe had Pantherine features. Retractable claws, ridges down the bridge of his nose, and a long slender tail were evidence of Valiant's side of the family.

The inherent power of an alpha emanated from his son, which pleased Valiant mightily. But he also felt something else stir within the boy. Eyes widening with his surprise, he glanced to Talia, the overwhelming pride he felt clear in his voice when he said, "He has magick."

Talia cried harder.

"I don't understand. Why do you weep so? He is a beautiful child who will grow into a powerful male." He sensed nothing wrong with the babe, so why were Talia and her household filled with such sorrow?

"He is Feyborn." Talia's voice broke, and she choked on a sob.

He remembered Talia speaking of the treasured Feyborn children, cuddled and spoiled, given everything they wanted. For a drow to be called Feyborn magick must be infused within them at birth. Instead of being born with the drow's light-colored hair, the Feyborn were distinguished by beautiful gossamer locks in brilliant hues only found in nature. Their eyes were dual ringed with the outer circle the same color as their hair. These were signs the young were touched by magick. These children grew to become druids or rangers. Occupations of great importance to the Elffin-ones because they became healers, the ones who brokered peace, and settled disputes. How was their son being with magick not a wondrous thing?

"This is excellent tidings," Valiant argued. "Why are you upset?"

Talia shook her head, copper eyes glistening. "He is also a drow male. Feyborn are only supposed to be drow females, never drow males. All Feyborn males know is violence and war and blood. He—*it*—is an abomination. Father will fetch the high druid, and she will take it away."

Talia's words shocked him to the core. Pantherines were a warrior people. No, they didn't conquer and kill blindly but were chosen to police the races of the galaxy. Fighting was what they did, *who* they were, and to hear the disgust in Talia's voice as she described their child wounded him—and lit a flame of anger that burned through his veins.

His voice held a dangerous edge when he asked her, “How can you say that? You are married to a Chandarian knight. There is no equal to our battle prowess. How can you think to murder a child for carrying the qualities of his father?”

Valiant’s bodyguards crowded into the room, and their growls of displeasure at the offense caused Talia to pale. “No, Valiant, please. You don’t understand. Feyborn females are touched by magick at birth. They are in tune with all life, but when it touches a male drow, the gift is warped. The magick within him becomes corrupted—tainted. No good comes from any male born with magick. Allow my father to handle this. Walk away, Valiant, because you don’t understand our ways. Nothing you say can change his fate.” Talia moved slowly across the bed, attempting to stand, but she collapsed on the mattress, moaning in pain.

Elffin-ones were called by some The Golden because their skin tones were various coral hues, and their hair came in shades of white, gold, and bronze. A small portion of their population was born as drow, with their darker skin color that contrasted with light colored eyes and hair. Drow females stayed close to home while drow males kept to themselves, and often suffered from wanderlust, roaming the galaxy as if searching for something. They had more alpha qualities than any of the Elffin-one race, but Valiant didn’t understand why Talia was concerned.

He glanced back down to the babe. Drow eyes were always very pale with hair silver white, neither of which did the boy have. Talia’s attendants hadn’t deemed him worthy enough to clean completely, but his dusky-gray skin was evident. Elffin-one drow bore dark skin from dark grays to the deepest blacks. But Valiant’s own skin was the color of midnight, therefore the tone of his son’s surely came from him, and if not, he still didn’t see a cause for the Elffin-ones to commit infanticide. Never had he heard that drow males born with magick were shunned so cruelly.

“Have you forgotten that his is blood of my blood? I get a say, Talia, whether you like it or not.” Against Talia’s pleas to leave him be, he swaddled the babe as his mother had taught him, and cradled the child in his arms. The boy watched him with those wide unusual eyes, and Valiant couldn’t help but to think his son’s hair was the color of blood. He forced the thought away, refusing to allow Talia’s belief to infect him.

She made a wounded noise when he moved to the doorway with his son. “No, you cannot take him.”

He didn't meet her gaze for she lacked the honor he once thought she had. He'd thought he knew her, and although he didn't love her, he had believed they were friends. How could he not have known she would murder an innocent?

"Feyborn males were responsible for the Scarab War. The destruction they caused, the lives that were lost, all can be laid at their feet," Talia said quickly, as if she desperately searched for a reason to cause Valiant to stay.

The Scarab War was some five hundred years before, and yes the magick used by the different factions took many lives before the Chandarians stepped in and put a stop to the fighting. "I know my history well, Talia, and I know that Elffin-ones and the drow females were just as responsible for the devastation that was wrought. If this is how all Elffin-ones treat their Feyborn males then perhaps my father—*your* king—should be made aware."

Valiant strode from the room, ignoring Talia's desperate pleas. He had little time to reach his vehicles, much of it he'd squandered arguing with Talia when he should've been fleeing to where his gliders awaited. He ran, his bodyguards forming a shield behind him. Usually, the Elffin-ones didn't condone violence. That they used stunners told him they only wished to stop him. If they managed to incapacitate him, then the child would surely die, and that outcome he refused to allow.

Through the magnificent Jade Forest he loped toward the road that stopped at the border between the Elffin-one province Edrijan and the Pantherine province of Skoyle. There his gliders waited along with his remaining knights. The panther within him would make better time up in the trees, if he wasn't carrying a fragile burden. Not that it mattered. He was in the Elffin-ones' forest, and they were more familiar with these woods than he. Instead, he relied on his speed and reflexes to keep him ahead of his persistent pursuers.

Never had he been so relieved to see a flash of tail in the bows ahead. Jumping over a downed tree, Valiant veered in that direction, barely missing being hit a half-dozen times. He dared not glance up, otherwise he'd give away his hidden brethren to the pursuers. The startled yelps and angry yowls were the only indications that some who chased him had been stopped, or at the very least, temporarily delayed.

Breaking through the trees into the clearing, Valiant bit back a whoop of relief upon seeing his knights. They jumped to their feet and raced to meet him after noticing Valiant's desperate flight.

The captain-in-charge barked out strident commands. “Unit one, on your prince! Unit two assist the personal guards. Detain those who dare to hunt him!”

Half the males streaked past Valiant, and he prayed none of his guards had been injured. His father would take this whole event as a personal insult as the matter now stood. If his men returned harmed... Valiant didn't want to think of what could happen. The Elffin-ones' trespass against the drow males born with magick would garner a swift and fierce response. Already he was thinking of ways to mitigate the situation, to right a wrong, but also to keep the peace.

Hearing the cursing of a few of his fighters, he glanced over his shoulder, eager to discern the welfare of his guards and knights. Within Elffin-one territory, they were only allowed to carry stunners, and the knights had no idea what danger awaited them in the jungle.

“Who pursues you?” the captain asked, his sharp gaze scanning the tree line behind Valiant.

“Talia's people,” he gasped out, slowing to a trot. “They wanted to kill my son.”

The knights nearest erupted in a chorus of angry hisses and feral growls, crowding around him protectively. Children were cherished and protected. Especially nowadays when so few were conceived and no one could pinpoint why. Firm hands grasped his arms and shoulders, hustling him into a hovercraft. Four guardsmen followed him into the vehicle before engaging the protective shield. The remaining knights of unit one piled into two other vehicles, one pulling ahead of Valiant's craft and the other taking up the flank position. All the vehicles turned around on the dead-end road and headed back toward the capitol.

By degrees, Valiant relaxed. He turned in his seat to stare out the back. His personal guards and the remaining knights exited the Jade Forest at a lazy run, none of the Elffin-ones followed. Satisfied they were fairly safe, he returned to his seat and lay the babe in his lap. Gently he unwrapped the blanket swaddling the newborn. One of the guardsmen retrieved a container of clean wipes and handed the box to Valiant. He did what Talia's attendants failed to do and carefully wiped away the remains of the afterbirth. Bright eyes stared up at him, and Valiant sucked in a breath at how beautiful his son was. When the guards leaned to peer at the infant, he lifted and turned the babe for all to see, amazed the boy hadn't cried at all.

For the life of him, Valiant didn't understand how Talia or her people thought they could harm his heir. When he returned to the capitol, he would begin work on stopping the Elffin-one madness. If need be, they would find worthy Chandarian families to take in unwanted Feyborn males and prove the Elffin-ones wrong. Inborn magick in drow males didn't make them demons to be destroyed.

“What will you call him, Your Highness?”

Valiant's smile broadened as he said, “I will name him Sunder, for he is beautiful.”

Chapter One

Barely able to keep his head up, Gabriel Barba let himself into the loft. Three nurses had called in, and he'd volunteered to work a double in the emergency room. The full moon always caused an increase in human accidents, not to mention the other races who were in town for the upcoming festival.

He was ready to drop from exhaustion. The hospital was always busy this time of year. The annual gathering of Pantherines, Elffin-ones, Felineans, and Zelians would take place in four months, and already the outrageous parties to entertain the off-world guests had begun. Add in the stupid things people did during the full moon, and the ER was more of a madhouse than a hospital.

Gabe was so glad he would be gone for this year's festival. His boyfriend, Pierce, promised a two-week vacation on the moon. They were staying at the Armstrong Regency, rumored to have the most spectacular view of Earth. Gabe only had to put up with four months of the craziness, and then he could relax. Earlier in the day, Pierce had told Gabe he wanted to talk, and with how Pierce had been acting the last couple of weeks, Gabe wondered if he would push for them to take the next step in their relationship.

Marriage.

Not having a good example of what a marriage between two people should be like, he wasn't sure how he felt about the topic. He and Pierce had been together for almost seven years, and he was comfortable with their relationship. He really wasn't interested in taking that next step. He loved Pierce, really he did, but Gabe was uncomfortable with tying himself to someone for the rest of his life. He didn't want the white picket fence. He'd grown up behind that particular façade and knew firsthand marriage wasn't all it was cracked up to be. Then to bring children into a relationship that was statistically rated as doomed to fail, where did that leave the child when the parents split? He knew where. Alone and abandoned by both of the people who were supposed to love and care for him. Besides, he couldn't imagine himself as a dad. Hell, he and Pierce barely had time to spend together. How would they make time for kids?

Closing and locking the door behind him, he ignored the light switch. He knew the loft like the back of his hand and didn't need illumination to find his bedroom. The curtains had been drawn when Gabe left for work, now they stood wide open, and the moonlight spilled into the interior of the apartment. He grinned. Pierce was there.

Dropping his keys in the bowl on the foyer table, he removed his scrubs and put them in the washer. He walked around the living room and checked on his plants, whispering softly to them as he ensured they didn't need anything, a habit he'd inherited from his grandmother. When his parents were particularly loud in arguing and making up, he walked over to her house. Gabe liked to think that he got his green thumb from her. His first memories were following her around with his miniature watering can and listening as she told him everything he knew. She'd passed away in her sleep a year before his life turned to hell. Nowadays, tending his houseplants made him feel as if she was close by.

Before crossing to the bedroom, he watered a couple. As he expected, Pierce sprawled across the bed, a whole eight hours earlier than Gabe had anticipated. He was pleased to spend extra time with Pierce before he was due back on shift. As a doctor, Pierce's schedule rarely matched up with his own, not that Gabe minded. He was a firm believer absence made the heart grow fonder.

Gabe crawled into bed next to Pierce. The green glow of Pierce's ear plugs made him look like Frankenstein in the dark. Chuckling softly, he spooned around his boyfriend. *Besides*, he thought, *if we get married I won't have these moments when I'm excited to see him*. He breathed in the smell of Pierce's clean hair, catching a whiff of a new cologne. He thought it was nice, right before he fell asleep.

The ringing of a phone woke Gabe. When he opened his eyes, the sun was already high and the clock said the time was close to noon. The cell rang again and the shower cut off, followed by a muffled sound of Pierce's voice. Gabe wasn't ready for the day to start, but this would be the only one he had with Pierce for another three days.

Rolling out of bed, he pulled on a pair of sleep pants before wandering to the kitchen to turn on the coffeemaker. On the table sat a vase of flowers with a half-dozen helium balloons, a couple exclaiming, "Congratulations!" One said, "Safe Trip! Bon Voyage!" They weren't leaving for vacation for months yet. The future trip wouldn't necessitate balloons and flowers from Pierce's staff.

He sipped his coffee, staring at the arrangement. Pierce came around the corner with a wide, cheery smile.

"Good morning, sleepy head." Pierce's brown curls brushed against Gabe's nose as Pierce kissed his cheek, but when he pulled back, those blue eyes wouldn't meet his.

He continued to drink his coffee, not really tasting the brew. Pierce wouldn't be able to stand the silence, and Gabe was terrified to outright ask the question weighing upon his mind. He was pretty sure he didn't want to know the answer.

“Remember that opportunity I told you about a while ago?” Pierce slowly poured himself a cup of joe.

“What one? The cruise ship?”

“It isn't a cruise ship,” Pierce grumped.

Pierce had broached the subject of a job offer a couple months ago. A ship that carried affluent families to a series of vacation planets approached Pierce for the head surgeon position. The venue had sounded like a cruise ship to Gabe, but he didn't want to fight, not now when he felt their relationship had suddenly become precarious.

“They came back and doubled their offer. I'll be able to spend time on three different worlds learning from top specialists while the ship is docked. It's an opportunity I can't pass up.”

Gabe nodded, felling a little disconnected. The conversation didn't seem real, especially after he'd expected Pierce to bring up marriage. How had they gone from contemplating the next step to their relationship to Pierce—steady, reliable Pierce—leaving him?

“When will you be back?” Gabe's voice cracked.

“Five years, if I come back at all. There's the possibility I can transfer to another world. If I do, I doubt I'll ever return to Earth.” The small spark of hope Gabe had harbored was snuffed out. Pierce finally glanced up, met Gabe's gaze, and flinched. “I'm sorry to break it to you like this. I've been trying to find a way to tell you the last couple of weeks, but no time seemed right. I know you don't want to get married, and well, you and I want different things. We've just been comfortable following the same routine.”

Gabe poured his now-cold coffee down the drain, the life he once led going with it. Unsure what to say, he felt numb, the chill growing from his chest outward.

“You have to understand, Gabe. I want to fall madly in love with someone who I can't wait to see at the end of the day. I want a home and a family. I had hoped one day you'd come around, but it's been years and you... We want different things.”

Gabe's throat closed up and breathing became hard, but he nodded. Hadn't he thought the very same thing last night? Even so, he had considered taking the next step—but Pierce wanted a crazy kind of love. Gabe didn't believe in such a thing. He did love Pierce, but not in the way Pierce needed.

“When...” He cleared his throat. “When do you leave?”

Pierce hunched his shoulders. “In a few of hours. My bags are already on the ship, and my apartment is packed up. I just wanted to spend what time I had left with you.” He looked as if he wanted to say more, but he closed his mouth, his face crumpling with anguish.

Gabe held out his arms. Pierce sighed as he fell into them, wrapping around Gabe. How was this happening? The difference between last night and now was drastic. Perhaps he should've seen this coming.

“Are you going to be okay?” Pierce whispered, his lips brushing Gabe's throat.

No, but Gabe wouldn't tell Pierce that. “Make sure you send a holovid every once in a while so I know you're all right.”

Reluctantly, Gabe let go, and Pierce backed up, his eyes suspiciously red. “I need to go.”

He swallowed hard, his throat aching as his own eyes burned. “I know. You have everything you need?”

Pierce grabbed Gabe's wrist. “Are you going to be okay?”

He gave his best soothing grin. “Just go or you'll be late.”

Pierce scowled and looked as if he would say more, but he turned on his heel crossing the room to pick up a bag sitting in the entry way. Gabe hadn't noticed Pierce dropping it there earlier. He knew he should walk Pierce out. Perhaps exchange a series of platitudes, wish him good luck, or something other than watching Pierce wave before closing the door behind him. At the moment, he didn't have it in him to lie. Anyway, if he'd moved from where he leaned against the counter, he wasn't sure he could walk with how unstable his legs felt.

Staring at his feet, Gabe wondered where he went wrong. Were there signs he missed? He thought Pierce was happy, or had they both been biding their time until something better came along? The sudden banging on the front door startled him. The muffled voice of his best friend, Ronan, called his name. Had Pierce contacted him?

What could he have done to change the outcome? Had Pierce been ready for something else long before now? What did it say about him that he let Pierce walk out without even thinking about begging him to stay? He didn't fight for Pierce, and somehow that seemed worse than Pierce waiting until the last minute to break the news. Why did this feel like his family leaving him all over again?

His parents hadn't waited around to give him an explanation when they'd abandoned him. When they thought he was old enough to take care of himself, they bailed. Gabe didn't have a clue they were leaving. He'd come home to an empty loft, and they were just gone. The fifty-year lease on his home was paid up, an account for expenditures was left in his name, and a sticky note that said his parents were separating and what ships his mom and dad were taking off-world. Back then, Gabe would've begged them to at least take him with them. But with Pierce, Gabe let him walk away, leaving him alone once again without uttering a word to stop Pierce.

The front door slammed closed. "Gabe, where are you? You're scaring me."

He opened his mouth to let Ronan know he was in the kitchen, but nothing came out. Something wet fell on his hand—a droplet of water followed closely by another. When he swiped a hand across his cheeks he discovered they were wet. Ronan skidded through the kitchen door as if chased by the hounds of hell. His clothes were rumpled and mismatched, telling Gabe he'd dressed in a hurry. Distantly, he thought Ronan looked cute, especially since Ronan was always immaculate. He met Ronan's concerned brown eyes, worry etching lines in his dark face. Gabe found he couldn't muster a smile for his best friend.

"Jesus, Gabe. That fucking asshole. He had to wait to the last damn minute to tell you because he didn't want to deal with breaking your heart." Ronan didn't ask, but roughly pulled Gabe into his tight embrace, and suddenly Gabe could breathe.

He wasn't alone. He had Ronan, more brother than friend. The one person who was there to help Gabe pick up the pieces when his parents had rocketed off-world. At the tender age of sixteen, Ronan had dragged Gabe to his house. With much cooing and a lot of food, Ronan's parents listened as Gabe explained how his mom and dad didn't want him. Again, here was his best friend standing by his side. Ronan, who had proven to Gabe time and again that some people didn't leave—no matter what.

Chapter Two

“Are you sure they can treat me here?” Sitting in the backseat of the long, plush hovercraft, Sunder supported Ayre who cradled his broken arm to his chest. Other than the pain evident in Ayre’s brilliant-blue eyes, he gave no other outward indication of how much agony he was in.

Sunder refrained from laughing at Ayre’s pout that made him look like a cub not ready to leave the lioness’ side instead of the mature male he was. Ayre should’ve thought about that before he consumed so much orange juice, a drink that was highly intoxicating to Pantherines. After gulping several glasses of the fruit juice, Ayre decided to impress the fawning humans by walking a plank from one rooftop to the next. Sunder had cautioned his cousin to stop drinking after the first glass, but when his charge became determined to do something foolish, only Ayre’s father could talk sense into him—or scare it into him. As it was, King Valiant was light years away, making Sunder his cousin’s official escort, therefore his responsibility.

“I’ve been assured this is the best hospital certified to treat our people. I’m sure you will be in capable hands.” The transport stopped in front of a brightly lit building with Chandarian Hospital illuminated in large glowing letters.

Exiting the vehicle first, Sunder turned to help Ayre and was almost smothered by Ayre’s mane of corkscrew blond hair. For the briefest of moments, bittersweet emotions clenched at his heart as he held Ayre close. Very few humans recognized that Sunder and Ayre were related, and those who did were the ones who’d read up on the Chandarians. Their knowledge was never related to any resemblance Sunder and Ayre shared, because physically they were very different. Sunder was of mixed parentage while Ayre was all Pantherine with midnight skin covered in gray rosettes along his temple and down his neck, wide cheek bones, and a square jaw. The only feature they had in common was the broad feline nose with scent producing ridges along the bridge. Sunder’s hair was bloodred and very straight, his skin a dusky gray, and he too had rosettes, but along his chest and back, not his face. Ever since he was a cub, Sunder often wished he had more of the Pantherine features, as useless as the desire was.

Pushing away the sudden emotion, Sunder steadied Ayre on his feet and prepared for the argument he knew would come. Earlier, while they’d waited for transportation, Sunder had called ahead to the hospital. A woman dressed in blue scrubs waited at the emergency entrance with a chair on wheels.

“Have a seat, Your Highness.” As expected, she ignored Sunder completely, her interested gaze only for Ayre who scowled fiercely. Knights didn’t show such weakness in public, and she was unaware of the slight she’d given him by inferring he was too infirm to travel the distance to his room unaided.

“Sit, Ayre, you aren’t on the field of battle,” Sunder bade when it seemed Ayre would argue when she again insisted he take the seat. “If you had read the brochure on any of the trips you’ve taken to this planet you’d know she’s required to follow hospital policy.” Ayre grumped but reluctantly conceded.

Taking Ayre’s good arm, Sunder led him over to the chair that offended Ayre’s pride. His cousin didn’t quite hold back a sigh when he was securely ensconced, letting Sunder know Ayre was in more pain than he let on. Before Ayre could complain, Sunder gathered up Ayre’s long golden hair, twisting it into a knot on the back of his head. Ayre constantly lost his own hair sticks so Sunder had taken to carrying a couple of sets. He drew two from his belt and secured the tresses out of the way. The humans, especially the females, fawned over the long curly mass when Ayre let his hair down, and he accepted the caresses with pride. But later, he’d become aggravated when his hair caught in doors or flew around in the wind.

The attendant smiled and flattered Ayre with pretty words as she cooed over his slanted golden eyes and his half-moon cat ears. Sunder merely shook his head and followed them through the automatic doors into a brightly lit reception area. Even though he appeared to be relaxed, Sunder was anything but. Soon the rest of the staff would find out Ayre was the Chandarian heir to the Slorix throne. Word would spread fast. Listening to the chatter from his ear bud, Sunder’s security team ensured they weren’t followed to the hospital. His knights had taken up strategic locations throughout the wing and additional knights would arrive shortly.

As always, Sunder would act as Ayre’s only personal guard. As a Bladedancer, Warder Class, his presence would be enough to keep his cousin safe, for the most part. He still didn’t understand why his uncle had commanded he escort Ayre on this trip to Earth. Sunder was more suited to leading the crown’s armies, or going on special missions. Not that he didn’t enjoy Ayre’s company, but Ayre was attending the festival, and Sunder had no interest in taking a human to bed, much less mating with one.

Following Ayre being wheeled through a commons area, Sunder spotted a dark haired man wearing scrubs. There was something about him that called to Sunder, and his magick suddenly bloomed in his chest, pressing against him in

eager anticipation, struggling to be free. Tall for a human but much shorter than Pantherines, the man was ebony eyed with a golden-bronze complexion. He smiled at his coworker, turning somewhat handsome features to stunning. Sunder sniffed the air, trying to catch the male's scent, but there were too many around to figure out which belonged to the human without Sunder moving closer.

Ayre had the attendant stop not far from where Sunder halted to stare at the human. Unfortunately, he couldn't investigate. He pushed the magick back to his core, rushing to catch up to Ayre, but couldn't help glancing over his shoulder. He was intrigued by the unexpected longing for the human. He promised himself he'd return later and discover who the man was.

Pushing Ayre into a room the attendant said, "Please wait here. Your nurse will be right with you." Then she closed the door behind her, leaving them in a room that was surprisingly decorated like a Chandarian relaxation room.

Ayre sniffed after the woman, not weaving as much with intoxication as he'd been earlier. "It doesn't stink of chemicals."

The last time he and Ayre had been to a human med unit, the sting of astringents had given them both headaches.

"That's because this facility is one of the few certified to treat Chandarians." The male nurse closed the door behind him, and smiled at Ayre.

Sunder forgot how to breathe. The human he'd spotted a moment ago moved farther into the room. The corners of his dark eyes crinkled when he grinned, but his eyes themselves held a sadness Sunder wanted to wipe away.

"My name is Gabriel Barba, but you can call me Gabe. I will be your nurse this evening. Let's have a look at your arm." Gabe lowered the bed in the corner and positioned a rolling table next to it. After wheeling Ayre closer, Sunder helped Ayre up, all the while his gaze taking in everything about Gabe. He didn't wear any cologne, making it easy for Sunder to parse out the alluring tang of Gabe's scent. Clean male interwoven with something that tickled Sunder's senses, reminding him of a vast forest.

Gabe pulled a mechanical arm with a flat screen from the wall. "Can you place your arm on the table so that I can take a few scans?" Ayre paled doing as Gabe asked but held his tongue.

"Please hold very still," Gabe instructed as he moved the flat screen over Ayre's arm and then tapped away on his data pad.

The surface under Ayre's arms glowed white for a few minutes. Gabe spoke in a low soothing tone, inquiring how Ayre came to be injured.

Sunder almost purred at the sound of Gabe's low chuckle. "No matter the race or species, when they become inebriated they lose all sense of self-preservation and do the most foolish things."

Gabe's gaze darted to Sunder, and he was pleased at the sight of Gabe's suddenly flushed cheeks. "What about you? Are you the friend who goaded Ayre into that stunt?"

No one, with the exception of the king or Princess Valora, boldly dared to take Sunder to task. Too many were terrified of crossing Sunder, yet here was a human who'd just called the heir of Chandarian a fool and was ready to include Sunder if the situation required. How refreshing.

Ayre laughed into his fist. The censure in Gabe's tone made Sunder stand taller even as he smiled down into those ebony eyes. "No, I'm the one who cautioned him to stop and then caught him before he fell three stories." Sunder smirked when Ayre's snickering turned to coughing as he flushed with embarrassment.

Sunder would never forget that heart-stopping moment when Ayre teetered on the edge of the plank spanning the rooftops between the two buildings. Any sober Chandarian could've crossed blindfolded, but Ayre's balance was compromised by the fruit juice and he fell. Sunder had leapt without looking, snagging Ayre in midair to land on the edge of a balcony. Ayre's arm had smashed into a concrete overhang on the way down.

"It looks like you owe your friend more than a drink the next time you two go out." Gabe arched an eyebrow at Ayre before he tapped away on his data pad. Glancing at Sunder from the corner of his eye, Gabe said, "Taylor didn't ask for your data chip, did she?"

Sunder unclipped his chip from the breast pocket of his shirt, handing the device over. Purposely, he brushed his fingers against Gabe's as he stepped closer to better scent Gabe. This wasn't Sunder's first trip to Earth. He'd visited before for other reasons, usually tracking down someone the crown wanted found. His uncle kept suggesting Sunder search here for a mate. They both knew that no Elffin-one would join themselves with Sunder, much less touch him, but neither would a Pantherine. Anyone with political aspirations steered clear of a romantic relationship with him. Those who sought out Sunder only desired bragging rights for bedding the infamous darksoul. None aspired to

keep him. Usually, he agreed to the arrangements because he had no desire to be kept.

Since the humans opened their doors to the Chandarians, offering a program to help them with their birth rates, many Pantherines and Elffin-ones had flocked to Earth in search of fertile mates. Sunder claimed happiness in his bachelorhood because none tempted him to consider more than a dalliance or two. But this human with his dark beauty and sorrow-filled eyes called to him like no other. It was a pity, actually, because once humans discovered who Ayre was, they forgot Sunder was in the room.

Gabe scanned the chip, tapping away on his data pad. With rising disappointment, Sunder waited for Gabe's reaction, slightly ashamed at the jealously curling in his gut at the thought of Ayre taking Gabe to his bed.

Then the strangest thing happened. When Gabe handed the data chip back, his thumb caressed the back of Sunder's knuckles. "Thank you. It's a pleasure to meet you, Commander Alard. Are you in town for the festival?"

Giving a slow smile, Sunder ignored Ayre's shocked expression. Cupping Gabe's hand between his own, he bowed, touching Gabe's knuckles to his forehead while releasing a pleased rumble. "Yes, but only as escort to His Highness."

The corner of Gabe's lips twist up in a shy smile. "I always wondered if the festival was as successful as advertised. Do you expect to bump into someone and just know they're the *one* over a couple of cocktails?"

Sunder gave a small frown. "Do you not believe in love at first sight?" He slowly stood up, loathing to release Gabe's hand. Curiously, Gabe didn't seem in a hurry to pull away.

"No, I don't. I definitely believe in lust at first sight. Love comes later." Gabe glanced down at where Sunder held him and scowled, finally pulling away as his face flushed.

Inhaling deeply, he took Gabe's scent in, memorizing the mixture of pheromones, excited to smell arousal curling around Gabe. He wanted to run his nose along the area where Gabe's scent would be the most concentrated. Then he could rub his ridges along Gabe's skin to mark him, warn others Sunder was considering Gabe as a possible mate. As a courtesy, his people wouldn't pursue Gabe while marked. For now, committing the odor to memory would have to do until Sunder could devise a way to thoroughly mark him.

“Will you be attending the festival?” Sunder asked.

Gabe blinked as if coming out of a daze. “What?”

As much as he hated to, Sunder stepped away from Gabe. “I’m merely escorting Prince Ayre to the festival and wondered if you’d be there. Seeing a familiar face would be nice.”

Gabe’s gaze snapped to Ayre as if he’d forgotten Ayre was in the room. His soft flush took on a deep alluring hue. “Oh, well, I can see why he’d need an escort if all his decisions are as bad as the one he made tonight. No, I don’t attend the festival, usually, ever, because I had... but now I don’t and I didn’t think about it. I’m going to shut up now. I’ll let the doctor know you’re ready to see her.” Gabe slipped out of the room before Sunder could say anything.

Ayre gave a soft drunken snort. “I don’t know if I should be insulted or humored. It was as if I didn’t exist. I think I like him, and by all the pheromones you’re giving off, so do you.”

“There is something about him... I just might make him mine.” Sunder barely bit back the growl. Never had he made such a declaration about anyone.

Ayre hummed. “Father will be pleased. He worries you don’t mingle more, only keeping the company of a few people. You haven’t chosen a paramour—”

Sunder made a rude noise. “I am not interested in the human male to please *Uncle*.”

Ayre gave a weary sigh. “He hates it when you call him that.” This argument had been going on since Sunder had come to understand who King Valiant was to him.

“He does not share my last name, now does he?” Sunder glanced away from Ayre, not wanting to see the hurt in those blue eyes.

In Chandarian culture, females take the surname of their mother, males that of their father. Occasionally, males weren’t allowed the names of their father. Sometimes the father denied parentage or no female was born to carry their mother’s name. In the latter case, one of the male children would step forward or be chosen to take their mother’s surname. When they had a daughter of their own, then she would bear her grandmother’s name.

The reason Sunder didn’t carry his father’s name was more complicated than that. Not only was he not allowed the Balsari surname, he couldn’t acknowledge King Valiant as his sire either. The female who raised him as her

own was not the one who gave birth to him. She—his birth mother—would never acknowledge Sunder as being of her blood because of what he was. Feyborn. The Elffin-ones refused to be ruled by a Feyborn male because they believed he'd become a magick-crazed egomaniac and commit genocide like the magick-wielding drow of old.

Sometimes Sunder wondered if his bitterness kept him from being grateful his grandfather hadn't sent him to foster with a family far from his relatives. He knew his lineage when it could've easily been lost to him. Instead he'd been given to Valora, his father's twin sister, to raise. He loved her fiercely, but he couldn't help to be discontented when it came to his father.

An uncomfortable silence stretched between Ayre and him. Just when Sunder thought to step into the hallway to ask after the doctor, Ayre spoke. "Well, I think it's wonderful you have shown an interest in someone. Perhaps at the festival you'll find another you'll want to make your paramour." Ayre's innocent look didn't fool Sunder.

On his planet, no male would claim Sunder as his own and risk tainting their family name. Although they did enjoy taking Sunder for a tumble now and then, none would risk losing status when yoking their name to his. He hadn't minded because there were none he'd wanted to join his life with. Until now.

The thought of finding someone other than Gabe to take to his bed caused a sour taste to form in his mouth. The human seemed resistant, perhaps reluctant was a better word. Sunder scented Gabe's attraction, but he'd left before Sunder pursued the matter. His magick moved again, more active than usual. What did that mean? "I don't want another human. I will have Gabriel."

Ayre's expression turned smug.

The sudden urge to go track down Gabe rocked Sunder. Never had he experienced such a visceral reaction. He wanted to know more about Gabe. Why did he work at a hospital? Who or what put the sadness in his eyes? Would he allow Sunder to take the pain away? Did he want Sunder as much as Sunder wanted him?

The door opened and another female entered. "Good evening. I'm Doctor Allen. Thank you for your patience, Your Highness. All the scans came back."

Sunder tuned her out, disappointed Gabe hadn't returned with the doctor.

Chapter Three

Gabe didn't know what was wrong with him. Pierce had only been gone four months, and Gabe had practically thrown himself at the Pantherine. Might as well hang a sign around his neck proclaiming, "Fuck me, I'm yours for the taking!" Not only that, he'd insulted the Chandarian royal, multiple times. He should be terrified about losing his job. One complaint by Prince Ayre, and he had no doubt he'd be fired.

A small crowd gathered at the nurses' station, and Gabe rolled his eyes at all the oohing and awing. They were all in a twitter over Prince Ayre. He didn't understand why no one commented on the prince's companion, Commander Sunder Alard. How could they not notice him with hair so scarlet its equal could only be found in nature? Plus his unique eyes, the outer red ring surrounding dove gray, Gabe had never seen the like, and he'd been treating Pantherines for the last several years.

Seventy-five years after the Chandarians were introduced to Earth society, people still looked upon them with a kind of awe. The fascination with the feline-like Pantherines and the Elfesque Elffin-ones hadn't wavered. The Pantherines were popular for their wide cheek bones, square jaws, honey-gold hair, and skin tones that ran the gamut of sun-kissed gold to the deepest of black. Gabe could see the Pantherine features in Sunder, but his bone structure was more refined and not as broad. His skin tone was also a dusky gray, not the common black Gabe had seen before. But Sunder's ears were pointed like the Elffin-ones causing Gabe to idly wonder if Sunder was of mixed heritage, not that he'd ever see Sunder again to ask.

Why did the thought of not seeing Sunder again cause him to feel as if depression pressed at him? Surely he only felt this way because he was still missing Pierce, right? Was it too soon to consider taking a lover? What about simply asking Sunder to dinner? He pushed away the thoughts of Sunder. Why was he even contemplating another so soon after Pierce's leaving anyway?

Down the hallway, the door to the examination room opened, and Prince Ayre exited behind Dr. Allen, followed by Sunder. The small crowd that had gathered to catch a look at the Chandarian royal quickly dispersed at the frown Dr. Allen shot them. A group of Chandarian males had assembled at the opposite end of the hall. They bristled with armor and weaponry that reminded Gabe of the rudimentary warriors of ancient eras gone by. Upon seeing Prince Ayre, the men snapped to attention.

Dr. Allen motioned for Prince Ayre and Sunder to follow her, and she headed in the opposite direction. Sunder's tail lashed back and forth, the movement mesmerizing. Faintly, Gabe wondered what all Sunder could do with his tail. It seemed longer than other Chandarians. The tail stopped midmotion, and Gabe's gaze slowly traveled up those leather-encased legs. Why hadn't he noticed that detail before? The royal-blue sleeveless shirt showed off impressive musculature. Those crimson-ringed eyes stared back at him, holding him captive. He could barely breathe and something strange swirled in his stomach.

Sunder gave him a small satisfied smile, his expression promising naughty things if Gabe would only follow him. Unconsciously, he took a step forward, startling himself when he ran into the edge of the nurses' station. He tore his gaze away, silently cursing himself for being distracted on the job, and for lusting after a Chandarian. When he snuck a look back up the hallway. Sunder was striding away, his movements inhumanly graceful as his tail lashed the air like an angry whip once again.

Disappointment washed through him, only making Gabe angrier with himself. His confusion over his butterfly stomach, dry mouth, and the fact he had to slip into the nearest restroom to hide the erection straining his scrubs only added to his ire.

As he was throwing cold water on his face, the door opened and Ronan rushed in.

"I saw you sneak away. Are you all right?" Ronan wore purple scrubs with white bunny rabbits.

Gabe smiled. "Are those new? Did you lose another bet?"

Leaning against the wall next to the door, Ronan crossed his dark arms over his chest. "I'm a man of impeccable taste. I can pull off any look, even bunnies, and still be sexy as hell."

He suppressed a smile because Ronan was a bit vain at times, but not wrong. His rich chocolate skin, heart-shaped face, and swimmer's body won him considerable attention from both men and women.

"You are rocking the bunnies." Gabe blotted his face with a paper towel before stepping away from the sink.

"And you dodged my question." Ronan arched an eyebrow.

"I'm fine, just... confused," he admitted.

“Come on, your shift’s over. Let’s go grab a beer.” Ronan pushed off the wall and opened the door. As Gabe walked by, Ronan threw an arm over his shoulders. “And you can tell me all about that hot leather-encased ass you were drooling over.”

Gabe playfully shoved Ronan away. “Jerk.”

Ronan’s laughter followed him down the hallway. “You wouldn’t have me any other way. I’ll catch you in the parking garage.”

Gabe refrained from flipping Ronan off and barged into the locker room. He swiped his keycard to clock out before he grabbed his backpack from his locker. Quickly, he changed into his street clothes, a simple black T-shirt and jeans, and shoved his scrubs in the hospital’s laundry chute. After he grabbed his leather coat and helmet, he closed and secured the locker, eager to leave before he ran into Sunder again.

True to his word, Ronan waited for Gabe next to their bikes. He’d exchanged his scrub bottoms for a pair of tight jeans but hadn’t bothered to change his shirt.

“I knew you liked the bunnies,” Gabe teased.

Ronan gave him a wicked smile. “The women *love* it.”

“I should’ve known.” He stuffed his backpack into the saddlebag and threw his leg over the seat of his Harley. “Where to, chick magnet?”

Ronan buckled on his half shell. “I heard of a new place over on South Avenue called the Jade Forest. Let’s check it out.”

“Sure.” Not that he cared where they went. He didn’t pick up people at a bar like Ronan sometimes did. He wondered briefly if he should try meeting someone new. He’d met Pierce on campus, which was the extent of his dating experience.

After buckling on his own helmet, Gabe kick-started the bike. The rumble of the engine vibrated up through his balls before he activated the inertial stabilizers. The machine pushed off the ground and hovered while the wheels rotated ninety degrees to become parallel with the ground.

Ronan pulled out of the parking space first. Gabe followed since Ronan knew where they were going. Even though dark had fallen, the neon city lights kept the streets bright. Pedestrians still filled the sidewalks, a diverse mix of human, Pantherine, Elffin-one, Felinean, the artist pursuit enthusiast, Olghevaar, and the Zelian peace brokers.

Gabe thought it was strange how humans' view of the universe had changed drastically after the Grazoarlons invaded the human colony of Lorisia more than seventy-five years ago. Up until then, humans believed themselves to be alone in the galaxy and prepared no defenses to ward off invaders from deep space. In a twist of fate, the Chandarians picked up the distress call and came to Lorisia's aid. Later, after the initial confrontation, the Zelians were brought in to arbitrate a cease-fire and broker peace. Since then, humans embraced the three Chandarian races; the Pantherines, the Elffin-ones, and the Felineans, the faces seen on the streets became more diverse.

As they came to a stop at a light, Gabe looked through the crowd, picking out the Pantherines and wondered what it would be like to attend the festival. Not that he wanted to be paired up with anyone, but he would like to see Sunder again, talk to him longer, and maybe ask him to dinner. Sunder escorted Prince Ayre so he wasn't looking for a mate, which was good because neither was Gabe.

Ronan pulled up in front of a three-story building covered in actual broad-leafed vines. The valets came out and collected the bikes. Gabe scowled at Ronan. He'd thought they were going to a bar. He wasn't dressed for a place like this.

"Stop worrying." Ronan grabbed his arm and pulled him toward the door. "I'll pay for the valet if that's what you're worried about."

"Maybe I should go home." His stomach twisted into knots. He hated walking into the unknown.

"You never went out while you dated Pierce."

"I didn't date Pierce, he was my partner."

"Really? Because I thought partners shared things like homes and bills and beds every night."

Gabe refrained from flinching at Ronan's stinging observation. But before he could back out, Ronan had him through the doors. The plant hanging from the ceiling seemed to quiver when the top of Gabe's head brushed a leaf. Ronan tugged on him when he would've stopped and studied the plant, but instead he followed the hostess to a table.

Ronan had the grace to look contrite. "Look I'm sorry, but you know you never fully committed to Pierce. He was comfortable to have around."

“What a horrible thing to say. I loved him but didn’t want the same things he did.” Gabe glanced away from Ronan’s assessing gaze. Sometimes he liked how Ronan never watered down his thoughts, always laying it out as he saw it. Right now he hated that Ronan knew him so well.

“Yes, you loved him, Gabe, but you weren’t in love with him. One of these days you will know the difference and quit worrying your love life will turn out like your parents. You need to let go enough to truly and completely fall in love with someone.”

A waiter came by and took their drink order, dropping off a basket of flat bread. Gabe hated thinking about his parents. They had loved each other hard and fought with the same passion.

Gabe detested it when people made the distinction of loving and being in love. Love was all the same, wasn’t it? “My relationship with Pierce was nothing like my parents,” he defended.

“Exactly. It was safe. You held Pierce at arm’s length, never letting him close to you. There is middle ground, Gabe. You can love someone without the pain and drama your parents caused.”

“Says the man who hasn’t settled down yet,” Gabe sniped and then immediately felt like an ass. “I’m sorry, that was uncalled for. I just...” He couldn’t finish because then he’d have to admit what Ronan said was too close to the truth. He’d had time to think about what had led to Pierce leaving, and Gabe couldn’t blame him. Pierce deserved to be happy.

“I know, buddy,” Ronan said in a low voice.

The waiter delivered their drinks and a dish of maraschino cherries which Gabe spooned into his soda. Ronan had the expression he always wore when he wanted to ask Gabe something but didn’t know how. If he probed, Ronan took twice as long to organize his thoughts.

While he waited, he glanced around the room, suddenly realizing the patrons were mostly Elffin-ones. There were a few Pantherines here and there, a handful of humans, and even a couple of Zeliars. Gabe had seen a few Elffin-ones, mostly on the street. At the hospital, his wing of emergency only specialized in Pantherines health. The Elffin-one wing was on the opposite side of the building and Gabe wasn’t certified to work on that floor. He supposed if he indulged in a leisurely night out he might have befriended an Elffin-one before now. Making friends and business contacts was Pierce’s thing. He

thrived on rubbing elbows with specialists from other worlds. Gabe had always encouraged Pierce to go without him. He should've gone, he knew that now, not that he could do anything about it. Hindsight and everything.

Pushing thoughts of Pierce away, he went back to studying the bar patrons. In all honesty, he hadn't paid them much mind because most humans equated the Elffin-ones to the ancient fabled elves. There were enough similarities between the two to cause wide speculation about an Elffin-one ship perhaps crash landing on Earth in the distant past. One of the companies offered DNA testing to those who wanted to see if they had Elffin-one blood. Gabe thought it was a scheme. Yes, humans were genetically and sexually compatible with the Chandarians, but the likelihood of there being any Elffin-one ancestors was sure to be nil. Although, studying them over the rim of his glass, he could see the allure of wanting to have something that fantastical in the family tree.

Was it terrible he compared the Elffin-one features with what he'd memorized of Sunder's? The pointed ears were the same, although the Elffin-one's were much longer, more delicate. Unlike the other Pantherine with their corkscrew curls, Sunder's red hair was long and straight, like the Elffin-ones. Sunder's bone structure was something in-between the two races. Where the Pantherine skin tones were varied they were also vibrant, but the Elffin-ones had a more coral hue with their hair mixed shades of white, gold, and bronze. Gabe did see a delicate female Elffin-one with bright-blue hair, dark-gray skin, and the curious dual-ringed eyes like Sunder. When she caught him staring, he offered her a small smile before glancing away in embarrassment. Even so, he thought about going over to talk with her. The burning desire to know more about Sunder and where he came from pushed aside Gabe's normal reticence to speak to strangers.

"I think I'm ready to settle down."

Ronan's sudden statement startled Gabe. "Excuse me."

The corner of Ronan's mouth kicked up making him look sheepish. "You heard me."

"Okay. Congratulations?" What was he supposed to say? Most people didn't tell others they were ready to get married, well at least not when they were still single.

In a nervous gesture Gabe knew all too well, Ronan rotated his glass. Whatever came next, he was going to be drawn into Ronan's plans. "No," he automatically said.

“You haven’t even heard me out.”

“My answer is still no.”

“I received the invitation to be tested again.”

Gabe groaned to hide the spike of panic caused by Ronan’s confession. He was on the verge of getting up and walking away, but how could he when Ronan had always been there for him? If he was honest with himself, he was afraid Ronan would leave him. Guilt immediately followed the selfish thought. He didn’t want Ronan to be miserable—but seriously, there were other ways to find a life partner who’d stay on Earth. What would he do if Ronan moved to another world? “Please don’t tell me you’re not—”

“It’s just a test. We don’t have to go to the festival if we pass, and even if we go, we don’t have to choose anyone.” By the end, Ronan was speaking fast and leaning forward, his face animated with excitement.

Gabe rested against the booth seat and glanced away. How could he say no to that face? His hands were suddenly clammy, and he had a hard time breathing. Ronan wanted to do this together, which both eased his fear of being alone and caused horror to rise at the thought of intentionally searching a crowd for a potential partner. Why did the thought of going to the festival cause a cold sweat to form between his shoulders? What was the chance Ronan would find someone there? The Pantherines, Felinean, and Elffin-ones didn’t dawdle when searching out a mate. The decisions were quick, and somehow the humans agreed, which was just crazy. How would one know in such a short time they were compatible? That they wanted the same things out of life, out of a partnership? The image of Sunder and that naughty grin popped into this head.

Ronan grabbed his hand, drawing his gaze back to those dark expressive eyes. “Please, Gabriel. I don’t want to go alone. Plus I think this would do you some good to get out there and meet new people.”

When Gabe’s parents had left, Ronan had been there for him. He and his family took Gabe in. He stayed with them as he finished high school, then he and Ronan went to college together. Every step of the way, Ronan had been by his side. No one could ask for a better friend. The thought of Ronan eventually going off-world to settle down caused his gut to twist, but there was no way he could tell Ronan no. He wanted his best friend to be happy, and it wasn’t right for Gabe to keep Ronan to himself.

As if he read Gabe’s thoughts, Ronan grinned wide. “Thank you.”

“As if I’d let you go alone.” Gabe clenched his fist to hide the trembling of his hands.

“Who knows, maybe you’ll see the Pantherine you were drooling over tonight.”

And that was exactly what he was afraid of.

Chapter Four

After the hospital released Ayre, Sunder took him out of the city and returned to the estate. King Valiant bought the grounds for Ayre when it became apparent he'd visit Earth often and needed a secure location for his extended stays. For two days Sunder endured Ayre's teasing over Gabe. This morning the topic had changed, but Sunder wasn't sure if it was for the better.

"What do you mean the king is on his way here?" Sunder stared at Ayre, waiting for his cousin to say it all was a joke.

Ayre lounged back in the middle of the sofa, staring at Sunder with a solemn expression. His feline ears twitched in obvious agitation, whether at the prospect of Valiant coming to Earth or the reason for the unprecedented visit. Valiant had never made the journey to Earth before, always inviting the humans to Slorix or sending Ayre in his stead.

Sighing, Ayre ran his hand through his springy honey curls. "It seems the whole of the high druid council have called a conference with the Chandarian ruling party and advisors, the Elffin-one chieftains as well as the strongest of the Felinean lords, and the Zelian arbitrators. Earth agreed to host the meeting as a neutral party. From what I understand, no one suspected the high druid had problems on such a scale as to request help from abroad."

Sunder studied his cousin, knowing that worried expression all too well. "And what else?"

"The drow—all the drow—are on the move. Higher than average numbers of them have been coming to Earth the last six months or so." Ayre grimaced when Sunder narrowed his eyes at him. What he said didn't make any sense. What was there to worry over?

The Elffin-one race had two peoples living within the borders of Edrijan. Unlike the Pantherine and the Felinean, who were wholly distinct from each other, the drow were exactly like other Elffin-ones with the exception of skin and hair coloring. The Pantherine ruled all Chandarians and were smooth skinned with feline features: ears, tails, eyes, teeth, and retractable claws. The Felinean leaned more toward their animal with pelts of fur, more prominent muzzles and teeth, and reverse-articulated legs that allowed them to drop and run on all four limbs. On the other hand, the Elffin-ones singled out and named the drow. Born only to Elffin-one families, the dark-skinned drow were

believed to have more connection with the forest, the earth, and wildlife. Through them, the Elffin-one enclaves communed with the life forces around them and lived in harmony. Considered special over the normal drow, the female drow who were Feyborn, touched by magick at their birth, were revered above all Elffin-ones. They along with the common drow females, stayed in Elffin-one enclaves. The males who weren't Feyborn wandered the galaxy often settling on other planets instead of returning to Slorix. It wasn't unusual for the males to come to Earth. What was the problem?

“Explain,” Sunder demanded, not liking how Ayre withheld information.

“Father instructed me to wait until he arrived before giving a deeper clarification.”

The double doors opened to the austere sitting room Sunder and Ayre had retired to after breakfast. The butler bowed, announcing Princess Valora before she swept into the room. As King Valiant's twin, Valora shared strikingly similar features with her brother with her midnight skin, their father's signature blue eyes, and a luxurious honey-gold mane. Her typical court formals had been exchanged for sturdy travel clothing. Sunder knew his mother hated the constricting regalia she normally wore and took every opportunity to don the clothing of another's station. For years now he'd believed she would do well as a spy. If Valiant knew Sunder had utilized her talents for blending in on a couple of his missions, he was sure Valiant would order him whipped for putting her in such danger.

He rose from his chair and crossed the room to greet her. “Mother.”

Never would he think upon Talia of Nella as his mother. That honor belonged solely to Princess Valora Alard, who embodied the meaning in every sense of the word. She was the one who taught him he was not the abomination the Elffin-ones proclaimed him to be. Impressing upon him he was the only one who'd determine who he would become. Not her. Not their king. Not even the people who shunned him.

Instead of allowing him to kiss her hands, Valora drew him into a strong embrace. “How I have missed you. I hope you and Ayre are not causing too much trouble, but by the contraption Ayre wears, I'm afraid to ask.” Sunder smiled at her when she took his cheeks between her palms. Her knowing gaze narrowed on him, and she inhaled deeply, taking in his scent. “Something has happened. Your scent is buoyant.”

Ayre chortled gleefully. “I would say so. The human nurse—”

“He has a name, Ayre,” Sunder snapped. He bit back a groan because now Ayre had a new audience.

“My pardon,” Ayre mocked, sketching a bow. “My human nurse, Gabriel, drew Sunder’s interest.”

Sunder endured his mother’s steady blue gaze, all the while planning ways in which he’d strangle Ayre.

His cousin continued, “It was as if I wasn’t in the room. He only spoke to Sunder, chastised me as if I were a cub, became tongue-tied when he asked Sunder about attending the festival, and then fled leaving behind a bouquet of pheromones.” Ayre embraced Valora looking quite pleased with himself.

“From what your personal guards tell me, the young man had every right to treat you like a kit still suckling at his mother’s tit.” King Valiant closed the double doors behind him. Ayre’s casual pose immediately straightened.

A tinge of bitterness roiled in Sunder’s gut at the sight of Valiant. Ayre was the spitting image of his father, only appearing much younger. Valiant wasn’t consider old by Chandarian standards but already, silver streaked through his honey-gold curls. Valiant and Valora had inherited their father’s clear sky-blue eyes, a trait that had been passed to Ayre.

To Sunder’s naked eye, Valiant appeared hale and whole, then he remembered himself. Dropping to his left knee, Sunder placed his right fist on the floor in the proper bow to the King of Slorix. “Greetings, Your Majesty.”

He stared at the Oriental rug while he reached out with his magick to truly discern all was well with at least the king’s health. If Valiant knew Sunder used his magick to check on him, he said nothing. Sunder never did such in the company of others. With only Valora and Ayre as witnesses, he knew he was safe from heretical accusation. Bitter he might be over the denial of the family tie, but he loved Valiant even if the sentiment wasn’t returned.

Once or twice when he was young, Sunder considered defying the accord drawn up between the Elffin-ones and his grandfather, Leanter. He’d imagined standing before the committee and claiming his birthright as first born of Valiant Balsari, but always shelved the thoughts because the Elffin-ones would rise up, ensuring a civil war between their peoples. The issue the Elffin-ones claimed was Sunder being born half drow as well as with the magick of the Feyborn. Usually, Feyborn were celebrated because they housed a wild magick that bound them to all living things. Unlike Elffin-ones, who were inherently a

peaceful people, Feyborn males excelled at warfare, setting them apart from their brethren. Many believed Feyborn males warped the inherent good of the magick into something unnatural, as they walked the dark pathways of violence, until the magick turned the males into darksouls—twisted creatures who needlessly slaughtered and caused mayhem.

Or so they claimed.

His grandfather brokered a peace with the Elffin-ones, removing Sunder from the line of succession. Valora adopted him, much to Talia's ire, or so he'd heard, then demanded Talia face her in the pit if she raised an objection. If it came to light Sunder was the child of the union between Talia and Valiant, the peaceful Elffin-ones would declare a DarkHunt, demanding Sunder's immediate death, and declare war on Pantherine province of Skoyle. Even though he longed to be recognized by his blood father, Sunder would never be selfish enough to plunge two peoples into such turmoil by making a public claim.

So when Valiant entered the room, Sunder formally greeted him like any other subject of Slorix. Valiant sighed heavily, and Sunder wished he had the courage to look up and see what lay behind Valiant's eyes. Would his gaze be sorrowful? Did he yearn as Sunder did? Or would his countenance be filled with indifference? Sunder could read Valiant's health, but he'd never been able to parse out the emotions Valiant was too adept at hiding. Surely the bitterness within him would be alleviated if he knew Valiant cared for him as a father did for a son.

Not knowing how Valiant felt one way or the other, Sunder always endeavored to at least make Valiant proud, even if he held no soft affections for Sunder. At thirty seasons old, Sunder was the youngest and most successful commander of the Slorix Empire. He hadn't turned into the monster the Elffin-ones proclaimed him to be. He'd worked hard for the honor of being a Bladedancer. In the dozens of battles he'd led he'd yet to lose, but he brokered twice the number of peaceful resolutions than the campaigns he'd led. Among his peers he had become respected. The soldiers reporting to him lauded Sunder as even tempered, ruthless in battle, but fair handed when accepting terms of surrender.

A heavy hand fell atop his bent head. "My most honored knight and commander, I am gladdened to rest my eye upon you. Now rise and tell me of this human who has snared your attention enough that Ayre acts as if you've already claimed him as your mate."

Sunder raised his gaze from the floor and followed Valiant as he moved to embrace Ayre. Before he could climb to his feet, the double doors banged open with three knights trailing closely behind a tall coral-skinned Elffin-one.

In a bold move, the knight's captain, Floritian, grabbed Talia of Nella's arm to keep her from moving further into the room. "My apologies, Your Majesty. She refused to allow us to announce her, claiming you expected her." The tone of his voice said he didn't believe her. Neither did Sunder.

Forcing a placid mask over his expression, Sunder never enjoyed being in the same vicinity as Talia. She stood tall and regal, her corn-silk hair hanging free and unadorned down her back. Her gown was simple but elegant in shades of blue that set off her vibrant coral skin. When her rich copper gaze came to rest on Sunder, she wrenched her arm away from the knight. Before anyone could stop her, Talia quickly strode the last few steps separating her from Sunder and slapped him hard enough that his head snapped to the side.

Sunder blinked several times, hearing Valora growl menacingly as Talia's presence was wrenched away. Slowly he straightened, probing his split lip with his tongue as Talia was remanded by two of the knights.

"You will call off this farce right this instant! You will command the drow to return to their homes! Do not think I will stand aside and allow you to destroy my people!" Talia struggled against the knights' grip but this time they held fast. Sunder would have words with Captain Floritian for the carelessness that allowed Talia to get away from him. Whether or not Valiant could claim a blood tie to Sunder, Talia assaulted a commander of the Slorix army. There would be consequences for all involved.

Valora paced between Talia and Sunder, her black tail slashing angrily through the air. A long low growl of warning filled the room. "Touch him again, Talia, and I will find a way to take away your precious Jade Forest."

Talia's beautiful face contorted into a sneer as she stared at Sunder. "Your darksoul will destroy our planet, our way of life. Valiant will curse the day he saved you from being culled."

Valiant roared, his deadly bellow automatically summoning more knights who swarmed into the room, taking up defensive positions as they waited for their king to command them. When Ayre grasped Sunder's elbow, he allowed Ayre to pull him further away from the dramatic scene unfolding before them.

Every time Sunder had to interact with Talia, which wasn't often, she'd worn a cold mask, talking around him and never to him. She refused to touch

him or meet his gaze. Her demeanor always announced how unworthy she thought he was to share the same air as she, but she never revealed the depth of her hatred of him—until today. The whole incident was out of character for her. She didn't normally lose her cool control, and Sunder had to wonder what scheme was at play here.

For the first time since meeting Gabriel, Sunder's magick rose within him responding to his deep alarm, pulsing under his skin. He could feel the life force of all living things surrounding the estate. The plant life slowly awoke from its slumber, sending tendrils of energy to Sunder.

"Are you injured? Do you need us, our liege?" The offer brushed across the senses of Pantherine and Elffin-one alike.

Every eye turned toward Sunder. Never before had the plants spoken loud enough for all to hear their wispy voices. Usually when they spoke to Sunder, none were the wiser. That they rose their voice for all to hear meant they detected a danger he was unaware of. He threw out his magick and since Ayre still gripped his arm, Ayre's consciousness accompanied Sunder as he searched for the peril. His vision of the room was replaced by that of the surrounding woods. Normally he wouldn't leave himself so vulnerable, but with Valora and the knights in the room as well as Ayre next to him, he was as safe as he could be.

The estate was surrounded by a new forest, young and vibrant to Sunder's inner eye. There, within their confines, hid many Elffin-ones bristling with weaponry. Sunder sucked in his breath in shock. Who would dare attack the home of the heir apparent, or was the target Valiant?

"Father." Ayre's voice sounded disembodied. "There are close to—I don't know, a hundred Elffin-ones hiding in the forest. I see Talia's father and the council of Nella among them. They are girded for battle."

The heat of another body moved to stand close to Sunder. He inhaled Valiant's scent, waiting for what his king would do. He dared not draw back into himself and take his eyes off the soldiers. Unexpectedly, Valiant grasped Sunder's free arm and immediately Valiant's awareness joined them. Sunder hadn't taken riders with him before and felt as if his head was overstuffed. A throbbing started behind his eyes, but he allowed Valiant to see what he did.

"Can you contain them?" Valiant's question was a thought none could hear but he and Ayre.

Instead of wasting the energy to answer, Sunder sent his magick into the soil feeding the forest's vitality. Naturally the Elffin-ones could feel the magick in the woods, but they were used to such sensations. They didn't expect the confining roots that rose from the ground to incapacitate them within seconds. Once he was sure all had been restrained, Sunder withdrew and settled back into himself. When he blinked to clear his vision, he focused on Valiant's vibrant-blue eyes. Reflected there was pride and affection he hadn't seen before, causing his heart to constrict with joy. Without saying a word, Valiant continued to stare until a noise behind them reminded Sunder of their current predicament. Valiant grimaced and then the mask he always wore fell over his expression before he turned away.

"Wow." Ayre drew in a shaky breath. "That was... wow. We have to talk about that later."

Sunder gave a small nod to indicate he heard then turned his attention to Talia. Her glittering coral skin had paled to a light peach, but her gaze held a fanatical gleam. She watched Sunder expectantly. "Abomination," she hissed.

Valiant moved so Ayre was to his right and Sunder to his left. "What goes on here, Talia? What are you accusing Sunder of?"

She didn't take her eyes off Sunder. "Did you believe we wouldn't notice? Wouldn't catch on to what you were doing? You have summoned all drow to you, as if you have the right. In doing so, you have broken the accords, and Edrijan will have no other recourse than to declare war. You are bent. Twisted. Darksoul. We will put a stop to you before you cause another Scarab War. Have you turned into such a monster you would doom so many to death?"

"That is enough, Talia!" Valiant snapped. "If the drow are leaving Edrijan then it is because of something the Elffin-ones have done, not because of Sunder. You forget, he is one of my commanders. His movements, his communications, all have been witnessed and verified. I can produce evidence; all your accusations are groundless. Your druids are the ones to call this conference. Your theatrics today are unwarranted and inflammatory. Not to mention you struck my sister's son, a person of the royal house."

Talia made a rude noise. "I did no such thing. He has no bearing, he is outcast, shunned. I birthed him. *I* decide his fate."

The room settled into a stunned silence. Sunder couldn't believe his ears. Glancing around, he wasn't the only one taken aback by Talia's declaration.

The older of Valiant's soldiers bared their teeth in grins of triumph. Had they been there when Valiant had taken him and ran from the people of Nella?

Sunder broke the silence, quickly grasping this opening she'd handed him. "Talia of Nella, you have claimed me as blood of your blood before these witnesses. You have broken the Feyborn Accords giving King Valiant leave to claim me as his son."

Talia's eyes widened. Sunder didn't know if her shock was feigned or if she'd truly lost control and blurted her thoughts out loud. Glancing around, she searched for something, perhaps a way around her faux pas. Her eyes only grew wider as she took in the scope of who was in the room. Was she so lost in her fanaticism to not realize the room held so many knights?

From behind the wall of guardsmen a soft voice called out. "Greetings, King Valiant. May we enter?"

At Valiant's nod, the knights parted to reveal the Feyborn High Druid Melindria and four of her acolytes. Sunder had never met Melindria, only knew of her by reputation. She was the one to call the leaders of their peoples together for this impromptu conference, and perhaps the reason why Talia acted out of character. He carefully looked her over. From the silky black robes that draped from her neck leaving her shoulders bare, to the high golden collar that rose above her shaved head, she appeared dignified and regal. White glyphs were tattooed into her dark-gray skin. Sunder knew they held meaning, but he wasn't schooled in the ways of the druid to understand what he saw. Three of the acolytes wore red, and the last wore golden yellow indicating she would one day be the next high druid. That one, Sunder recognized and even knew her name. Renna. She was at court often, and he remembered how she'd watched him carefully, not maliciously, but as if she waited for something.

Melindria bowed to Valiant, her gaze carefully lowered to the floor in deference. "Your Highness, if you will, it seems we must speak sooner rather than later." Her lavender-ringed eyes slid over to Sunder, her expression neutral. "Commander Alard, I understand you have captured those hiding within the woods."

Sunder glanced to Valiant before he replied, "I have."

"Would you mind speaking to the forest? It resists my magick. Also, I must insist you leave this place so we may speak with King Valiant. I fear your presence will cause an incident with the Elffin-ones when we all need to remain calm and logical. But if you leave, the Elffin-ones will be trapped in the woods." Melindria clasped her hands, waiting for Sunder to reply.

He glanced to Valiant, refusing to do as Melindria bid until Valiant made a decision. For all he knew, the Elffin-ones were there because Melindria directed them. "I don't want to leave you with this situation," Sunder said softly to Valiant.

Did Valiant bring enough knights to handle the contingent outside? Once arrested they'd need to be transported to the battle cruiser designated to escort Valiant. Sunder should be the person in charge of supervising the situation, but he also understood Melindria was correct. He made the Elffin-ones agitated, and he sensed they were on the edge of breaking their noncombative demeanor. Taking into consideration Talia and her recent behavior, something was going on here that Sunder wasn't privy to. His presence could cause more harm than good, but he still didn't feel comfortable handing over the captured Elffin-one soldiers to Melindria, High Druid or not.

"If you will excuse us for a moment." The knights responded briskly to Valiant's request, carrying out Talia and ushering the druids ahead of them.

When the double doors closed, Valiant, Valora, and Ayre were the only ones who remained with him. Sunder worked a quick privacy spell over the room. "If she attempts to use magick to listen in, I will know." He turned to Valiant. "What would you have me do? I have no wish to cause more turmoil."

Valora's tail lashed the air. "Unfortunately, she wasn't lying about the drow leaving Edrijan. The Elffin-ones were already agitated with this unexpected evacuation. Many of the drow crossed the borders into Skoyle and Felinean territories while others booked passage here to Earth. Whatever the Keepers of the Jade Forest are hiding, drow males and females alike are reacting. Talia is the one whose actions will cause illogical fear, spurring the Elffin-ones into action."

Valiant heaved a heavy sigh. "Regrettably, I agree with Melindria. I do not want you here in the middle of this, Sunder. I suspect Talia broke the accords meaning to force the DarkHunters into action. The Elffin-ones are terrified of being ruled by a Feyborn male, and nothing we have done over the years has alleviated their concerns. Until I have a better handle of what is causing this inner turmoil within Edrijan, I want you away from this fiasco." Valiant's gaze softened, and Sunder held his breath as Valiant looked upon him just as he'd always wanted. "I want you safe."

Sunder glanced away from Valiant's tender expression finding it hard to breathe around the constriction in his chest. Valora approached taking his face

between her palms to kiss his cheeks. “Yes, keep yourself safe while we untangle this knot.”

After she released him, Sunder turned toward Ayre taking his right hand. “Since I don’t know her intentions, I won’t ask the forest to listen to Melindria. To you I entrust the key. With it, the forest will recognize that you speak for me. Since you were with me when I asked for their help, they will recognize your essence.” Sunder touched two fingers to Ayre’s palm and a red glyph flared to life and then disappeared. “You will need to get close enough to touch one of the trees, but then all you need to do is ask the forest for what you need. Do you have any questions?”

Ayre stared at his palm for a second, the awe evident before he turned his gaze to Sunder and grinned wide. “No, I’ll call you if I need you. When this is over, we are going to talk about all you can do.”

“I will pack my bags and take my leave then.” Before they could say anything, Sunder practically fled the room, on the verge of being emotionally overwhelmed.

In the foyer, the druids waited along with Talia who was still restrained. The druids had always been courteous to him, and now he returned the favor. He’d wondered if his being half drow was the reason for their careful neutrality, but now wasn’t the time to make inquiries. Sunder bowed deeply to Melindria. “Wise one, I hope to see you again in better circumstances.” Talia made a disgusted noise, but he ignored her and climbed the stairs to the second floor.

As he packed, Sunder thought over what he knew, forming plans, guessing at motives and actions. Valiant needed to decide soon what they would do before word spread past the knights about Talia claiming him as her son. The Elffin-ones would revolt, Sunder had no doubt, if Valiant named Sunder as heir. The question would be, why would Talia want to start a revolution? Were the Nella hiding something the druids wanted to bring to light? Sunder was a battlefield commander. War and politics often mixed, but usually the politics were of other planets and species. The Zelians sorted out what went on behind the scenes to cause the war. Sunder’s responsibility was to bring the fighting to an end and broker a short-term peace treaty, giving the Zelians time to pound out something more long-term for all parties involved. Sunder could look on the surface at the day’s events and form hypotheses of the different directions Talia’s actions could lead her people in, but Sunder was no savvy courtier and certainly not familiar with the machinations of either Elffin-one or Pantherine courts. Bitterly, he had understood the future peace between the two peoples

meant he would spend his life withdrawn from influential circles. Ayre and Valiant would be much better equipped to discover the truth of the matter.

Sunder quickly filled a bag, knowing that wherever he settled, the house butler would send his remaining belongings. Perhaps he'd stay in a hotel in the city, or he could take a shuttle to his ship. A slow smile lifted the corner of his lips. Or he could seek out Gabe and invite him to dinner.

“Sunder.”

He halted in midmotion at the sound of Valiant's voice. He stood from where he stuffed clothing in the overnight bag, his heart skipping a beat. The sound of the bedroom door softly snicking shut caused him to turn around. Was this where Valiant—his father—explained why he couldn't claim Sunder publicly, regardless that Talia had opened the door for them? He already knew this, Valiant didn't need to speak to him about it. Sunder had purposely shied away from thoughts of being acknowledged by Valiant, of being able to call Ayre brother instead of cousin. Such a little thing he'd wanted all of his life, and he knew—he *knew*—he would never be able to have it.

Even in travel clothes, Valiant had a regal bearing, his midnight skin flawless, wide cheek bones and square jaw accentuated by his bright-blue eyes and honey-gold corkscrew curls perfectly placed. Valiant was the epitome of handsome in Pantherine circles—stunning in Chandarian culture. Next to him and Ayres, Sunder felt as if the Gods had roughly slapped him together before he was birthed.

Valiant crossed the room swiftly, startling Sunder when Valiant pulled him into a tight embrace—and didn't release Sunder when he struggled. This touching, this show of emotion wasn't done. Valiant never—ever—touched him. If they were caught, Valiant wouldn't be able to deny anything and there *would* be a war. A couple of seconds passed before he realized Valiant was speaking to him.

“It will be all right, my son. Now that they have given you back to me, I'm not letting you go. I will challenge any who try to steal you away again. I won't allow it! You are mine and I will tell all who will listen. Somehow, I will make these last years up to you. I should've never let my father convince me this was the only way to keep peace. I should've fought, but I only wanted you safe. Three times they sent assassins to take your life, and I needed you to be safe. I'm sorry, my son. But now you're mine, and I will die before they take you from me again.”

Sunder gave in, squeezing Valiant tight, only letting up when his father grunted. As commander of the royal army, he should've reminded Valiant the brink of war loomed over them. His responsibility was to be the voice of logic for his king. Intellectually, he understood the politics behind the accords his grandfather brokered, but bitterness and anger at the unfairness of it all had grown within him over the years. In public or private, Valiant hadn't acknowledged their blood tie, and Sunder had believed this moment—the moment when his father called him *son*—would never come. Except the moment had come, and he was terrified of grasping and holding on for all he was worth.

Reluctantly, Sunder released Valiant. “Father,” he whispered aloud for the first time.

Valiant's smile was huge and unrestrained, showing his teeth with pride written upon his features. “Talia was furious with me when I stole you away. Her father threatened war if the Elffin-ones would one day be ruled by you. Talia took her animosity a step further and demanded I could never claim you publicly or privately as my son, knowing full well how that would hurt me every time I saw you.”

Immediately Sunder was swamped by a cloying guilt. He'd never known Valiant hurt just as he had.

“Now that she is the one to break the accords, I won't go back to how it was before. The road ahead of us will be hard, but we are Balsari, we will prevail. But beware, I suspect her outburst wasn't an accident. Something else goes on among the Elffin-ones.” Valiant gripped Sunder's nape.

“When is the meeting the druids have called?”

“As of right now, a week after the festival. The timing will allow all who attend and find mates at the festival to settle in their new matebonds before they come together for the gathering.”

Sunder nodded. “Do you think the Elffin-ones will put a mark on my head?”

The Elffin-one hatred of the Feyborn bordered on illogical. When Sunder's grandfather, Leanter, had insisted that if Valiant had to lose an heir, then all Feyborn males were to be handed over to the Pantherine. With the low birth rates, Pantherines kept meticulous records of each pregnancy. After the accords, the Elffin-ones had to give birth in facilities instead of at home with their private physicians. A king's official and a druid were both present, and if the child was a Feyborn male then he was handed over immediately.

As a curious young kit who could smell his relationship to the king's heir, he often spied on Leanter and Valiant. On one such childish expedition, Sunder had overheard how the Feyborn children placed with Pantherine couples were dying of supposed "accidents." The DarkHunters of old had emerged from the Elffin-one society, sneaking out to assassinate the innocent children. In response, Leanter quit placing the children within his own lands. Some were sent to be adopted by the Felinean, where they disappeared into the vast deserts, while others were adopted into families off-world. Granted there were only a couple of dozen Feyborn birthed over the last thirty years but still that was a couple of dozen children given a chance to live.

Now Sunder worried the DarkHunters would come for him. In the past, they hadn't dared once he'd been adopted by Princess Valora. But with Talia's declaration, they wouldn't chance Sunder being declared heir to the Chandarian throne.

Valiant sighed heavily. "I'm afraid that is a real possibility. I'm sending a few of my personal knights with you." Sunder wrinkled his nose at the thought of his father's safety weakened by the loss of strong arms. Valiant laughed. "Yes, my son, I'm well aware of how well you can take care of yourself. Allow me this one indulgence. If the Elffin-ones make a move and you're hurt, I'd never forgive myself."

"As you wish, and I will try to stay hidden until at least the festival." Even though Sunder was sure he could defend himself, he was warmed by Valiant's worry. The sensation felt odd but was welcomed.

Sunder blinked at the fond expression Valiant gave him. "Than that is all I can ask. Now I need to speak to the high druid. Perhaps she will give me a hint at what is to come. I think it is obvious the Nella already know."

"Are that many drow really converging on Earth? Surely all they want is to attend this conference Melindria has called." The drow made up only a small percentage of the Elffin-one population, but even then the imagery of all of them on the move was staggering.

"I'm afraid so. My contact tells me there is civil unrest, but the specifics are being held close to the drow breast. I'm hoping Melindria will be able to shed some light upon the situation. Touch base with me or Ayre if anything unusual happens or if any of the drow contact you." Sunder didn't struggle when Valiant drew him into another fierce hug.

Holding Sunder still, Valiant ran the ridges of his nose from Sunder's chin to ears several times. Marking him. Claiming Sunder for all Chandarians to smell. Sunder swallowed convulsively at the tender fatherly touch.

"I will stay out of harm's way," he promised. He shouldered his bag, feeling lighter in spirit than when he'd entered the room.

In the hallway, Ayre and Valora waited. "Mother." Sunder beamed, taking her into his arms, reassuring her he would be careful.

When he released her, he had an armful of an excited Ayre. Sunder laughed loudly.

"Finally," Ayre breathed out. Clapping Sunder on the arm, he glanced at the bag over Sunder's shoulder. "Come on, I'll walk you out."

Leaving the house was surreal with the knights smartly coming to attention, fists clenched over their hearts. They knew. He'd understood there were knights sworn to secrecy when his father took him and ran from the Nella people, but he never knew which ones. Many of them had already moved on or retired, but there were a few expressions that weren't filled with the same awe as the others, but a deep pride. They gave him slight nods of acknowledgment, and Sunder had the urge to pull them aside and ask them to tell him of his birth. To hear from them what happened that day, but now wasn't the time.

At the vehicle, the driver took the duffle from him. On the lawn near the forest, a small contingent of knights waited for Ayre. Sunder embraced his cousin—*brother*—again, burying his face in the soft curls of Ayre's mane. "If you need me, call me. I will bring my men," Sunder whispered.

"I will," Ayre promised, his voice holding the sound of a smirk. "Don't get into any trouble with your nurse."

Sunder said nothing, only released Ayre with a wide grin and climbed into the transport with four other knights. That's exactly what he planned to do with Gabe.

Chapter Five

The crook of Gabe's elbow was tender, He kept touching the area where the techs had taken blood. He could've sworn they were trying to drain him dry with as much as they drew. Did they really need that much to run tests on? When he and Ronan approached the center with their invitations, he'd half hoped they were too late. Most people had their testing done months in advance. They were now a couple of weeks from the festival, and the events were already under way. But the perky receptionist ushered them in to separate rooms with a bright cheery smile. They spent all day taking cognitive tests and answering questionnaires. He spoke to a shrink who seemed to give him the stink eye through the whole hour. He thought his issues with being abandoned by his parents would bar him from the festival. Nope. He passed and the only things pending were the blood tests.

He waited in the reception area for Ronan. An hour later, his best friend stumbled through the swinging door looking exactly how Gabe felt. "I'm starving!" Ronan announced. "For a moment there I thought they would keep me overnight."

Dusk was falling fast when they stepped outside onto the sidewalk, and they picked a deli within walking distance.

Ronan's shoulder brushed his as they walked. "That questionnaire was crazy. How do you feel about a marriage with multiple parties? Would you consider donating sperm or eggs for a fertility program?"

Gabe chuckled. "I almost skipped reading the pregnancy disclosure because really, I'm gay and the last I heard the Chandarian males don't have the capability to become pregnant." They entered the deli and gave their orders. After they claimed a table, he continued, "I read it anyway because I figured they'd stick something unrelated into the clause."

The Chandarians had some strange rules on males and females. Who took whose surname. The legal and financial obligations of each parent. He wondered if the females ever paused over the portion that said they were required to reside on Slorix until the cubs were at least twenty seasons old.

Ronan swallowed and sipped his drink. "Yeah, it made me wonder about the matings. The way everybody talked about the couples who left the festival mated, I was under the assumption there was a low relationship failure rate. I assumed everyone got their happy ever after, you know?"

Gabe watched as Ronan chased catsup around the plate with a fry, brows drawn down thoughtfully. “From what I have gleaned working with the Chandarians, they do mate for life when allowed to choose their own partners. But it isn’t always a bed of roses. They work to keep a healthy relationship. Imagine the culture shock people like you and me would experience if we mated one of them. Even though people think they’re prepared, they really aren’t. I hate to say it, but some people don’t have the fortitude to wade through the issues and stick with it through the bad. Plus, do they really know the being they are mated to?”

Ronan chewed on the tip of a fry considering. “The participants go to the gatherings that are organized before the festival. We have access to the database of the Chandarians attending. I don’t see why someone wouldn’t know enough.”

Gabe laughed. “How many people actually read through the biographies?” He had read Sunder’s, but he wasn’t going to share that tidbit with Ronan. “I can guarantee most humans are expecting the Chandarians to do all the work with their enhanced scenting abilities. They expect to walk around the festival allowing others to scent them, and then to have a male or female beat their chest and claim them like some bodice-ripping novel. The whole system needs to be rethought and overhauled, if you ask me.”

“Or they can include the clause saying there is no divorce. I bet that would chase away those who weren’t serious about the process.”

Gabe wrinkled his nose. “Perhaps, but it wouldn’t keep out the fools who believe in love at first sight. Love isn’t... isn’t like instant coffee. Just add sex and boom you have a lifetime relationship. What happens when things don’t pan out like they imagined? Then comes the, ‘I love you but I’m not *in love* with you.’ Makes me feel sorry for any being shackled to a fickle human.”

Ronan snorted. “You’re seriously jaded, you know that, right? That is what some of the testing is supposed to eliminate. Otherwise, why have the testing at all?”

Shoring up his courage, Gabe broached the question he was afraid to ask. “So, you’re serious-serious about this. You’re ‘reading the bios’ serious?”

Ronan looked down at his plate, the shyness so unlike his best friend. “I’ve been reading through the biographies for a while now. I know you think this is a sudden decision on my part, but it’s not. I’ve been thinking about this for a while, although I haven’t told my parents yet.”

Gabe released a steady breath. He'd thought as much. "They're going to balk at you leaving Earth but they're like me, they only want to see you happy. Who knows, maybe your mom will convince your father to move off-world?" He laughed at the face Ronan made.

"That's just wrong, Gabe. And you'd better not plant that idea in her head." Ronan sat up straight, staring at something over Gabe's shoulder.

"What?" He turned, glancing around the deli wondering what caught Ronan's eye. Movement on the other side of the floor-to-ceiling windows drew his attention. There, pacing the sidewalk in front of the deli, was the Pantherine from the other day, Commander Sunder Alard.

Gabe drank in everything about the Chandarian. If anything, he appeared more alluring than Gabe remembered. His whole body reacted to the sight of Sunder prowling back and forth as his tail waved behind him in agitation. Before he could decide what he wanted to do, Ronan slid out of the booth and crossed the deli to stick his head out the glass door. Sunder stumbled to a halt, listening to whatever Ronan said. When Sunder looked through the window at him, Gabe held his breath. He swallowed thickly when Sunder followed Ronan back to their table.

"You're really doing me a huge favor." Ronan pushed Sunder down into his seat, shooting Gabe a mischievous grin. "Sorry, Gabe, I have to run, but the big dude here said he'd walk you home."

Confused, Gabe didn't get a chance to ask Ronan what he was doing. "Walk me home? But I rode my bike."

Ronan was out the door before Gabe could finished speaking. He threw a wave over his shoulder and was gone before Gabe could mutter, "What the fuck?"

"How does he know who I am?" The question brought Gabe's attention back to Sunder, who had one of those neutral expressions that said Sunder didn't like the surprise.

An embarrassed flush warmed his face, and Gabe gave Sunder a tentative smile. "Because he caught me staring at your... you the other day at the hospital. He's my best friend and a nurse who works on the same floor." There was no way he would confess Ronan caught him searching for Sunder's contact information. "He knew I found you attractive." Gabe hadn't believed he'd run into Sunder again, well, at least before the festival. He'd wanted to know more about the Pantherine who had tongue-tied him with a simple smile.

The online biography for Sunder only evoked more questions than answers. He searched through dozens of electronic files. Although, when he crossed the Elffin-ones' data, his curiosity had been tempered. Granted, the database was similar to old-time wikifiles, programs open for other users to add information based on "facts," but everyone knew to take the information found on wiki with a grain of salt. It was astonishing the site hadn't been shut down. After reading the Elffin-one article calling Sunder a dangerous darksoul, Gabe had recognized fanatical tone and reported the piece to the site moderators.

Gabe started when Sunder shifted in his seat. He'd missed something Sunder had said. "I'm sorry, I was just thinking. What was that?"

Sunder's tentative grin vanished and he leaned back. "I said... never mind, I didn't mean to intrude on your evening with your friend. I'll leave you in peace."

"No!" Gabe panicked, reaching across the table and grabbing Sunder's wrist when Sunder went to slide out of the booth. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be rude. I really had hoped to see you again." A small voice hissed at Gabe that he was a fool to admit that much. He would only be hurt, but he pushed aside the doubt and forged on. "I was thinking that I had really wanted to see you again, and I was disappointed I didn't get to say good-bye the other day. If it's not too forward of me, would you like to grab some ice cream?" Gabe wondered if he came off as stalkerish.

The wariness in Sunder's gaze was chased away by an open smile, and he slid his hand over where Gabe's still clutched Sunder's wrist. "I have heard of ice cream, but haven't sampled the dish."

Releasing Sunder's wrist, Gabe beamed. "Then I'm your man because I may not do many things well, but I'm a knowledgeable connoisseur of ice cream."

After gathering his and Ronan's littered trays, he emptied them in the trash. When he turned, his heart kicked up a beat to find the sexy-as-fuck Sunder standing close. For a brief second, Sunder's tantalizing cologne teased Gabe's senses, and he thought about leaning in to bury his nose in Sunder's chest so he could breathe more of it in. How had he not noticed Sunder was a head taller than him? Gabe wasn't a shrimp by any means, but even then the top of his head easily brushed the underside of Sunder's chin. The realization only fed visions of how easily Sunder could surround him, cocoon him—and he broke off the thought because he was already sporting a chubby.

“Wow, you’re really tall. Oh my God. Way to sound intelligent, Gabe.” How did Sunder do it? Gabe blurted out his thoughts like an untried teenager talking to a crush for the first time.

This was the second time he spouted something stupid around Sunder. He was an educated man and could hold deep discussions about a host of topics. But being near Sunder seemed to short-circuit his brain. He didn’t do butterfly stomachs or stumbling words—ever. Even when he was a horny teenager, he didn’t make this much of a fool of himself. *Because I’ve never immediately liked someone this much upon meeting them.*

“Does my height bother you?” Sunder frowned, sniffing Gabe as if he could tell from smell alone that Gabe was upset.

Gabe hissed through his teeth, beating down the ugly head of anxiety whispering Sunder was dangerous, and he should go home, alone. Wasn’t Ronan right? Didn’t he needed to get out and socialize more? There was nothing wrong with finding Sunder’s nearness titillating.

Something wrapped around his ankle, and when Gabe looked down, Sunder’s tail tightened around his leg. The dirty thought of all the wicked things Sunder could do with that tail made Gabe blush.

Snapping his head up, he hoped Sunder couldn’t read thoughts. “No, that doesn’t bother me. I’m just socially inept and awkward around others sometimes.” Before then, he’d never cared.

“You interact well with your friend, Ronan, do you not?” Sunder tucked his brilliant red hair behind a pointed ear, his red-ringed gray eyes steady on Gabe’s.

Moving across the deli, Gabe pushed through the glass door. The heat of the summer evening chased away the air-conditioned coolness that clung to his skin. “Ronan has been my friend for a long time, and I’m more comfortable with him than anyone else. If I say something wacky he doesn’t hold my ineptitude against me.”

Sunder fell into step with him. “Then we will have to get to know each other so you’re more comfortable around me. And I promise, I won’t hold anything against you, although you may need to explain things to me from time to time. I’m still mastering the cultural sayings and nuances of your language.”

“Deal. Come on. Let’s bust your ice cream cherry.” Gabe laughed at Sunder’s confused expression. Several awkward minutes followed as he

explained what he meant. "I'm a nurse for Pete's sake. I should be able to explain that without this much embarrassment." He was absurdly pleased when Sunder laughed at him.

The longer Gabe spent in Sunder's company and talked about mundane everyday things, the less he marveled that a Chandarian was walking with him down the street, and the more at ease he became. By the time they strolled a half-dozen blocks, he'd made Sunder belly laugh several times. He held open the door to an old-fashioned ice cream parlor, liking the way the stress lines on Sunder's face had smoothed out. In the beginning, the laugh sounded rusty, unused. Not that Gabe should care, but he found he did, not understanding why. He didn't normally go out of his way to make anyone laugh, other than Ronan, and sometimes Pierce.

Gabe found it hard to look away from Sunder for long. The tilt of Sunder's eyes, how his nose looked Pantherine but more delicate with ridges Gabe's itched to stroke. The way Sunder's dusky-gray skin shone with health and vitality, and the jut of sharp canine teeth that barely peaked out from under his top lip had Gabe wondering what it would feel like to touch, to run his tongue under the sharp edges. Lust curled in his gut, and he couldn't bring himself to mind.

"I never thought of all the strange things a healer sees," Sunder said, preceding Gabe into the parlor's cool interior. The place was twenty minutes away from closing so there were only a couple of other customers. All of them stared unabashedly at Sunder who ignored them as if they weren't there.

"I'm a nurse, not a healer. Things only get more weird around the full moon and the couple weeks prior to the festival. People do the damndest things, oftentimes hurting themselves or others in the process."

He stopped in front of the counter and explained what everything was, fascinated as he watched Sunder sample flavors. The reaction Sunder had to each taste was enough to make Gabe's constant chubby turn in to full-fledged arousal. The soft moans, the way that wide flat tongue licked any remaining residue from the small wooden spoon, caused Gabe's heart to speed. If Sunder didn't stop, Gabe would kick propriety's ass out the door and climb Sunder like a tree.

He must've made a noise because Sunder's gaze snapped to his. Heat sparked in those unusual eyes and suddenly Gabe was hot. He tugged at the collar of his shirt wondering what happened to the air-conditioning.

“I think I want them all,” Sunder purred. Embarrassingly, Gabe whimpered. The grin Sunder gave him was full of sharp teeth and seduction.

His mouth went terribly dry and sweat trickled down his spine. “No need to be greedy. We can come back here again.”

Triumph crossed Sunder’s expression, but Gabe’s muddled mind couldn’t decipher why. Clearing his throat, he placed his own order and leaned back against the counter. The spicy cologne Sunder wore surrounded him, and he inhaled, realizing belatedly that it wouldn’t help him clear his mind.

“Something is wrong.” It wasn’t a question. Sunder said it as if stating the obvious before he crowded into Gabe’s personal space. Usually Gabe kept distance between himself and others, but he couldn’t find it in himself to move away.

“No, I’m... Do you know how good you smell?” Heat rose in his cheeks.

“You like my scent?” Sunder’s voice lowered, becoming growly.

“Your cologne is amazing. I’ve never smelled anything like it,” he confessed, closing his eyes to inhale deeply. “I don’t think I could ever tire of how you smell.”

Sunder looked more than pleased. “I don’t wear personal scent enhancers. It muddles my senses.”

“Oh, God. Was I just rude to you again? I’m sorry.” But holy hell, if that was what Sunder’s body odor was like all the time—how did he not have people clamoring to be his mate? Hell, Gabe wanted to roll in the scent.

Sunder’s loud purring did nothing to dampen Gabe’s libido. “You have paid me a high compliment, Gabe. I’m pleased you find my pheromones enticing.”

The attendant handed over their cones, and Gabe began eating just to shut himself up. From the corner of his eye, he watched Sunder lick his ice cream, and he swore Sunder was purposely tempting him with every careful swipe of his tongue. All he could think was how it would feel if Sunder laved his skin in such a naughty manner. He was so engrossed he forgot about his own treat.

“Do you find yours unpleasant?” Sunder asked when he finished crunching through the last of the wafer.

Swallowing down his lust, Gabe glanced at his ice cream, partially melted. He lied. “I’m full.” He was ravenous, but not for that kind of dessert.

“Do you mind?” Sunder reached for the cone, and Gabe let him take it. He tried to say no because he wasn’t sure if he could take any more sensual torture. “You don’t share food with strangers. For... you know... I could have a contagious disease... or something.”

“Hmm.”

Gabe held his breath as Sunder leaned in close. He grasped Gabe’s wrist and pressed his nose to the delicate skin there. Sunder’s eyes became half-lidded as he inhaled, his gaze never leaving Gabe’s. When Sunder’s tongue swiped over his pulse point, he thought he’d jizz in his pants like a horny teenager. He choked on a cough.

Sunder grinned as if he knew that one motion turned Gabe’s world upside down, and in no way was he sorry. “There is nothing wrong with you. And you smell delicious, too.”

How was he supposed to respond to that? All the cylinders of his mind were misfiring. He could only watch as Sunder took the melting cone and made quick work of it. He almost swallowed his tongue when Sunder took the hand the ice cream melted on and licked that away as well. Gabe couldn’t remember when he’d been so turned on. When was the last time he’d met someone who muddled his mind to the point he couldn’t think properly? Who he’d wanted to drag to bed and screw, despite the fact he had to report to work in a couple of hours?

Sunder pulled a silky cloth from his pocket and proceeded to wipe down the hand he’d cleaned with his tongue. The nurse in him harped about washing his hands, but he pushed the thought away when Sunder pressed the material into his palm.

“Just in case you need it,” Sunder said, something hopeful in his expression.

Gabe couldn’t quite understand. He didn’t remember if there was any significance to Sunder giving him the equivalent of a handkerchief, and came up with nothing. He should’ve given it back knowing he wouldn’t need it again, but instead he curled his fingers around the cloth murmuring a “thank you.” He was sure he stepped into something when Sunder beamed a bright satisfied grin. The logical part of him that governed his behavior, protecting him from getting hurt, demanded Gabe give the garment back. In a fit of rebellion, he stuffed the handkerchief into his jeans pocket with the promise to himself he’d give the cloth back—later.

“Would you... would you like for me to drive you home.” The hesitation after such a bold display made Sunder more adorable, not that Gabe would admit to thinking such a thing.

“My bike isn’t far from here.” He checked his watch and frowned. If he was to make it to work on time he’d need to go home soon. When he glanced back up he couldn’t stand to see Sunder’s crestfallen expression. “But if you want to walk with me to the garage, I won’t say no.”

Immediately Sunder perked up, and Gabe had a hard time reconciling the famous Chandarian commander to the eager male who stood before him.

“What do you do for fun on your world?” Gabe asked. The night had deepened and the sidewalk wasn’t as crowded as before. He noticed the Elffin-ones crossed the street, if they could, rather than walk by him and Sunder. Gabe narrowed his eyes as he watched them, a protectiveness swelling within him. *Assholes.*

Sunder ran a hand through his hair. Was he nervous? “I don’t have much free time at home. Unless I’m required at court, I stay in. Sometimes I meet with a small group of friends, and we play a game very similar to what you know as mah-jongg.”

He huffed a laugh. “I don’t get out much either. This is the first day in a while that I didn’t spend at home. And the first date I’ve been on in a long while. I always feel out of place.”

“As if everyone is watching, waiting for you to screw up?” Sunder gave him a calculating look.

“Exactly! Ronan says if I went out more I wouldn’t feel as if I’m on display all the time. Perhaps he’s right. It doesn’t negate the fact I’d rather spend my free time relaxing at home.”

He slipped his check-in slip into the slot outside the parking garage and waited. Sunder had fallen silent. Gabe kept glancing at Sunder, his stomach fluttering again. Should he simply say good night and leave it at that? He enjoyed Sunder’s company too much, and he knew Sunder would soon return to his homeworld. *That doesn’t mean I can’t get to know him a little more.*

The bay door opened to reveal the elevator box that retrieved his bike from storage. Sunder prowled around his Harley making noises of approval. Gabe pulled his leather jacket, gloves, and helmet out of his saddle bags. As he readied to leave, he watched how Sunder kept glancing at him, mouth opening only to snarl and pace, his tail lashing in what Gabe thought of as aggravation.

“I have to work tonight, and I’ll be tied up for the next couple of days, but I start my two week vacation Friday.” He swallowed, his mouth dry. Was he really going to do this? One look at Sunder’s wide expectant eyes and Gabe knew he couldn’t just walk away. “Would you like to have dinner with me? I make a mean lasagna. I’ll buy some ice cream, and we’ll experiment with toppings, or something.” His face burned with embarrassment, praying Sunder didn’t pick up on any of the innuendo in the offer.

Halting midstride, Sunder lifted his nose to the air as he sniffed. With what appeared to be exaggerated care, Sunder bowed low. “I would be honored to be your guest, and doubly honored you would go to such trouble for this humble servant. I look forward to the mean lasagna made by your hand.”

Gabe floundered. Should he bow back? Was there some sort of formal reply? Sunder stood and crossed the space between them, his expression so fierce, so fucking hot that Gabe had second thoughts about going to work.

Sunder drew up only a couple of inches away. “May I?”

Dumbly, he nodded thinking Sunder would kiss him. To his disappointment and bewilderment, Sunder ran the bridge of his nose over each of Gabe’s cheeks, leaving a tingling trail behind. Sunder’s tail wrapped around Gabe’s calf, causing Gabe to inhale deeply, Sunder’s spice tickling his nose. He stretched his neck and Sunder seemed to take that as an invitation, rubbing along the column of his throat as well. As Gabe held still, he sensed there was something intimate about the action, as if what Sunder did was more than a simple caress. For all he knew, this was how Chandarians kissed. Sunder breathed across his skin raising gooseflesh all over Gabe’s body, but just as suddenly as he began, Sunder stopped and stepped away.

Gabe’s hands trembled as he brought out his data pad. “What number can I contact you at... so I can send you my address?”

Sunder drew in a couple of deep breaths, as if he too struggled to keep his hands to himself. He rattled off a number and gave Gabe another regal bow before he spun on his heel and left the way they’d come. Like a besotted fool, Gabe watched Sunder walk away, the lithe sensuous movement of Sunder’s body both provocative and telegraphing a hint of danger to all who looked upon him. Those wide shoulders straight and proud with Sunder’s tail slashing the air behind him like a whip. Disappointment warred with relief, but alarm shoved the conflicting emotions aside and attacked Gabe.

After mounting his bike, he adjusted his pants to relieve the constriction on his erection. He ignored the grumbles of the people who waited for him to leave

so they too could have their vehicles retrieved from the parking garage. “This isn’t the only elevator station,” he groused loud enough for the bystanders to hear.

He knew it wasn’t fair for him to take his frustration out on complete strangers, but he needed to lash out, expel this twisting anticipation in his gut. All the way home, he relentlessly chided himself about breaking all his carefully constructed rules that kept him away from people who elicited extreme emotions from him. The rules had kept him safe all of these years. Spending more time with Sunder was in no way safe. He made Gabe want things Gabe knew he shouldn’t have. What if he turned out like his parents and dangerously lost himself to high emotions, causing harm to another—someone he loved and cared about? He’d never forgive himself.

The image of him physically hurting Sunder brought Gabe’s out-of-control thoughts up short. After he unlocked his door, he quickly entered his loft and shed his street clothes. There was no way he could really harm Sunder, who was bigger and stronger than him. Sunder could probably snap him in half. But the mere thought he could even lash out at Sunder had caused a cold shiver to work its way up his spine. He was revolted by the mental image of raising a hand in anger to Sunder.

He took out his data pad, contemplating sending Sunder a message canceling their date.

Gabe wanted to believe he wouldn’t hurt anyone like his parents had harmed each other, but could he trust himself to be a better person than either of them were? Had his experience, the very DNA he was born with, pushed him in their direction, giving him a penchant for sudden and horrible violence? When he was younger, after they left him, he’d lashed out. Never with Ronan or Ronan’s parents, but at everyone else. He picked fights, was thrown out of more establishments than he cared to admit. But he’d worked hard to move away from all of that because he wanted to become a nurse, therefore he had to be a better person. Hence, the rules.

With quick strokes he typed, *I spoke too soon, I forgot I had other obligations...* Groaning, Gabe deleted the message. “Fuck.”

Rules which he planned on breaking *again* because he wanted to see Sunder. Logically, he knew he should call and cancel. Remove himself from the situation, but it wasn’t like Sunder was here looking for a mate. He was escorting the heir apparent. What would it matter if they both had a little fun?

For a moment, guilt swamped him because the excitement to see Sunder again was how he should've been with Pierce.

Dating Pierce had followed all the rules Gabe had created to keep himself safe, and even then, they didn't help him. Mixed with the guilt was the relief Gabe hadn't wanted to acknowledge. Their relationship had reached the point where Pierce had outgrown Gabe. He had no right to ask Pierce to stay, besides anything he would've said to convince Pierce to remain would've been a lie. Even though Gabe was the asshole in the relationship—not being able to give Pierce what he needed, not able to love Pierce like he wanted—Gabe was happy for Pierce and hoped he found someone who could be what Gabe wasn't.

After showering, he donned his nurse's scrubs and threw together a quick meal. He turned his relationship with Pierce over and over, finally accepting Pierce's leaving had been the best course of action for both of them. He worried his reaction to Sunder was some kind of rebound thing, and he quickly dismissed it. His interest in Sunder was only lust. Taking a tumble with that male would not be a hardship. But if he was wrong and he was rebounding, then it was fortunate Sunder would only be in town a couple of weeks. He could get the lust out of his system and give Sunder a fond farewell.

Chapter Six

The hotel was a buzz of activity as Sunder approached on foot. Knights swarmed about the lobby like angry bees protecting their hive when he stepped through the glass doors. After what had happened at the estate, he shouldn't have gone out on his own.

Needing space, he'd slipped away to turn over everything that had happened. Running into Gabe took his mind off his concerns for an hour or so, brightening Sunder's world with his shy smile and witty humor. The more he knew Gabe, the more certain he wanted the human as his own. Even though Sunder could smell how much Gabe desired him there were also moments when his scent turned sharp with a reluctance. Gabe didn't put a voice to those thoughts but occasional hesitancy crossed Gabe's expression, as if he considered walking away from Sunder. He'd spent the trip back to the hotel making plans to seduce his human and perhaps contacting Gabe's friend Ronan to ask a few pointed questions about why sorrow reflected in Gabe's eyes even when he smiled.

Bemused, Sunder allowed the guardsmen to practically lift him off his feet and haul him into the elevator where they eventually disembarked in the lobby of the penthouse. More knights waited there bristling with armor and weapons. The double doors burst open and a harried Ayre charged from the rooms. Sunder was immediately contrite to see his cousin—brother's worry.

"Thank the stars you're okay! What were you thinking, wondering the city without anyone at your back?" Sunder tuned out Ayre's frustrated and angry words, basking in the open concern Ayre had never been able to show in public before. He let Ayre paw and manhandle him as he made soothing noises. "Do not let them take you away from me now that I have you," Ayre pleaded.

Sunder purred and did what he'd wanted to do since the day Ayre was born. With tender care, he rubbed the bridge of his ridged nose from Ayre's chin to ear, on the left side then the right. The motion caused Ayre to stop his tirade and hold still under Sunder's ministrations.

Ayre's loud purr of contentment matched Sunder's, the very sound shooing away the static of tension surrounding the agitated knights. When Sunder finally stepped away from marking his brother, he turned his attention to the guards surrounding them. "My thanks for your concern. I vow not to leave

again without you. Now, if you will please give me some time with Prince Ayre.”

With obvious reluctance, the knights not assigned to sentry duty entered the elevator. Sunder ushered Ayre back into the penthouse. The suite was too extravagant for Sunder’s taste, but the location was only temporary. Ayre crossed to the dining table set with a smorgasbord of food. Sunder’s stomach rumbled with hunger. Ice cream was the only food he’d eaten since midday.

Ayre crunched on his favorite Earth treat, something called Cajun crawfish. “You smell like the human nurse, Gabriel.”

Sunder grinned. “He’s invited me to his abode and will feed me a meal prepared by his hand.”

Ayre stopped chewing to stare at Sunder. “Does he know what he’s offered you?”

Picking through the selection of morsels, Sunder filled his plate while contemplating his answer. “No, I don’t believe so, but his scent screams at me “want, want, want.” I exercised great restraint not to reply to the obvious offer.”

Sunder knew to be careful. The Earth’s visitor’s brochure said a human’s scent would say one thing while their mouths relayed another. The recommendation was to ignore scent offers unless they’d already established relationship guidelines. The human must make a verbal offer or the Chandarian had to ask for permission. The penalty for sexually assaulting a human was high, ensuring all Chandarians would act with caution and propriety when dealing with humans. It was also the reason why the festival was established. The location and meeting with the humans in a safe and public settings ensured a more agreeable experience for all parties involved. He wasn’t following courting protocol and meeting Gabe within the established events so he needed to be extra careful.

Ayre finished chewing and swallowed. “Then it’s more important you have your security detail with you at all times. If you are serious about your intentions with Gabriel then you need witnesses. You wouldn’t want to bring danger to his doorstep and have no way of defending him, now would you?”

Chagrined, Sunder agreed even as he thought he was more than capable protecting Gabe. “It wasn’t my attention to seek him out when I went for a walk. The meeting was fortuitous.”

Now more than ever he was sure he wanted Gabe. The way Ayre stared at him said something of his conviction reflected in his expression. He tried to

explain. “He is...” He wanted to say perfect, but Ayre would scoff at him for using such a broad term. “Funny. He loves being a nurse and helping people. He is kindhearted but attempts to hide it. He smells... incredible. Of need, of hope. But when he laughs, his eyes still reflect sadness. Sometimes he looks at me as if he will run away, but he loves my scent.” Sunder couldn’t wait until he saw Gabe again, to dig below the surface and entice Gabe to open up to him. He wanted to know all of Gabe’s secrets, all of his desires, and then Sunder would endeavor to find a way to give them all to Gabe.

Ayre frowned. “He can scent you? Humans don’t have the capability.”

Sunder sipped his water, turning over exactly what Gabe had said. “Perhaps he has a better nose than other humans because he definitely enjoyed my pheromones.”

While Sunder considered why Gabe could detect his scent, Ayre placed a call to Valiant. The captain of Sunder’s knights would’ve made the first report but Ayre’s gave a more thorough accounting. When Ayre handed the phone over to Sunder, he stared with surprise as Valiant dressed Sunder down for wandering the city unprotected. Never mind he was one of the few revered Bladedancers and more than capable of defending himself. He stood in the middle of the penthouse with a goofy grin on his face as his king—his *father* expressed his concern, alternating between surprising strings of cursing before extracting a promise from Sunder to not do so again.

Ayre stayed the night and they talked about Talia of Nella, speculating at the game she played. Sunder still found it strange to suddenly have his family, the one he’d longed for and had unexpectedly been given to him. Even so, he was hard-pressed to forget the years of yearning and bitterness. By his father’s and Ayre’s actions, Sunder had no doubts they’d been as tormented as he but had never given voice to what they wanted.

When Ayre went to leave, he launched himself at Sunder who quickly caught him. He hadn’t expected Ayre to hold on so tightly. “Times have turned dangerous. Be safe, big brother. We have yet to talk about how I can see through your senses.” After squeezing tighter when Sunder attempted to push Ayre away, he whispered in Sunder’s ear, “I know *this*, us finally being a family is strange, after all the seasons of pretending we weren’t blood. Talia has some scheme up her sleeve, and I have no doubt she’ll attempt to take this away from us. But please, don’t hold back when all I’ve ever wanted to do is embrace you like a brother and claim you as such in front of others.”

Sunder gave in and wrapped his arms around Ayre. He wanted to whisper, “I’m afraid, brother, that once I’m used to having you and Father she’ll find a way to steal you back.” *That once again I’d have to stand on the sidelines and watch the family that would never be mine. Better not to know a thing than to experience it and have it torn away. I don’t think I can withstand the despair.*

But he murmured nothing of his personal nightmares, instead squeezing until Ayre grunted and laughed. When he finally released Ayre, his brother had never appeared happier before bounding out of the penthouse to battle politics with his—their father.

The days leading up to Friday dragged by slowly, giving him time to mull over Talia of Nella’s intention. For the first couple of days, Sunder gave into paranoia when he was out and about in the city. He covertly watched the Elffin-ones. Were there more drow walking the city streets or did the knowledge more were coming to Earth cause them to stand out in the crowds? Nothing seemed changed. The Elffin-ones avoided him, and the drow watched him from afar—just as always. Which only led him to believe Talia was after something by breaking the accords. The question became what? He hoped Valiant could quickly devise the why of it all after spending so many seasons in a silent war with her and the Nella. Sunder came up with nothing short of her forcing her people to either go to war with the Pantherines or hoping someone would finally declare a DarkHunt to kill him.

When he wasn’t mulling over Talia’s intentions, his thoughts turned to Gabe with his golden skin, sleek black hair, and piercing dark eyes. His laugh and the way he whimpered when Sunder cleaned his hand made Sunder ache every time he recalled the night at the ice cream parlor. He’d been roaming the streets when he spied Gabe and his friend entering the deli. He’d faced devastating armies and dire circumstances. Never once had he fumbled or paused, his actions always decisive and sure—until then. He was ashamed his nerves had caused him to linger outside.

When Sunder first smelled Gabe at the hospital, his scent hadn’t mingled with another’s. But when he saw how Gabe was with his friend, the obvious love in his eyes when he looked at Ronan, Sunder had wondered if he’d read Gabe’s single status wrong. Scents dissipated when mates were away from each other for long periods of time.

Then Ronan confronted him with excitement swirling about him. “Get your royal-guarding ass inside. You’re going to make Gabe’s day.”

The night had been more than pleasant.

“We’ve arrived, Commander,” the driver announced.

Sunder broke from his thoughts and looked out of the window of the limo. The renovated warehouse appeared bland but well kept on the outside. He scowled at the open grins his knights gave him before they left to clear the area. As if he’d never met with another male before. *Not like this I haven’t.* Impatiently, he waited for their signal. He was the one who cleared the area for Ayre. Being on the receiving end made Sunder respect Ayre’s patience.

Paulo stuck his head back in the vehicle. “When you’re ready, Your Highness.” The teasing humor in the last two words combined with the scent of contentment from Paulo caused Sunder to give a small hiss, which only made Paulo laugh.

Sunder grabbed his bag and exited the vehicle. Going through the doors, Sunder took in everything about the building where Gabe lived. The commander in him assessed the security or lack thereof as he bypassed the rickety elevator to climb the stairs to the third floor. There was only one door and Sunder knocked.

Something smelled wonderful. The delectable aroma teased him where he stood, and he could imagine how much more mouthwatering the scent would be inside Gabe’s home. Sunder’s knights gave rumbles of approval reminding him to beat Ayre the next time he saw his brother. Ayre had told them on the way out how Gabe courted Sunder with food made especially for him. Their approval stroked his pride in his future mate, but at the same time, he was uncomfortable. No one cared or noticed his romantic interest before, not that he had considered a long-term relationship previously. To be fair, Valora vocalized her displeasure when he only took people to his bed for short trysts. Now the guards watched him in a new expectant way.

The door opened, snapping Sunder out of his dark thoughts. Gabe stood there looking unsure of himself even as he stole Sunder’s breath away. Quickly he stepped close, wanting to grab Gabe’s attention and take his mind off what had caused that expression. Even though Gabe had to have showered several times over the past week, Sunder’s markings were still there, although faint. His dark hair was carefully combed, the black slacks and equally dark silken button-up hugged Gabe’s shoulders, hinting at the form the material subtly hid from the eye.

“Hello, my Gabriel,” Sunder greeted, unable to keep himself from inhaling again.

Those luminous eyes stared up at him. “You said fake scent—scent enhancers—muddled your senses so I bought soap and stuff that didn’t have any artificial chemical perfumes added. I don’t stink, do I? I’ve never used the odorless deodorant before.” Gabe gazed up at him, the wariness sliding from his gaze as his eyes devoured Sunder’s features, as if memorizing Sunder.

“Let me see.” Sunder rubbed the ridges of his nose along Gabe’s jaw to his ear as he inhaled. The last time he’d marked Gabe, Sunder had memorized his scent. He would recognize Gabe anywhere. Now he checked for the scent of others to find none but his. No one competed for Gabe’s affections which satisfied the Pantherine in him.

Sunder gave a pleased rumble. “You smell perfect.”

Gabe’s skin flushed a rosy hue. The polite clearing of a throat from behind Sunder caused Gabe to stiffen and distance himself from Sunder. Gabe took in the three guardsmen as if seeing them for the first time. “My apologies.” The light flush turned a bright red.

Sunder bowed. “No, I should’ve called ahead and let you know I would have an escort. It is a necessity, for now. Before I can enter, they need to sweep the area, with your permission, of course.”

Gabe’s eyes grew wide, and he stepped aside. “By all means, sweep away.”

Two of the guards slipped by with hands on their weapons. Gabe moved closer. “Are you all right? Are you in danger?”

Sunder rushed to alleviate Gabe’s concern. “No.”

“Yes,” Paulo countered. Sunder glared, but Paulo ignored him. “Prince Sunder has found himself in the middle of a Pantherine and Elffin-one political mess that could bring out the DarkHunters.”

Sunder growled at the alarm filling Gabe’s expression. Imperiously, Gabe held up his hand forestalling anything Sunder would’ve said. “What are DarkHunters?”

Paulo’s lips pursed in a grim line. “They are assassins who specialize in hunting people like Sunder who are Feyborn.”

“Everything is clear.” The guardsmen returned. “We have pulled the coverings over the windows. Even though we are on the third floor anyone on the roof of the surrounding buildings could see in.”

To Sunder’s ire, Gabe asked Paulo, “He can come in now?”

Paulo grinned wide. “He can, but one of us needs to enter as well. I promise we’ll stay out of the way, and you’ll soon forget we’re here.”

Sunder heard Gabe say, “Not likely,” under his breath before he waved Sunder in. Paulo followed on his heels, immediately stepping to the side and closing the door.

“Again, my apologies, Gabriel.” Sunder waited, turning agitated when Gabe continued to keep his distance.

Gabe’s gaze softened and dropped to the grocery bag Sunder held. “Please call me Gabe. What did you bring?”

He’d completely forgotten what he carried and thrust the sack at Gabe. “You said we would have ice cream for dessert and experiment with toppings. I brought some the nice female at the store said would be ideal.

“Oh, I bet she helped you all right.” Gabe’s sarcasm was thick, and his scent held a pinch of jealousy. Sunder grinned broader.

“My thought was to please you with a surprise,” Sunder confessed and watched the blush creep back into Gabe’s cheeks.

Gabe spun on his heel and moved across to what appeared to be the kitchen. There was a wall dissecting the kitchen from the living room but open to the dining area. On the far wall there three doors, all closed. The main living space was sparsely furnished. A well-worn quilt over the back of the sofa, a wall of shelves that contained books and multiple picture frames. The furniture held a hint of age making Sunder believe more than one generation of Gabe’s people had resided in the space. And there were plants *everywhere*.

Sunder wasn’t braced for the sudden chatter as the plants reached out to him, not quite quivering with excitement. Outside the areas of forest cared for by druids, he’d never come across such awareness and never had he sensed such suspicion directed toward him. Usually, they dozed in a half sleep unless called upon, but Gabe’s home was filled with silent sentinels ready to protect their guardian. *Interesting*.

“You don’t have to stand over there. I promise I won’t bite,” Gabe called.

Turning his attention away from Gabe’s indoor garden, Sunder grinned. *What if I want you to?* He said nothing but crossed the room to the kitchen. The delectable aroma was stronger there, and Sunder’s mouth watered. On the counter Gabe arranged the items Sunder had brought. He waited for Gabe to ask about Paulo using the title of prince but was surprised when Gabe said

nothing. Perhaps he shouldn't be amazed because Gabe hadn't given preferential treatment or fawned over Ayre. Did status really not matter to this human?

"I know that most Pantherines eat primarily meat and a few choice vegetables. I bought nasu root from the store and looked up how to prepare it. I hope I did it right." Gabe pointed to a bowl and Sunder glanced in to see the bright-red nasu cut up and garnished with what smelled like mint.

"I don't know how well it will go with Italian—"

"It's perfect," Sunder said, hearing Gabe's nervousness. When Gabe turned to look at him, Sunder stepped in close. He'd been patient, waiting so many days to see Gabe. Every time Sunder had thought of him, his magick had strained against him. Now that he had his future mate in front of him, Sunder needed to touch and yet he stayed his hand. "You keep heaping honor upon me. Did you know the nasu root was my favorite?"

Gabe stared up at him as if he hadn't seen Sunder in a season. "I wanted to make sure I didn't accidentally poison you with any of the ingredients. Your biography gave a list of things you enjoyed eating, but the store only carried the nasu."

Sunder held his breath as Gabe raised his hand and hesitantly stroked Sunder's ribs. "Gabe," he panted, the heat of Gabe's hand through the thin material made Sunder want to shed his clothes so Gabe could stroke him anywhere, skin to skin. "Would you allow me to kiss you?"

Gabe licked his lips. "Finally. Yes. Kiss me, Sunder."

He didn't wait for another invitation. Sunder took Gabe's mouth slow and gentle, but it seemed Gabe wanted more. Fingers digging into Sunder's arm prompting him to wrap them around Gabe. Needing a better angle in order to kiss, Sunder lifted and set Gabe on the counter. Blood thrummed in his ears when Gabe moaned, wrapping his arms and legs around Sunder. He probed deeper, needing more, but when Gabe pulled away, he reluctantly let him go. Arousal hung between them, and Sunder purred with heady contentment.

Gabe licked his lips as if chasing Sunder's flavor. "Wow. I think I could kiss you for days." Glancing over Sunder's shoulder, Gabe stiffened, his gaze dropping.

Moving so Gabriel and Paulo couldn't see each other, Sunder whispered, "Please don't feel self-conscious. What transpires between us won't leave this room. The knights are men of honor. They would never judge or embarrass us."

Gabe raised his head, his hand caressing Sunder's cheek. "I'm not used to having an audience. I recently came out of a long-term relationship. We were very private." The sorrow in Gabe's gaze deepened.

The threat of this former mate coming back to claim Gabe made Sunder's heart race. He gripped Gabe harder, schooling his expression when all he wanted to do was snarl and take Gabe away. Sunder reminded himself nothing good came from a forced claim.

"Will he return?" Sunder forced himself to ask.

"No. Pierce left on a luxury ship bound for... I don't know where. Kind of fucked-up. I let him go and didn't bother to find out where he went to." Sunder stepped away when Gabriel pushed.

"He was a fool to leave you in the first place," Sunder replied.

Hopping off the counter and moving past Sunder to a rack that held a loaf of bread, Gabe took out a knife and cutting board. "As painful as Pierce's leaving me was, it was necessary. We weren't what the other needed." When Gabe glanced over his shoulder, Sunder didn't like the forced smile that warmed as he stared at Sunder. "Besides, if he was still here, then I wouldn't have met you. I'm too selfish to claim to be sorry about that."

He almost released a sigh of relief because he didn't have to woo an encumbered heart. Such courtships took much longer, and Sunder wasn't a patient male. He moved the conversation away from the one who'd once shared Gabe's bed. "I scent several layers of your family in this place."

Gabe finished slicing the bread and cleaned the counter of crumbs. Sunder noted how Gabe's shoulders tensed and he once again put his back to Sunder, looking across the counter into the living room. Somehow Sunder had touched on another sore, seemingly much deeper than the one Gabe's former mate left. Bitterness and pain tinged Gabe's scent.

Sunder did the only thing he could think of and enveloped Gabriel from behind, nuzzling his dark hair. Gabe's stiffness screamed of old agony and unhealed wounds. "I'm sorry. It seems my social skills are lacking tonight. Everything I've said has upset you."

Several long heartbeats later, Gabe relaxed back into Sunder. "It's not your fault. This place once belonged to my parents, and my father's parents before them."

"I'm sorry for their passing." Sunder pressed a kiss onto the top of Gabe's head.

“My parents didn’t die; they left me when I was sixteen. No good-bye. No explanation. Just a short note. They each took passage on ships going in the opposite directions—and left me alone.”

Sunder tightened his arms, his heart hurting for Gabe. His father hadn’t abandoned him and even though it had hurt to be so close to Valiant and Ayre, at least he hadn’t been left behind.

“I don’t even know why I’m telling you this. I’ve only ever talked about my parents with Ronan,” Gabe grumbled. “Anyway, it’s in the past and doesn’t matter. Ronan and his parents took me in. I finished school, went to college, and acquired my degree to become a nurse.” Sunder thought it sounded as if Gabe was trying to convince himself more than anyone else. Contrary to what Gabe claimed, his parents’ abandonment hurt him deeply. The profound sorrow in Gabe’s voice was a testament to the scars he still carried from their selfish act.

“Thank you for gifting me with your pain. I won’t betray your trust.” Sunder kissed the side of Gabe’s neck, sucking in the anger that rose in Gabe’s defense.

“No, it’s not... I’m not...” Gabe turned in Sunder’s arms, scowling and pushing at Sunder to once again put distance between them. “You don’t understand what I’m trying to say. I’m not good boyfriend material. There’s something in me that’s broken. I hold people at a distance. That’s why Pierce left. I don’t need a shrink to tell me what my problem is. I’m terrified of people leaving me, so I don’t let anyone get close.”

“Anyone but Ronan,” Sunder clarified.

“Yes.” Gabe’s dark eyes were wide and luminous, the sorrow lifting a little at Ronan’s name.

“Because you trust Ronan.” Sunder made a note that Gabe’s friend was important, and perhaps he should approach Ronan about coming with them—once Gabe realized his place was with Sunder.

“Yes, but even he will leave me soon.” A new pain flashed through Gabe’s expression that was quickly squashed. Sunder vowed to make sure that didn’t happen. His Gabe didn’t need any more scars on his heart.

“And this Pierce, he left.” And good riddance, if anyone asked him. Any male who could look into Gabe’s eyes and not adore all that was reflected there, who wasn’t enamored with the way Gabe laughed with his whole body, or couldn’t resist rolling in Gabe’s scent was more the fool.

“Because I pushed him away.” Gabe frowned, and Sunder quickly kissed the lines on Gabe’s brow.

“Because he wasn’t the mate you needed,” Sunder said with conviction. If this Pierce couldn’t see what Gabe needed then he was no mate at all.

“No, because I knew he’d leave me, eventually,” Gabe said as if Sunder should’ve already guessed the answer.

“You’re not pushing me away.” He let a rumbling purr escape just for a moment so Gabe would know how pleased he was.

“You’re going to be angry with me, but I won’t lie to you. I know you’re leaving after the festival.” Gabe grimaced. “You’re safe because I don’t have to worry about when because I already know.”

Sunder blinked. That wasn’t the answer he’d expected. He stared down at Gabe, rolling what he’d said over. “I’m safe for you to show affection to because you think I’m leaving after the festival?”

Gabe gave a humorless laugh. “Fucked-up, isn’t it? But that’s the only reason I can come up with.”

“I don’t understand.”

When the timer of the stove beeped, Gabe pushed past him. He grabbed a couple of potholders and turned off the timer. “I don’t do things like this, Sunder. I don’t invite someone I barely know to my home, or make them a meal, or let them kiss me.” The pan Gabe pulled out the oven was bubbling on the sides with melted cheese on the top. Carefully, he set it on a cooling rack.

Gabe continued, “I follow a process. I meet someone, become friends, and then we discuss the merits of becoming more. This here, what we’re doing tonight, I’ve never done before. I look at you and damn if I don’t want to lick you all over then beg you to fuck me. That isn’t me and the only reason I can come up with is that you’re safe... because you’ll leave soon.” He threw the potholders on the counter with an angry huff. “So there. I told you. You can stay or go, that’s your choice. At least you know where I stand.”

Sunder suppressed a smile. He’d spend every minute of every day convincing Gabe he was indeed safe, but not in the way Gabe believed.

“You’re worried I would be upset if you used me? For sex?” Sunder asked, prowling close. Gabe’s nostrils flared. “Do you want me?”

“Yes, no, yes. I mean I don’t want to use you, I just thought we could have... give mutual pleasure, enjoy one another’s company while we had the time. And hell yes, I want you. I have since the moment I laid eyes on you.”

A pleased thrum vibrated from Sunder’s chest. “Then feed me, my Gabriel, and afterward I’ll see about making you beg.”

“Have sweet mercy.” Gabe gulped audibly. “Have a seat at the table, and I’ll bring everything out.”

Before stepping away, Sunder caressed Gabe from ass to calf with his tail. Sitting in the chair facing the kitchen, Sunder leaned back and spread his legs. Despite what Gabe thought, Sunder had accepted the unspoken challenge in Gabe’s eyes. He would prove himself worthy of not only Gabe’s trust but his heart. He wouldn’t leave this rock without Gabe and possibly Ronan. He would take his time and seduce Gabe, allow Gabe to come to know him, to be his friend, and by the end Gabe would present his heart to Sunder. He would cherish the gift for all of his days and never give Gabe reason to regret being his mate. Gabe would never have to worry about being abandoned and alone. If all he had to work with was Gabe’s lust, then Sunder would insert himself so far under Gabe’s skin that Gabe wouldn’t imagine being without him.

As he watched Gabe move about the kitchen, Sunder hid nothing of what he felt. He allowed his expression to fill with the want that had been roiling through his veins since he first set eyes on Gabe. When Gabe turned with the bowl of nasu, he stopped in his tracks when he saw Sunder. His eyes grew wide and his breathing quickened as Sunder ran his hand over the material that did nothing to disguise his straining erection. Holding Gabe’s hungry gaze, Sunder boldly adjusted himself.

Swearing under his breath, Gabe continued across the floor and set the bowl on the table. When he visibly shivered, Sunder purred with delight. With unsteady hands, Gabe plated the food, the scent of his desire thick in the air between them. He sat next to Sunder at the four-person table instead of across the way. Slowly Sunder ate the delicious food. He’d never tasted anything so decadent, this lasagna, and he hummed with pleasure, all the while watching Gabe’s every move—ready to pounce.

When Sunder ran his tail up Gabe’s calf, Gabe jumped, unable to cover the squeak of surprise. Sunder watched Gabe as if he were prey. Gabe’s hands trembled as he forked food into his mouth. The alluring pheromones wafting from him had Sunder ready to pounce.

Plates blessedly empty, Sunder pushed the bowl of nasu root toward Gabe. “When you looked up my preferences, did you discover how to serve nasu?”

The pupils of Gabe’s eyes ate up the gleaming brown until they were almost completely black. “Let’s see if I get this right.”

Sunder waited as Gabe picked up a slice and leaned forward holding the piece before Sunder’s mouth. “Sunder Alard, Son of Princess Valora, will you accept this small offering from my hand so that we may be called... friends.”

“And lovers,” Sunder added before he closed his mouth around the slice, licking Gabe’s fingers before pulling away.

“Lovers,” Gabe whispered before he picked up another piece of root and offered it to Sunder.

Grasping Gabe’s wrist, he took the nasu from Gabe’s hand and then gave a gentle tug. Gabe rose from his chair as Sunder pushed his away from the table, urging Gabe to straddle his lap. He pressed the root against Gabe’s lips. “Gabriel Barba, beloved friend of Ronan, will you accept this small offering from my hand so that one day we may be more than friends and lovers?”

Gabe stared for a moment and Sunder waited with a patience he didn’t believe he had. Slowly, something that looked like hope flashed across Gabe’s expression, there and gone so quickly Sunder thought the expression a figment of his imagination until Gabe opened his mouth. Relieved, Sunder slid the slice onto Gabe’s tongue, and he held his breath until Gabe chewed.

“What do you want from me?” Gabe whispered.

“Only you,” Sunder promised before taking Gabe’s mouth, reveling in the press of lips, the taste of nasu on Gabe’s tongue. He ate Gabe’s moans with relish, as if they were the most decadent dessert. Too much clothing separated them. Gabe’s need was palpable and Sunder determined to sate it.

Sliding his hands down Gabe’s back and under his ass, Sunder gripped and held Gabe against him as he rose from his chair. Gabe’s legs wrapped around his waist. “Which one?” he asked as he strode across the room.

“The middle one.” Gabe sucked hard on the column of Sunder’s neck.

Through the door, Sunder didn’t look around the room. Using his foot he kicked the door closed. Moonlight through the skylight was the only illumination but it was more than enough for Sunder to see by. Gabe rolled his hips, pressing his groin into Sunder’s stomach. In a flurry of impatience,

Sunder undressed them both with minimal sounds of tearing cloth before depositing Gabe onto the puny bed.

With great care, he explored and mapped Gabe's body with his tongue. Stroked Gabe with his tail, discovering what made Gabe's breath stutter, delving into places that caused his future mate to writhe and beg. And beg he did.

"Please Sunder, I need you."

"What do you need? Ask and I'll give it to you," he rumbled, barely holding on by a thread.

Lube was shoved into his hand. "Fuck me."

Growling low, Sunder flipped Gabe onto his stomach and grasped his hips pulling him onto his hands and knees. Kissing and nipping down Gabe's spine, Sunder came to the cleft of Gabe's ass. Ignoring Gabe's yelp, he continued to lick his way down to the place where he'd eventually slide into Gabe. With each suck and nibble, he laid claim to Gabe.

"Oh, God, so good. Don't stop." Gabe rambled and groaned, pushing his ass back as Sunder opened and prepared Gabe to take him.

When Sunder finally pushed home, he knew Gabe was his. The tight heat engulfed him, silently beckoning Sunder to spill his seed, marking Gabe on the inside as he had marked Gabe on the outside.

"I need you, Sunder. Hard and fast, please."

How could he tell Gabe no? Tightening his hold on Gabe's hips, he thrust deep, staring at the place where Gabe's ass stretched around him, pulled him in and holding him in a snug embrace. He'd never forgive himself for hurting Gabe, so despite his plea, Sunder set an easy pace, gradually pushing harder and assessing Gabe's ability to take what he gave, keeping a hold on his Pantherine strength.

With what sounded like a growl of impatience, Gabe grabbed the headboard and shoved back into Sunder, panting—"More. More. More."—until Sunder fell forward and covered Gabe's back, one arm sliding under Gabe's chest to grasp his shoulder while his other hand gripped the headboard next to Gabe's.

Burying his face in Gabe's nape, Sunder snarled and let go, losing himself in the scent, the feel, the taste of his Gabriel.

"So big, so full. I need... I need..." Gabe keened low and long.

Sunder snaked his tail between their thighs and found Gabe's cock long, hard, and leaking. Coiling the end around Gabe's shaft, he squeezed.

"Oh! Shit. Goddamn. That's..." Gabe's head dropped. "That's your tail." Gabe's heady scent burst around them until Sunder smelled nothing else.

He grinned against the skin of Gabe's shoulder. "You like my tail? Do you want me to fuck you with it? Would you enjoy that, my Gabriel?"

"Oh, fuck, you kinky bastard." Gabe growled well for a human.

"Are you going to come for me, my Gabriel?"

"Stop calling me that. I'm no one's."

"But you want to be mine." Sunder ran his teeth over Gabe's skin.

Gabe hissed, his response garbled.

The magick Sunder had kept bottled up since entering Gabe's home burst free from his core to envelope the two of them. Heat built until Sunder thought he was on fire. "Give me your seed," Sunder snarled.

He loved how Gabe screamed his name, his body seizing around Sunder's cock. He fucked Gabe through his orgasm and then Sunder let go. The Pantherine within Sunder took over, and he bit down on Gabe's shoulder, holding him in place as he lost control thrusting fast and hard until he spilled, further marking Gabe with his scent.

Without pulling out, Sunder turned them onto their sides. He continued to be hard, in the throes of needing. But he remained still, trying to be content. Instead he explored and petted Gabe's body. The muscular plains spoke of Gabe's diligence with keeping a fit body. Gabe's sweat-slick skin held a stronger mix of their intermingled scents.

"I'm discovering new kinks tonight." Gabe glanced over his shoulder, the moonlight causing his skin to glow. "You're purring and I'd never have believed what a turn on that would be." He hadn't realized he purred. "And your tail squeezing my cock—that was amazing."

He palmed Gabe's half-hard dick, loving how it lengthened in his hand. "I need," he whispered in Gabe's ear.

"I noticed you didn't go soft." He wiggled his ass. "Normally, I have to wait a while before getting hard again."

"You haven't had a lover like me."

Gabe huffed a laughed. “You think so?”

“I know so because you’re hard in my hand.” Sunder gently squeezed the firm shaft in his palm that belied Gabe’s words.

The moan Gabe released ended when he thrust into Sunder’s palm, then he pushed back on Sunder’s cock.

“There you go. Fuck yourself on my dick.” Sunder encouraged, watching every nuance that crossed Gabe’s face.

Increasing his speed, Gabe demanded, “More, Sunder.” Sunder readily complied, pounding into Gabe, his claws scoring soft human skin as Gabe clutched the sheets as he shoved back. There was no finesse, only raw uncontrolled want. Sunder filled him up, sliding his hand up and down Gabe’s shaft until he spilled into Sunder’s palm. Clutching Gabe to him, he roared his own completion, his cock finally depleted—for the moment.

Leaving Gabe panting facedown on the bed, Sunder went in search of a lavatory and returned with what he needed to care for Gabe. When he finished, he crawled back into the puny bed and pulled Gabe into his arms. Too exhausted to think, he fell asleep with Gabe’s scent filling his nose.

Chapter Seven

Gabe leaned against the doorframe to the master bath, drying his hair. He'd woken surrounded by Sunder. How he hadn't been crushed, he didn't know. He couldn't remember the last time he felt this content. As he stared at Sunder, an unexpected possessiveness clawed at him. He knew that bedding Sunder could cause problems, but he hadn't foreseen this visceral need to make sure everybody understood Sunder belonged to *him*—for now.

How could Sunder be comfortable? The queen-sized bed was about a foot short for Sunder, his feet hanging over the edge. The morning sun bathed Sunder in pale light. Never had he seen a sight so beautiful it took his breath away. The blanket and flat sheet were pooled on the floor, leaving all of Sunder exposed for Gabe to drink in. The smooth plains of taut skin over rippling muscle. The dusky-gray rich against the stark white of the linens. The spill of crimson hair decorated Gabe's pillow. Between Sunder's pecs were black spots that resembled rosettes flowing down to Sunder's navel. From the bottom of Sunder's ribcage to the top of his hips were stripes. At first Gabe thought they were like the rosettes but when Sunder moved, the skin pulled apart slightly.

He was familiar with Pantherine anatomy, and full-blooded Pantherines didn't have the stripes. Was that an Elffin-one trait? He didn't recall the specifics of his general studies of Elffin-one biology that described such markings. What were their purpose? When he had time, he would look it up or he could simply ask Sunder. Perhaps the subject would open an avenue of discussion that led to Gabe learning more about Sunder, his family, and where he came from. He wanted to know everything about the male who had shook up his carefully constructed world.

Last night had been the best sex of his life. Sunder was an insatiable and generous lover. His ass was still sore but in no way was Gabe sorry. Idly he wondered if Sunder would take turns bottoming but wasn't comfortable outright asking the question. That Sunder's guard—knight—had witnessed Gabe's slutty behavior embarrassed him enough. He'd completely forgotten the Chandarian was there while he straddled Sunder's lap and rubbed all over him as if he was in heat. Even with the bedroom door closed, he and Sunder hadn't been quiet. At least he hadn't torn his clothes off at the table like he wanted to do.

Noise from the living room reminded him he'd been rude to Sunder's guardsmen and hadn't offered them drink or food the night before. Quickly

dressing, he quietly left the bedroom. The same knight, Paulo he thought the name was, stood at the window peering out the drapes. He didn't look at Gabe, for which Gabe was glad. He wasn't sure he was ready to see a sneer or condescension in the guardsman's expression. How had he forgotten someone watched them? He didn't believe he was an exhibitionist because he never once thought about having an audience while kissing Sunder. The more he thought about it the more unease settled over him. He'd love to blame Sunder for making him forget but that wasn't fair.

The mess he and Sunder had left the kitchen and dining area in had been cleared. Since Gabe was sure Sunder hadn't left the bed that meant Paulo had a hand in cleaning up their dirty dishes and forgotten food. Setting the coffee machine to brew, Gabe rummaged around for something to make for breakfast. Whipping up some scrambled eggs, Gabe put some bacon down to fry. Once the food was ready, he sucked in a breath and carried a plate and a cup of coffee over to Paulo.

"Thank you for picking up. You didn't have to." Paulo stepped away from the window, staring at the plate and cup. "I made breakfast for Sunder, but there is enough for you guys as well."

Without warning, Paulo bowed deeply. "I am honored by your gift. And thank you."

"For what?"

Paulo gently accepted the drink and meal. "I have served with the commander for ten seasons and watched him grow into the male he is today. In all of that time he hasn't smelled as happy as he did last night."

What? Gabe was confused. "Surely he's had lovers before." Sunder was an excellent and knowledgeable lover. He smothered the frown that threatened to surface at the thought of others who'd shared Sunder's bed.

"Oh, his company has only been sought out by those who wanted nothing more than to use him for a night or two. Then they go about their merry way, their tongues bragging about how insatiable Sunder is in bed. They were selfish. None thought beyond what he could do for them. Because he's half Pantherine and half drow Elffin-one, they never considered keeping him. Those of us in his personal guard chased off many a fickle courtier who saw him as a conquest and nothing more."

Shame made Gabe's insides run cold. His intentions weren't any different. The male in the other room deserved better, was worthy of more. Even as he

chastised himself, anger at how Sunder had been treated heated Gabe's blood. He recognized both he and Sunder knew what it was like to be unwanted, to be discarded. Did Sunder yearn for a mate but didn't dare hope one would accept him? At the same time, Gabe couldn't see Sunder shying away from something he wanted. No, Sunder would pursue what—who—he wanted, not taking no for an answer. Even if that was true, it didn't give others the right to take anything from Sunder.

Gabe turned his attention back to Paulo. What was the purpose behind Paulo's observation? "Why are you telling me this?"

"Sunder walked away from those half-wits not caring. You on the other hand—"

"Paulo!"

The knight jerked to attention as much as he could holding the cup and plate. Sunder stood half-dressed in the bedroom doorway, thunderclouds in his expression.

"Thank you," Gabe whispered before heading back the kitchen. Over his shoulder he said, "Sunder, go back to bed and I'll bring you food. I'm going to feed the guards in the hallway first."

A couple of seconds past before Gabe heard the door snick closed. Paulo's words kept cycling through his thoughts. Sunder smelled happy when he was with Gabe? He could only imagine what Paulo would've said if Sunder hadn't interrupted. Would Sunder have a hard time walking away from him? Would he stay if Gabe asked him? Did Gabe want him to stay? If Gabe walked away, would Sunder be hurt? That was the last thing Gabe wanted. Perhaps he should separate himself from Sunder now if Paulo thought—he shook his head. Last night he had been up-front with Sunder and Sunder had stayed, still wanted him.

Opening the outer door to the hallway, Gabriel surprised the two guardsmen with platters of food, a couple bottles of water, and hot coffee. He ignored Paulo, understanding part of the message. *Do not hurt Sunder*. If Paulo thought he could chase Gabe off then he had another thing coming. The only person who could tell Gabe to leave was Sunder and Sunder alone.

Carrying the food-laden tray to the bedroom, he didn't have to worry about how to open the door. Both of his hands were full but Sunder waited, the door cracked enough he could see Sunder peering out. When Gabe approached, Sunder open it for Gabe to slip through. If he had still entertained the thought of

ushering Sunder out of his home and breaking things off, then he would've changed his mind when he saw the uncertain expression Sunder wore. As big and alpha male as Sunder came off as being, the thought of hurting Sunder made Gabe sick to his stomach even as the knowledge unsettled him.

"Sit against the headboard so I can put this over your lap," Gabe commanded, softening the bark with a leer. Sunder gave a small smile and complied. Engaging the legs of the tray, he settled it across Sunder's thighs before climbing onto the bed on the other side of Sunder.

"Gabe, what Paulo said, it wasn't his place to say such things."

Gabe nudged Sunder's lips with a fork full of fluffy eggs. "He's your friend and cares about you. I took no offense."

"You should have. He compared you to those who've sought my bed in the past. You're nothing like them." Sunder hissed, brows furrowed.

"I don't think he was comparing but pointing out I wasn't like them because you like me more." Gabe gave a small teasing smile before sipping his coffee.

Sunder grinned, eyes lighting up. "Much more."

After crunching on a strip of bacon, Gabe asked, "Why don't you have a mate, if you don't mind me asking?"

The smile slipped from Sunder's face. "On my planet... I don't know how to explain this without you thinking poorly of my people. I'm one of a few called Feyborn. Until about thirty years ago Elffin-one drow males born with magick were culled at birth."

Gabe's stomach rebelled, and he swallowed convulsively to keep from losing what he'd just swallowed. "That's terrible! Oh my God, why would anyone murder innocent babies?"

"Some five hundred seasons ago, the Elffin-ones were embroiled in a terrible civil war. It's said that the Feyborn males were the cause. For some unknown reason, the magick they were born with grew dark, and they became bloodthirsty warmongers. Supposedly, without warning, the Feyborn males almost killed the whole of the Elffin-one race, but they were stopped when the Chandarians came in and put an end to the war. We absorbed Edrijan into the Chandarian kingdom. Thereafter, the Elffin-ones secretly claimed any Feyborn male was put to death to keep something like the Scarab War from occurring again."

Gabe tried to keep from being judgmental of a people he barely knew and now seemed to not understand. Five hundred years was a long time to hold onto a prejudice. Didn't Paulo say something last night about Sunder being Feyborn?

"King Valiant rescued me after I was born. He and his father put a stop to the culling, taking the Feyborn males away and allowing others to adopt them. Princess Valora took me in."

"Why didn't your father keep you?"

Sunder glanced down, and for the first time pain flashed through Sunder's eyes. "He wasn't allowed to." After clearing his throat he continued. "On the last count, there are only twenty some odd Feyborn males in the kingdom. Because of the Elffin-ones' murmurings claiming we would eventually become darksouls, most give us a wide berth, except for the Felinean. They live alongside the Feyborn, in harmony so far. I'm the only Feyborn who is both Pantherine and drow. As a Halfling, I'm not as outcast as the others, but I'm not considered mateable because no one wants to taint their bloodlines with a magick that can turn deadly."

Gabe was so pissed off his hands shook. "What a crock of shit! Anybody who knows you would be able to see you don't suffer from a mental illness. There are ways of testing for such things. Yet it seems your people are content to assume the worst even though you're more technologically advanced than we are. There would be ways to monitor such things without sacrificing children to superstition!"

Sunder's grin returned. "So it's your professional opinion that I'm of sound mind?"

Why wasn't Sunder taking this more seriously? *Perhaps because he's lived with the false perceptions all of his life.* Gabe blew out an angry breath before returning Sunder's smile. "I haven't known you for long, but I have seen no instability that would make me question your sanity. But really, there are ways to test for this darksoul effect, although perhaps not for a magick-driven dementia. Magick is really a thing with your people?"

"A thing?" Sunder frowned.

"Humans have fables about magick but we don't possess any. We have sleight of hand, but no spells or potions..." Gabe noticed Sunder's confusion. "I'm not making any sense, am I, which means what you call magick and what I call magick are two different things."

“I could show you, later if you wanted to see,” Sunder’s countenance suddenly turned shy and Gabe wondered if Sunder had made the offer before. Probably not with all the people climbing in his bed to simply use him.

“I would love too, but first...” Gabe lifted the tray away and set it on the floor. Straddling Sunder’s hips, he said, “First I want a good morning kiss.”

“My pleasure,” Sunder whispered against Gabe’s lips before opening.

He licked across Sunder’s bottom lip tasting coffee and salty bacon. Sunder still smelled good, this morning even more so. He’d meant what he said about wanting to lick Sunder all over. Last night was a blur of aching need. Now he wanted to savor, and he did. Tasting his way down Sunder’s neck, he kissed each rosette, tonguing the hard nipples. Pantherines had eight to ten nipples but Sunder just like the Elffin-ones had only two. When he ran his hand over the stripes, Sunder moaned and writhed, Gabe glanced up not sure if that was a good or bad thing. Sunder’s expression told him he had nothing to worry about.

Interestingly, Sunder’s scent was the strongest across the stripes. Gabe couldn’t help but to rub against them, imagining the smell seeping into his pores. More than that, Gabe loved the sounds Sunder made, how he responded as Gabe slid his body along Sunder’s. Working the fastenings of Sunder’s pants, Gabe pushed them down, revealing Sunder’s hard leaking cock.

He hadn’t had a chance to see Sunder before, so now Gabe took the time to examine him, heft the weight of his length in his hand. Of course, as a nurse on the Chandarian floor of the hospital he knew Pantherine and Felinean anatomy, but he’d never had a Pantherine in his bed before, and Sunder was a Halfling. There were differences between Pantherine and Elffin-one sexual organs.

Below the belt, Sunder looked all Pantherine with no external testis. The sacks that produced their semen was located in dual tubes along the underside of the shaft. Because of this, when Sunder was flaccid, his length was the same as when aroused, but it also meant that he was thicker around than average when hard. Below the tip that was similar in shape to Gabe’s, the girth flared to a width larger than the head. When Sunder’s seed was squeezed down the shaft, that two inch section would thicken until Sunder spilled.

Gabe swiped his tongue across the head, tasting the beads of precum gathered there and moaned at the absolute sweetness that burst across his tongue. He enjoyed the feeling of Sunder’s hands carding through his hair as he slid the heft across his tongue, memorizing the silky texture over a rod hard as steel. Sunder’s grip combined with the cock hitting the back of his mouth had

Gabe's dick aching with need. Fumbling with his jeans, he pushed them down his thighs, relieving the torturous pressure.

Sunder alternated between hissing and purring, "Gabe, please."

Looking up Sunder's body, he drew off the length. "You want to fuck my mouth? Do it. I want you to come on my tongue."

He swallowed Sunder down again, holding the base in his fist, applying pressure to the sacks on the underside when he squeezed. The low rumble was followed by Sunder's cock swelling, stretching Gabe's mouth wide right before Sunder arched his back and spilled into Gabe's mouth. He relished how wild and beautiful Sunder was in the throes of his orgasm.

When the girth returned to normal, Gabe released Sunder and wrestled his pants off one leg so he could straddle Sunder's waist. He licked his palm and thrust into his fist while he took in Sunder's wrecked appearance, reveling in the fact he did that to Sunder. When Sunder began to purr, something prodded Gabe's asshole. Glancing back he shuddered with secret delight to see Sunder's tail. Like the rest of Sunder's body, his tail was hairless, the skin smooth to the touch, and the tip's width equal to three of Gabe's fingers held together. He thrust back suddenly realizing Sunder had slicked up the end when it easily slid in. Sunder's pleased expression told him everything.

"That was sly," Gabe panted, his eyelids fluttering closed as Sunder fucked him with his tail. "Two can play that game."

With his free hand Gabe massaged the stripes above Sunder's hips and grinned at the growling hiss Sunder released. Muscles contracted under his touch. Sunder gasped and arched again as if Gabe stroke an erogenous zone. He was so fucking close. Then Sunder's tail nudged his prostate and Gabe cried out, coming so hard he lost his breath. Ropes of silky essence spilled over Sunder's stomach. Something dark and fierce moved within Gabe, a primal knowing at the sight of his seed painting Sunder's skin. With both hands he spread his spend, rubbing it over the stripes, the slits camouflaged by the dark markings gaped slightly as Gabe kneaded them and watched his seed disappear between the tight folds as Sunder writhed under him.

"You don't think I know you've been scent marking me?" Gabe met Sunder's gaze as he rubbed. "Now I've marked you so those who come sniffing around you will know you're taken, for the moment. They can fucking go away."

Gabe ducked his head to hide his frown. He had to remind himself Sunder was only his for a couple of weeks.

“Be careful, Gabriel Barba, others might believe you’ve claimed me,” Sunder rumbled, looking too pleased.

How many times had something in Gabe urged him to run, to kick Sunder out of his bed? The longer he spent in Sunder’s company the more dangerous it was to his heart. He really liked Sunder. He was easy to talk to and to be around. He looked fantastic in Gabe’s bed, but when he thought to tell Sunder to go, the Pantherine would smile. Gabe found he couldn’t roust Sunder from his home. Fuck. When they finally parted, that might end up breaking Gabe.

Don’t think about it. I can’t keep him. But damn if he didn’t imagine what it would be like if he did claim Sunder, to become Sunder’s mate—never needing to worry about being abandoned again.

Chapter Eight

Sunder moved around the living room, going from plant to plant. When he caressed the leaves they curiously probed his magick. He still hadn't ascertained how they came to be so awake. They reached out to him, eagerly whispering about their beloved guardian. Gabe played their favorite music and left the player on if gone for long hours. They held great affection for him which only proved to Sunder his chosen mate was perfect for him—even if he hadn't puzzled out why the plants responded to Gabe as they did.

Over the last five days, Sunder hadn't left Gabe's side, making love as often as they could. Gabe was still self-conscious in front of the knights but once that bedroom door closed, Gabe became a ravenous tiger. Sunder watched as Gabe bloomed, his confidence growing the longer they spent together, taking charge in a way that heated Sunder's blood.

As much as Sunder loved spending time with Gabe, he itched to leave the loft and explore the city with Gabe. With how alive Gabe's plants were, Sunder decided he would show Gabe what he could do as a Feyborn. Perhaps with his magick roaming free, Sunder would be able to discover how Gabe had breathed awareness into his houseplants. He said that humans didn't have magick, but his very home was evidence that he had something similar. Sunder would love to be the person to help Gabe explore that hidden part of himself—once Sunder found where Gabe had buried his talent.

Ronan had called before he and Gabe could leave for the park. Sunder listened to the conversation with half an ear, not wishing to intrude, but it was hard when he could easily hear both sides of the conversation. It seemed Ronan was attending the festival, and Gabe was going as his “wing man,” whatever that meant. Sunder was both pleased and upset, until he realized Gabe was going to support Ronan. He was overjoyed Gabe wouldn't be looking at the other Chandarians as mate material and yet hopeful he could change Gabe's mind.

Nearing Paulo, he ignored his knight, still annoyed with Paulo's interference the other day. While he'd waited for Gabe to return to the bedroom, he feared Paulo had scared Gabe away. He'd heard humans viewed such open sexuality differently than Chandarians. Instead of rejecting him, Gabe accepted the information in stride without pity or scorn. Were the pamphlets wrong or was Gabe different?

“Commander,” Paulo began but quickly hushed when Sunder shot him a scathing look.

“What was your purpose in speaking to Gabe so?” Sunder hissed, moving into Paulo’s space.

The knight didn’t flinch or turn his gaze away. “He’s human and doesn’t know what he does. He’s blind to our ways, and ignorant of the fact that you’re courting him. Are you sure he’s different from the others, giving no thought to how he’ll hurt you when he walks away? Someone needed to say something to him.” Paulo’s feline ears twitched, the only outward evidence at how upset he was.

Stepping away, Sunder caressed the long green leaves of the plant near Paulo. He thought Gabe was being generous when he said Paulo was only looking out for his interests.

“What Gabe will do in the future has yet to come to pass. Don’t judge him by what you think he’ll do. He may surprise you.” *And me.*

“Are you ready?”

Sunder turned. Gabe stood across the room tucking his phone in his pocket, his head tilted very catlike. Did he overhear their conversation? If he did, then he gave no indication, taking Sunder’s hand when he crossed the room.

“Is everything all right with your friend, Ronan?” Sunder led him out of the loft and waited for Gabe to lock up.

“He’s fine, just nervous. Today he attended his first gala associated with the festival.” Gabe chuckled low and dark. “He’s always had an easy time seducing people into his bed and now he feels like he’s competing for the attention of others. I had to remind him the participants had to wait for him to make the first move. I guess there are crowds around the Chandarians and people are talking over each other to be heard. He’s not happy with the process.”

Sunder couldn’t suppress a shudder. “I cannot imagine being in the middle of so much attention.”

“You and me both. I’m terrible in social situations. I can’t image how much worse it would become if I was forced to endure so much attention. Although my mouth would chase away those with only an idle curiosity.”

Growling he tugged Gabe closer. He laughed and shoved Sunder away to step in to the rickety elevator. When Sunder and his guards didn’t follow, Gabe stepped back out.

“Taking the stairs is safer,” Paulo explained, opening the door to the stairwell.

“For the love of...” Gabe snagged Sunder’s hand again and pulled him to the stairs.

He was tremendously pleased that Gabe continued to hold onto him. When they exited the building, a dozen knights surrounded them. The limo sat waiting with the Pantherine driver prepared to open the rear door. Two more dark hovercraft sat in front of and behind the luxury car for the security detail.

“Sunder, are you sure you want to go out. If you’re in this much danger to need so many people to guard you, then we can stay in. You don’t have to show me anything.” Gabe’s worry was evident in the tone of his voice.

“Some of this is because of the change in my status. There isn’t anything to worry about. We’ll be safe,” Sunder assured. Gabe kept glancing at all of the armed knights with their stiff matte-black armor and the bristle of swords on their hips and back until Sunder cupped his face, forcing Gabe to look at him. “I promise, you will be safe.”

“I’m not worried about my safety,” he whispered.

Warmth flooded Sunder, and he leaned down to lightly kiss Gabe. “Thank you for your concern.”

“Well, someone should worry over you if you’re this reckless. I haven’t forgotten Paulo mentioned DarkHunters. You’re no better than your cousin, Ayre. And here I thought you were the responsible one,” Gabe griped as Sunder allowed himself to be pulled into the backseat.

Paulo coughed into his fist and the nearest knights studiously looked away with suspicious grins turning up the corners of their mouths. Two guards slid in behind them while Paulo took the front passenger seat.

“About my cousin,” Sunder grimaced. He really should have talked to Gabriel instead of letting it slide so he could concentrate on wooing Gabe.

“I’ve been meaning to ask you about being called prince, but my mind was on other things,” Gabe’s grin was wicked as he glanced down Sunder’s frame and then bit his bottom lip. “You weren’t a prince when I met you. Your online bio only gives your title as Commander.”

If they were back in the loft, Sunder would’ve lunged for Gabe and carried him over his shoulder back into the bedroom. What a pity. Instead, he carefully

picked over what he could tell Gabe, so he kept it simple. “We spoke earlier about my being a Halfling. My birth mother is Elffin-one, the Keeper of the Jade Forest.”

When Sunder’s silence stretched, Gabe said, “The one who your King Valiant took you away from? She was the one who was going to kill you? Why would he be at your birth?” Gabe’s eyes widened. “King Valiant is your father. Wait. You said your father wasn’t allowed to keep you.”

“Correct. The Elffin-ones threatened war if my father claimed me.” Sunder was extremely pleased Gabe put the puzzle together, keeping Sunder from tripping over his tongue while carefully choosing what he could and couldn’t reveal to Gabe.

“Because of this darksoul business?”

Sunder nodded.

“So you’ve lived all of your life close to your father and brother as the adopted son of Princess Valora but unacknowledged as blood kin. She’s his twin sister, right? I thought being abandoned by my parents when I was a teenager was bad. You knew, didn’t you? You don’t act as if this is new information to you.”

Sunder smiled sadly. “When I was a cub, I could smell Valiant, Valora, and then Ayre were my relatives. Mother took me aside and explained what would happen if I were to say something, even accidentally, how dangerous it was to even speak of it in private. Security was always removing unauthorized surveillance equipment from the palace. Mother and I stayed at her estate where I was tutored until I was older. I joined the armed forces and worked my way up to commander.”

The car pulled up to the curb on the edge of the city park. Gabe stared out the window and Sunder couldn’t read his expression. “How did you keep from becoming bitter? Your family was right there and yet you couldn’t do or say anything.”

“I was bitter.” Sunder caught Gabe’s glance, seeing the confusion there. “I still am—a little. I understood the reason why but being on the outside hurt. That was Talia’s intention when she insisted on the clause while in negotiations with my grandfather. It wasn’t enough that I was removed from succeeding my father to the throne. I sometimes wonder what life would be like if I’d grown up in a different household, not knowing who my parents were.”

“And?” Gabe prompted, turning back to Sunder. “Do you still wish you’d never known?”

“It’s hard to imagine not having this life. My mother, Valora, I love her beyond measure. Her life has been dedicated to me. She never took a mate. The courtiers have labeled her eccentric to take on a Halfling destined to become a darksoul. The murmuring of the Elffin-ones has put fear into some Pantherines. She’s been very vocal, speaking up for not only me, but for all Feyborn males. Besides, how can I want another life when this one crossed your path?”

Gabe blushed, deep and dark, even as he scowled. “You’d better watch your silver tongue, Chandarian, or I just might take you seriously.”

Before Sunder could confess, a knight knocked on the window, the signal that the guardsmen were in place and they detected no threats. Sunder followed Gabe out of the car. On the sidewalk, Gabe took Sunder’s hand, again. He threaded his fingers through Gabe’s, resisting the urge to pull Gabe under his arm. As they walked, he turned his senses out, assessing the health of the park. The branches of the trees stretched across the path, providing shade from the heat of the summer sun.

Finding the perfect spot, Sunder led the way off the path into a thicket of older trees. The scent of water grew, mixing with the smell of loamy earth and decaying leaves.

“Where are we going?” Gabe asked after several minutes.

“We need a private place for what I’m about to do. I don’t wish to scare the humans or alarm any Elffin-ones who may be around.”

Gabe grumbled under his breath, but Sunder only heard a word or two. Elffin-ones wouldn’t be flattered by the expletives Gabe uttered.

Arriving at a space between four trees, Sunder sat on the ground and beckoned for Gabe to join him. Holding out his hands with his palms up, he waited for Gabe to place his on top.

“Is this safe?” Gabe asked as he slid his palms across Sunder’s.

“I’ve only done this once before with Ayre. Neither one of us was in danger from—you’ll see. Are you ready?” Sunder waited patiently. If Gabe decided he didn’t want to see Sunder’s magick then they would go back to the vehicles. He wouldn’t pressure Gabe.

Gabe exhaled loudly. “Do I close my eyes, or something?”

“You can, it might help you to see.” Sunder felt the slight tremble in Gabe’s hands.

He shut his eyes and exhaled loudly. “I’m ready.”

Sunder slowly released his magick. He’d learned at a young age how to bottle the energy within him, otherwise people became alarmed when a hundred-year-old tree bent and swayed toward him when he was around.

The warmth moved out from his core and flowed over his skin, caressing Gabe before soaking into Gabe as if he were a sponge. Gabe jumped but didn’t remove his hands from Sunder’s, gripping Sunder harder. Not for the first time while touching Gabe, fiery heat bloomed within Sunder, filling his veins and Gabe gasped. Somehow his magick intensified around Gabe, the usual glow strengthening to a conflagration that threatened to consume them both. It was almost like Sunder’s own magick had been asleep until Gabe. His human might not believe in fate or love at first sight, but Sunder’s magick recognized Gabe.

Whispers floated about them, greetings and blessings, as the plants and trees began to awaken from their half sleep.

Majesty, what is your will?

“*We only came to visit,*” Sunder sent back.

“Oh, wow, I heard them—you. This is fantastic.” The hushed excitement in Gabe’s voice caused Sunder to open his eyes. Around them, the plants and trees leaned toward them, sun dappled leaves fluttering on a nonexistent wind.

Extending his senses, Sunder sent energy into the vegetation struggling to survive, giving some of his vitality. Locating a small amount of toxins, he gathered them up. The air seemed to turn richer with each passing minute.

“Sunder, the Elffin-ones are fools.”

Chapter Nine

Nothing compared to what Gabe felt when the heat poured into him, lighting him up in ways he couldn't explain. He'd sensed touches of that warmth while having sex with Sunder, but this was much, much stronger. In his mind's eye, everything shone with an almost-blinding brilliance that caused Gabe's eyes to water, even though he technically wasn't looking at anything. Sunder glowed from within and Gabe had witnessed nothing—no one—more beautiful.

He expected magick to be this intangible thing, something like telekinesis where Sunder manipulated things with his mind. No, this was Sunder, the magick a part of him—it was him. The understanding of what the essence actually was remained just outside of Gabe's reach.

With growing awe, Gabe watched as Sunder reached out, tendrils of his light touching their surroundings. He shared himself with all the living things and they gave back to him. The flowers suddenly burst into bloom as if showing off for Sunder. Inexplicably, Gabe could feel how Sunder balanced nature, feeding a part of his energy into the work he did. Then Sunder crossed a patch of pollution and reached out to cleanse it away.

Gabe opened his eyes. Sunder was just as brilliant in real life as he was in that ethereal way he'd seen when his eyes were closed. The outer red ring of Sunder's iris had thickened to become more prominent than the gray, gleaming as if a million jewels sparkled in their depths. As Sunder handled the toxins, his light, his—soul—dimmed, darkened. At the sudden knowledge, something clicked into place within Gabe, but he didn't have time to examine it because he could see how the contaminants were harming Sunder.

Instinctually, Gabe reached out and buried his hands in Sunder's rapidly sickening light. If left alone, the wrongness would taint Sunder so Gabe gathered the sticky goo onto his hands as he swiped through the darkness dragging it away from Sunder. The inky black began to seep into his skin. Gabe gritted his teeth as the oiliness made his stomach roil. He didn't stop though, not until he'd collected every foul drop that had latched onto Sunder's soul. When he was finished, Gabe broke the connection to Sunder, afraid he would be responsible for undoing all of his work if he continued to hold on.

“Sun and stars, Gabe what did you do?” Sunder asked, his voice warbled, sounding stretched thin.

Gabe ignored him and slowly crawled away, flinching when Sunder reached for him. “Don’t touch me!” he rasped. “Not yet. I need to... need to...” There was something about the ick Sunder attempted to cleanse. *What is it?* It didn’t feel right. How would he know what pollution would feel like?

They brought it. The ones that smell like spring rain and angry winds.

Gabe didn’t understand what the trees were trying to tell him.

Un-earth ones, bright and golden and angry.

“Gabe, tell me what to do. How can I help you? What are the Ents speaking of?” Sunder sounded frantic and Gabe wanted to soothe him, tell him everything was okay, but it wasn’t.

He burned up. Something *moved* within him, every part of his body ached as if he had the worst flu of his life. “I need a container... bag or something, quick.”

Sunder barked commands in a language Gabe didn’t know. Knights scrambled but Gabe couldn’t see what went on because his eyes watered as he coughed. Something scratched at his throat and he swallowed it down. His body wanted to purge, all the signs were there, but he held back because he needed a sample. The nurse in him ran through all of the symptoms of this sudden illness, but a small voice in the back of his mind whispered this was unlike any sickness he’d seen or read of before. *Darksoul*.

A clear plastic bag was shoved into Gabe’s hands. It looked like the one from the trashcan in the back of the limo. He didn’t care where it came from because he retched long and hard into its confines. Squeezing his eyes shut because he didn’t want to see what had clawed up his throat. He continued to heave until even his breakfast was gone.

Viciously he squeezed the top closed without opening his eyes and lifted it up. “Don’t let it out.” He stamped down the shiver that gripped his spine when the bag shuddered in his grasp. What felt like several hands covered his, and he slowly released his grip, allowing them to take the foulness away.

The Pantherines spoke rapidly in what Gabe was coming to think of as their native tongue. He collapsed onto his elbows cradling his head on his forearms, his body still carrying a little bit of an ache. Sweat drenched his shirt and his hair, and holy hell, he was tired. He wanted a toothbrush and to gargle a gallon of mouthwash.

“Please, Gabriel. Can I touch you now?” Sunder sounded so lost and if he didn’t know better, afraid. He assessed himself, not feeling any of the taint that had threatened Sunder earlier.

“Sunder,” he rasped, but that was enough. He was lifted into Sunder’s arms. Later he would be embarrassed at letting Sunder cuddle him out in the open, maybe even gripe at Sunder to not do it again. He was a man, not some bodice-ripping damsel in distress. But for now, he buried his nose into the column of Sunder’s throat and breathed in, checking to make sure Sunder’s scent hadn’t changed.

“You’re scaring me, Gabe. How did you pull the contaminant away from me?” Sunder stroked his back, the motion soothing Gabe.

Wrong. Angry. Un-earth.

Gabe coughed, again. “What they said.”

“You can still hear them?” Sunder asked in a strained voice.

Gabe glanced up, his eyes still watery from his stomach turning inside out. “Can’t you?”

“Yes, that’s because of who I am.” Sunder’s expression had turned wary.

“Maybe I can because you’re touching me.” That had to be it because Gabe never heard the voices of nature until Sunder showed him. Unless once Sunder revealed how, Gabe couldn’t turn it off.

Sunder nodded in agreement although he didn’t seem as if he really agreed. “They are saying the pollution I attempted to cleanse was wrong, not from earth. How can that be? I should be able to reset the balance of nature. I’ve always been able to do so.”

They brought it. The ones smelling of spring and rain and angry winds. Trap. The leaves shook almost angrily.

Carefully, Gabe sat up pulling away from the circle of Sunder’s arms, thinking furiously. He’d become a nurse because he wanted to help people. Ronan had pushed him to become a doctor asserting Gabe was more than smart enough, but he didn’t have the money nor did he want to spend twenty years paying off loans. But just because he didn’t become a doctor didn’t mean he quit applying himself to learning. As he thought, he moved the puzzle pieces around considering all the information he knew. Darksouls. Pantherines. Elffin-ones. DarkHunters. Scarab War. Pollution. Magick. Souls. Dementia.

Environment. He needed more information. He didn't know enough but he had a strong hunch.

Paulo handed him a bottle of water. He'd forgotten the knights were there. As he drank he glanced around to see they had their backs to them, keeping him and Sunder in a tight circle among the trees. Sunder continued to caress him, his tail wrapped lovingly around his calf as if he was afraid to let Gabe out of reach. Gabe used the bottom of his shirt to wipe the lingering sweat from his face. Disconcertingly, the plants closest to him also petted him. It was such an odd sight that Gabe grinned, wondering momentarily if he was in some children's show that was only missing the perky music and talking birds.

"You won't do that again," Sunder admonished.

"Bossy much," Gabe quipped, not really angry with Sunder, simply out of sorts.

"I'm a commander, it's what I do."

He heard the tremble in Sunder's voice and relented. "I don't plan on it, but Sunder, if I asked you to do something would you—I know I have no authority to command you, but what you tried to clean up, it was poisoning you. I can't explain how I know, I could just see it." He didn't dare say more without proof to back up his assertions.

Besides, they were out in the open and the trees insisted the pollution was planted there. It wasn't possible for anyone to know they would be there. They couldn't have. Was it dumb luck that Sunder picked this place? Or did someone who knew Sunder well enough, guess where Sunder would be compelled to balance nature? Perhaps there were many such traps planted throughout the city? The idea was far-fetched.

He rubbed his eyes as a dull ache formed behind them. The knight's talk of DarkHunter assassins had to have tainted Gabe's outlook, not to mention he'd read a number of hate-filled articles written by Elffin-ones about Sunder. Even at the thought, he couldn't push away the conversation about the Elffin-ones waiting for Sunder to turn into a darksoul. Gabe recognized it as possibly a mental illness, perhaps one connected to an environmental cause.

"What you did shouldn't be possible, Gabe." Sunder radiated fear even though outwardly he only scowled.

He couldn't figure out how he knew, how he could feel Sunder and wondered if it was a side effect of Sunder showing him his magick. The word

magick implied something unexplainable happened when Sunder reached out to life, and that was so far from the truth. He needed to explain to Sunder he shouldn't take anyone else with him when he accessed his magick. Unwittingly, he exposed his very soul. Gabe could imagine all the ways in which someone could hurt Sunder.

“Gabriel. Are you with me?”

He blinked, looking up into Sunder's worried expression. Lord he was beautiful. Somehow he was lying in Sunder's arms again.

“Perhaps I need to see one of your Chandarian doctors. Someone you trust.” Gabe struggled to stand, Sunder gripped his elbow and had a steadying hand on his side.

“I can carry you.”

Gabe snorted. “Not in this lifetime. I can walk.”

Sunder grumbled but didn't argue. Gabe wobbled, his legs feeling a bit precarious, but the more he moved the better he felt. All the way to the path, he and Sunder endured the inquiring caress of the woods. He didn't gripe when Sunder kept a steadying arm around him, and if he leaned into Sunder, well, he'd blame his weakness on his unsteady legs. No need to confess he desperately needed to be close to Sunder.

When they reached the sidewalk, he glanced back. “Are they going to remain animated—alive like that?” The trees seemed no different than when they entered the copse.

“They normally exist in a sort of half slumber. The more I visit a place, the longer they remain fully awake.” Sunder squeezed Gabe's shoulder.

“You called them Ents. Do they have names?” Gabe looked up into Sunder's eyes. The red ring was smaller than before, the gray returning to its former rich and gleaming look.

“The trees self-possessed enough to relay information are referred to as Ents on my world.” Sunder's gaze was searching as if he were trying to read Gabe's thoughts. More and more Gabe was beginning to believe there might be some truth to the Elffin-ones crash landing on Earth.

Giving into the need, Gabe put his arm around Sunder's waist. Not so long ago he'd convinced himself he could keep company with Sunder, even sleep with him, and remain unaffected. When was the last time he liked someone

upon the first meeting, not needing to get to know them before he considered them a friend? That nagging, almost hysterical voice told him to walk away from Sunder. He knew little about how to navigate these new waters he found himself in. Below the surface was a deadly current that would sweep him away. Could he traverse Sunder's world? Were the politics, the machinations beyond his comprehension?

If he was smart, he'd leave. It was his best option, but how could he if he could somehow help Sunder? From what he'd heard so far, very few people had Sunder's back. Perhaps if he could correct the misunderstanding between the Chandarians and Elffin-ones over the darksouls, he could lessen the threat to Sunder and those like him. Then Sunder could have a more normal life on his planet. He could find someone worthy to be his mate.

Gabe's heart hurt at the thought of Sunder finding someone to settle down with, but if there was a chance for Sunder to be happy without a threat from the Elffin-ones and their DarkHunters overshadowing him, then Gabe would do everything in his power to make sure Sunder had the life he deserved.

You're just looking for excuses to stay around him longer.

Gabe pushed away the nagging voice. Whatever the outcome, he'd do what he could regardless of the emotional cost to himself.

Slowly, they walked through the park, Sunder and the guardsmen slowing their pace to match his. He was relieved as the body aches gradually dissipated until he felt almost like himself again by the time they reached the edge of the park. He was paying more attention to Sunder's warmth and scent than to his surroundings when the knights released an alarmed battle cry and encircled him and Sunder.

Gabe was tall by human standards but not so much next to the Pantherines. They practically towered over him, and their wide bulky bodies were effective walls keeping Gabe from seeing over and around them. Sunder had no such disadvantage. The string of words that came from him sounded harsh and foul, making Gabe think Sunder cursed in his native tongue.

In unison, the knights drew their swords, one for each hand. Paulo tossed a couple of sheathed blades to Sunder.

"Halt, DarkHunter! Come no further," Paulo barked.

"We felt the rise of the taint and only want the darksoul, Knight. There is no need for us to quarrel." Gabe expected something more sinister that screamed

I'm a murderer of the innocent, not the soft reasonable sounding voice he heard.

“Aye, the taint has been expelled, and we have it bagged here if you wish to confirm it.” Through Paulo’s legs, Gabe could barely make out the knotted trash bag that sat on the ground at Paulo’s feet. When Paulo kicked it, the sack writhed, making Gabe’s skin crawl.

“Nice try, Sir Knight, but it won’t save your tainted prince. We all know there are none who can do such a thing as cleanse the fouled. Please, step aside and I vow the execution will be quick.”

“You know I cannot do that, DarkHunter,” Paulo said, his voice grim.

“So be it.”

Gabe had never felt so helpless than when the fighting began. He couldn’t see much, but caught glimpses of dark-clad, golden-haired Elffin-ones. Everywhere he glanced there were so many fighters. When one of the knights fell, Sunder took his place. Gabe had only seen fighting on television and in the movies where the action was choreographed so that all the moves were smooth and beautiful in a horrific way. Real life didn’t imitate art and was sloppy by comparison. The ring of metal was loud and almost ear shattering. The smell of blood was something Gabe was familiar with, but this was mixed with the saltiness of sweat and offal as people died and lost control of their bodily functions.

Then there was Sunder and the haunting song he sang. He was fierce and darkly devastating. Any who set themselves in his path fell away. The circle of knights loosened, the gaps between them becoming wider until a person could slip through. A knight fell and without another to take his place two Elffin-ones entered the circle. That they hadn’t expected Gabe to be there was evident in their puzzled expressions.

One of them sniffed the air then sneered. “You are defiled, human. Come, we’ll put you out of your misery.”

The Elffin-one swung his sword impossibly fast, and Gabe screamed and fell backward. How he was able to move out of the way that quickly, he didn’t know. He should be dead, sliced through and through, but there he lay on the ground looking up at an astonished Elffin-one. The male wasn’t deterred though and raised his arm to swing a killing blow. Instead of cringing, Gabe rolled.

A ferocious roar filled the air. The nearby trees trembled and groaned. Without thinking why, Gabe scramble to his feet and stumbled toward the tree line. *Safety*. All he could think was he would be safe if he made the trees. He dodged another Elffin-one and stopped in his tracks when a silver-haired, dark-skinned drow leapt on to the back of the Elffin-one who'd raced to catch Gabe. With unimaginable strength, the drow tore the head off the DarkHunter.

"Run to the trees, little guardian!" The drow threw the head at another charging DarkHunter before he leapt on the distracted fighter.

Gabe didn't have to be told twice. Sliding through the blood-slick grass, on the edge of hyperventilating, he was about six feet from the nearest tree when something grabbed him by the back of the neck and around the waist. He screamed and flailed, attempting to turn and kick out at whoever had caught him but no one was there. Unexpectedly he was hoisted into the air, and he quit struggling as he continued to rise high above the ground, afraid he'd fall and injure himself. Leafy branches twined around him creating a nest-like basket. He gripped the edges, having a *holy shit* moment as he glanced around, not sure what to make of his rescue by tree.

With his face buried in his hands, Gabe sucked air into his lungs as his skin prickled where the branches touched him. He wanted to scream. To run. Gabe wanted to close his eyes and when he opened them again he would be back in his bedroom with Sunder wrapped around him. No talking plants. No tainted pollution seeping into his skin. No fanatical DarkHunters attempting to murder Sunder. No goddamn bag of *something* that Gabe had purged. And definitely no trees picking him up. Everything that happened this afternoon was so far away from the human realm that Gabe wondered if he had lost his sanity. His stomach roiled and he swallowed convulsively to keep from throwing up again.

His vision began to white out, prompting Gabe to work to calm his breathing before he lost consciousness. He had to keep it together and think logically, or he would be no use to Sunder. Even from his perch he heard the clash of the battle going on below. Wiping the nervous sweat dripping from his nose, he reminded himself of all the articles he'd read on the famous Jade Forest and the druids who watched over it. He'd been fascinated with the descriptions of how nature was connected to the people, but never in his wildest dreams did he imagine that this... *this* was what Sunder's world was really like. Strange and foreign and frightening... and maybe a bit exhilarating. The fantastical things that he'd seen today were all a part of Sunder and who he was. How could Gabe only accept a part of Sunder and reject the rest?

He continued to breathe deeply, for the moment ignoring the fact a tree held him. Ultimately, the noise of battle drew his attention as his frantic thoughts smoothed out to something less panicked. Calling on his nurse's training, he ran through the list of actions he used in emergency situations. First he needed to access the situation, then make a plan of action.

Looking over the edge of his living nest, he had a bird's-eye view of the gruesome fighting below. Many drow had joined the fight against the DarkHunters. Numerous Elffin-ones had fallen already, but the number pressing in on Sunder's small band of men was overwhelming. Even as deadly as the knights were with their wicked blades, and how savage the drow, Gabe couldn't imagine how such a small number of men could win against the odds he saw.

In the middle of it all stood Sunder, his swords a blur. Even from a distance Gabe heard Sunder's eerie song that seemed to call the DarkHunters to their death even as it encouraged the knights. Sunder's lethal dance of blades left behind body after body, the whistling of the swords somehow interwoven in the melody, the rhythm dizzying. How long could Sunder keep up the fast pace? Gabe had read Sunder was a great warrior, a legendary Bladedancer, and commander, but surely there was a limit to his endurance? Sunder twirled and slipped on the blood-drenched grass and three DarkHunters lunged.

Gabe howled Sunder's name and the Elffin-ones were somehow flung back. "I have to help him," Gabe said aloud knowing there wasn't much he could do.

The timber holding him shuddered and his heart skipped several beats as he almost lost the fight against the surge of fear. Reflexively, he held on tighter to the branches cupping him. On either side of him the woods groaned, sounding like the bellow of some prehistoric beast. The thick trunks trembled harder and then *moved* forward. Glancing down to the ground, Gabe watched in unbelieving fascination as the tree uprooted itself to lumber slowly across the grass, dead bodies audibly crunching under the tree's tremendous weight. Alongside his tree, a dozen others followed in a horrific macabre of unnatural movement.

Upon seeing Gabe's oncoming reinforcements, the drow raised delighted cries of triumph. The Pantherine ignored him, instead rallying to Sunder's side. To the man, the DarkHunters raised their gaze up to the hulking trunks to where Gabe sat and dropped their weapons, raising their hands in surrender. A deep, dark satisfaction uncoiled within Gabe as he watched them quake, the scent of

their sudden and strong fear reaching him in the bows. A few ran, screaming in their native tongue, while others fell to their knees.

“Halt, please,” Gabe whispered, trembling hard when the trees stopped at his request.

Gabe buried his face in his hands, surprised, but not, that they listened to him. Why the trees moved to help Sunder when he spoke aloud his desire, he didn’t know. How he could feel—hear—Sunder below him, gasping for breath, he didn’t know that either. What was he supposed to do? Within hours so much had turned strange and incredibly complicated. He didn’t think he could take anymore—weirdness.

“Gabriel!” Sunder bellowed, all the anguish, fear, and concern seeming to intertwine around his name. Glancing below, Gabe watched Sunder weave a path among the trunks, his movements panicky and stilted.

He tried to answer but his throat felt dry and his tongue thick in his mouth even as his teeth chattered.

“Gabriel, where are you? Please answer me.”

“Sunder,” he rasped, wiping at his wet cheeks, attempting to pull himself together. *Come on, you can do this. You’re not hurt. He’s not hurt. You’re only stuck in a tree.*

Pushing out a harsh breath, Gabe looked over the edge of the nest. Sunder was glancing into the boughs when a drow pointed directly at Gabe. Not knowing what to do, he gave a pathetic little wave. Stabbing the tips of his swords into the ground, Sunder leapt. Once, twice, then a third time and he was right there within arm’s reach.

Gabe lunged.

Chapter Ten

Sunder ached and the minor cuts he acquired stung, but the feel of Gabe in his arms calmed his racing heart. With only a few words, Gabe asked the tree to put them down and then bid them to return to their homes. He couldn't think about the how or the why at the moment. His remaining knights secured the weapons of the DarkHunters with the help of several drow. He detested that Gabe had seen such bloodshed and attempted to keep Gabe's face averted from the carnage, but Gabe refused to be shielded.

"I'm fine," Gabe claimed even as Sunder begged to differ. He could smell the stringent taint of fear and barely leashed panic. Gabe trembled but when Sunder wrapped his tail around Gabe's calf, the shaking lessened.

Seeing the wounded seemed to galvanize Gabe, and when one of the knights pulled a med kit from the trunk of the vehicle, Gabe commandeered the kit. He gave orders like a commander in the field, and Sunder was pleased to see his knights obey without balking about taking orders from a human.

After Gabe attended to the few minor injuries Sunder had sustained, he followed Gabe as he sorted the wounded, and put the knights to work setting up a field triage unit until more help arrived. Usually solitary fighters, Sunder had never seen so many DarkHunters in one place. More had fallen than had survived. How had they come to be there in such numbers? The Ents had warned of a trap, and Sunder had taken it to mean the pollutants, not that DarkHunters laid in wait. He should've been questioning the remaining Elffin-ones but he couldn't bring himself to move far from Gabe's side, his hand or tail always touching Gabe in some small way.

After several emergency med units arrived, a large human airtransport flew overhead and hovered, the turret underneath swiveling but not firing upon them. The once-full parking lot was almost vacant after the humans visiting the park fled the fighting. The blacktop gave the airtransport a place to set down. The dark side doors slid open, humans in battle suits jumped out and took up formation. To Sunder's surprise, Ayre, Valora, High Druid Melindria, and Valiant, exited the aircraft followed by the king's personal physician.

Sunder raised his hand in greeting but didn't move away from Gabe. The Pantherines thumped clenched fists to their heart and bowed low as Valiant and Ayre passed.

“Sunder!” Valiant’s call was like a roll of thunder.

Suddenly Gabe jumped to his feet a sharp instrument in hand as he backed up into Sunder. “Leave him alone!” Gabe yelled, the trees of the park punctuating Gabe’s words with a bellowing roar.

Sunder wrapped his arms around Gabe to keep him from lunging at Valiant while Ayre placed himself in front of their father.

Valiant waved the alarmed knights away before they could intervene. “At ease, he’s only a human.” Sunder knew Valiant wasn’t being unkind. All Chandarians were aware how fragile humans were and the chances of being overpowered by one were slim.

“Be calm, my Gabriel. He is my father, King Valiant,” Sunder murmured into Gabe’s ear. The bitter stink of fear surrounded Gabe followed by the coolness of relief. Resting in his arms, the sour scent of stress didn’t dissipate, but Gabe did drop the instrument into the med kit and held up his hands.

“My apologies, Your Majesty. You caught me off guard and with the amount of people who tried to kill Sunder today, I reacted before thinking.”

Valiant regarded Gabriel, his bright-blue eyes assessing. He made an intimidating figure in his knight’s uniform of segmented black armor, his honey-gold hair tamed into two thick plaited braids that fell over each shoulder. “My son is fortunate to have one such as you at his side. Paulo tells me you were the one who turned the tide of the DarkHunter trap. I will forever be in your debt. If you ever need anything, you only need to ask. You will always be welcome in my home and at my table.” In a flourish that astonished those who looked on, Valiant bowed low.

Sunder squeezed Gabe harder, responding to Gabe’s agitated movements, but Gabe pushed at his arms. Without stepping away from Sunder, he bowed awkwardly. “Thank you for the honor?” The statement sounded more like a question as if Gabe was unsure he gave the proper response.

When he rose, Sunder pulled him back against his body. “You did well,” Sunder whispered into Gabe’s ear, hoping the encouragement would sooth Gabe’s frayed nerves.

He might not show it, but Sunder sensed Gabe rode the edge of being overwhelmed. Too much had transpired, and instinctually Sunder knew Gabe had reached his limit. He wanted to take Gabe somewhere it was only the two of them, and give Gabe the time he needed to process everything that’d happened. Sunder was afraid the day’s events were only the beginning.

A small smile played at the corners of Valiant's lips, but it didn't displace the stern mask he wore. Hugh Druid Melindria broke away from their group and approached the gathered drow males. Sunder kept an eye on Melindria as Valora swept around Valiant.

"Sunder, are you injured? We brought Brock with us." Sunder appreciated that she embraced him without touching Gabe. She was excellent at recognizing when someone had a fragile spirit. Kissing Sunder on the cheek, she stepped away, giving her attention to Gabe.

With wide eyes, Gabe's gaze seemed to take in everything about Valora. She wore armor similar to Valiant's, her mane in a long braid that fell to her waist. Before she could say anything, Sunder was surprised when Gabe asked, "Are you Sunder's mother?"

Valora smiled wide, her blue eyes sparkling. "Yes, I am."

Reluctantly, Sunder released Gabe when he stepped toward Valora with a hand raised. Of the same height as Sunder, she bent at the waist allowing Gabe to cup her cheek while he kissed the other. Before he pulled away, he whispered very softly in her ear. If Sunder hadn't been standing so close he wouldn't have heard, "Thank you for not abandoning Sunder." He kissed her cheek again before he returned to Sunder's side.

Valora stayed bent over for a long moment before she straightened. She blinked rapidly and Sunder was sure she'd say something, but she only gazed at Gabe as if she searched for a way to pack him up and take him home with her. Sunder scowled and possessively looped his arm around Gabe's shoulders.

Gabe cleared his throat. "Ayre, it is good to see you again. Staying away from the orange juice, I hope."

Sunder snorted as Ayre preened awkwardly with the cast on his arm, his grin mischievous. "Nurse Gabriel, I had hoped to see you again under different circumstances." The smile slipped a little. "Thank you for taking care of my brother."

Mercifully, Paulo stepped forward and saved them from an awkward silence. He gave Valiant a detailed verbal report. The human emergency personnel were competently caring for the wounded. Sunder had called for a transport to take the DarkHunter prisoners to the Chandarian Embassy where they would be processed and sent to Sunder's warship docked at the orbital space station. He pulled Gabe to the side, unable to keep from checking him

over again, afraid he'd missed something. That Gabe didn't tease or complain, only lean heavily into Sunder spoke volumes. He needed to get Gabe away from the sight soon.

Ayre approached, his assessing gaze taking in how Gabe was wrapped around Sunder and a pleased light gleamed in his eyes. "Are the two of you truly unscathed?"

"Physically, we are fine, but we could do with some solitude," Sunder replied, hoping Ayre picked up on what he hadn't said.

Ayre's gaze dropped to Gabe. "Father believes the two of you will be out of harm's way aboard your ship." Gabe opened his mouth as if he would protest before his teeth clacked back together, his jaw working furiously. "For the moment, at least," Ayre quickly added. "There are more knights stationed there, and the Elffin-ones wouldn't be able to board unnoticed. He only wants the two of you safe as he sorts out what happened and why."

Something indecipherable moved across Gabe's expression, and unease settled between Sunder's shoulders. He could tell Gabe didn't like the suggestion, but he didn't complain or refuse. Sunder thought his father was correct. The ship was the safest place for them right now.

High Druid Melindria approached. Sunder had kept an eye on her as she strolled around the battle site, approaching the trees with more caution than Sunder thought was warranted. He didn't like how she stared at Gabe and suppressed the urge to place himself between the two of them. Ayre came to stand next to Sunder, surreptitiously placing Gabe between them.

"Prince Sunder, I'm happy to see you alive and well." There was no spite or derisiveness in Melindria's voice as he'd expected. "Would you introduce me to your young man?"

Sunder hesitate for a second. "Thank you for your concern. This is Gabriel Barba. Gabe, this is High Druid Melindria, Watcher of the Jade Forest of Edrijan."

Gabe stiffened, his scent filling with wariness, prompting Sunder to take a better look at Melindria. Her black silky robes were edged in white lace and looked out of place when in the background the grass was stained crimson and the dead lined up ready for transport. The white glyphs shone silver in the sunlight against her dark-gray skin. Did Gabe see something he didn't? Behind Melindria, the drow who'd fought alongside Sunder sidled closer.

“Are you one of those who seek to hurt Sunder because he’s Feyborn? I read the Elffin-one druids and rangers were supposed to be peace keepers. Your path is to mediate, to guard the forest. Is it not your responsibility to...” Gabe glanced away, jaw muscles tight. Sunder ran a soothing hand down Gabe’s back, feeling him tremble as the spicy tang of anger filled his nose.

Melindria bowed. “The SilverHands called you guardian, and I see they bear great wisdom. Forgive me. I do hope to bring peace after five hundred years of prejudice. Once the festival is over, there will be a conference between the Elffin-ones, Pantherine, and the Felinean. I would be honored if you would be my guest. All Feyborn would be humbled if you deigned to attend.”

Why would Melindria want Gabe at that meeting? Sunder growled low in warning and the drow quickly moved to flank her. The nearest drow held his hands out in a placating gesture. “Please, My Prince, she means no harm to the little guardian. She only wants his help.”

Instead of leaning closer, as Sunder expected, Gabe straightened. “You’re the one who saved me from the two DarkHunters.”

The harsh features of the drow’s face softened as he smiled. “It was my honor to come to your aid, Little Guardian. I am called Aymon. My brothers and I are Runners of the SilverHand.”

Gabe extended his arm and Aymon took Gabe’s palm between his. “It is a pleasure to meet you. If you need me, I guess I can make this meeting.”

When the drow held Gabe’s hand for too long in Sunder’s estimation, he gave a low snarl and pulled Gabe back into the circle of his arms. To Melindria he said, “I expect an explanation before I’ll bring Gabe near those who would wish to do me or him harm. Having him in the same room as Talia... I won’t allow her to touch him.” He didn’t want Gabe anywhere near Talia or her family, ever.

Gabe patted Sunder’s chest. “I’m a big boy, Sunder. I wish everyone would stop calling me little. I’m tall for a human.” Sunder was stuck between wanting to laugh and snarl.

Paulo warily approached. “Are you ready to leave, Commander?”

“You and I will speak in depth before the meeting, Melindria,” Sunder said before guiding a disgruntled Gabe toward the waiting armored hovercraft. He itched to be away from this place and somewhere he could relax his guard and convince Gabe to cuddle with him.

Chapter Eleven

Gabe had to put some space between himself and Sunder. He felt hot, as if his skin stretched too tight. He needed room, needed fresh air or something because his lungs didn't seem to want to work. He barely waited for the guards to clear the building before he clamored out of the vehicle. Without looking back he said, "Stay here. I won't be long."

Then with great care he walked into the warehouse, entered the elevator, and rode to the third floor. When his door closed behind him, Gabe turned all the locks with trembling hands. The panic attack was right there on the edges of his awareness. He fought from losing control as he tore his bloodstained clothes off, stumbling across the loft. Sloppily putting toothpaste on his toothbrush, he climbed into the shower and turned on the cold water. He stood under the icy spray scrubbing his teeth and tongue, remembering how he purged something unnatural just an hour or two before.

What was he going to do? Where was he going to go? He couldn't stay in his loft. Could he go with Sunder? He didn't belong in Sunder's world where fucking trees walked around. The sight was both awe inspiring and horrifically strange. That was abnormal, wasn't it? Trees on earth weren't supposed to talk or understand human speech. Things like that only happened in books and movies. What the hell was he supposed to do?

When his teeth began to chatter he turned on the warm water. The room spun and Gabe placed a steadying hand on the tiled wall, squeezing his eyes shut as he hung his head concentrating on breathing slow. He couldn't believe how he'd clung like a barnacle to Sunder after he climbed out of the tree. Gabe snorted. He didn't climb anywhere. The tree put them gently down. What was wrong with him that he could pull toxins off of Sunder's light, no—his *soul*? How could his body process the pollution and turn it into whatever he threw up? His mind skittered away from what was actually in the bag, the dark forms that had *moved*. Then when he was desperate to help Sunder, his whispered words had compelled the trees near him into action. But that wasn't exactly correct because the one had picked him up without him saying anything. Why? He wasn't from another planet. He'd been born on Earth. His parents were human.

Gabe washed and rinsed methodically, barely drying off enough before pulling on clean clothes. Grabbing the biggest duffle bag he had, he threw what

he thought he'd need, and then he included things he couldn't part with because he didn't know when he'd be able to come back. He could slip out the back and use the fire escape in the alley to disappear. He could go to Ronan's place or maybe Ronan's parents. Who would think to look for him there? He wasn't due back to work until a few days after the festival. He could stay inside and lay low. Sunder would go back home and he'd be safe.

Or would he?

Gabe paused in his hurried packing, his gaze caught on a couple of crimson strands of hair left on his pillow. Half the people of Sunder's world were afraid of him and wanted him dead. Plus Gabe had an idea of what caused the darksouls among the Feyborn males. If he walked away, who would step up and help them? He could send an anonymous letter to Sunder's father and explain what could happen, what to look for. He had to keep Sunder from trying to cleanse anymore of that weird pollutant. What if Sunder thought he had to? He said he balanced nature, so who was to say Sunder wouldn't take a chance and become tainted? Who would be there to guard Sunder and cleanse him when the contaminants dimmed his light, poisoned his soul. Then the DarkHunters would have a reason to murder him.

Perhaps he should stay long enough to make sure Sunder remained safe. How long would he have to stick around, though? When Sunder returned home he wouldn't be lacking for lovers, from what Paulo said. *Yes, but you're the one that makes him happy. You're such a coward, running because you're scared, just like your parents.*

Gabe sat on the bed and pulled the pillow into his lap. He couldn't resist bringing it to his nose and inhaling deeply. Sunder's scent still lingered, strong and thick. Something about the smell caused Gabe's shoulders to relax and his frantic thoughts to smooth out. If he could bottle this, he would be rich, but the thought of another enjoying Sunder's scent made him gnash his teeth. That the courtiers would be clamoring to crawl into Sunder's bed made him sick to his stomach and then angry. They didn't care for Sunder. He bet none of them could make Sunder smile or had heard him laugh. The thought of Sunder taking a mate who wasn't him—hurt—much more than it should because Gabe hadn't known him very long. Heaven help him if he fell in love with Sunder.

You're already falling in love with him, you fool. Why do you think you make excuses to keep him around? The question is, what are you going to do about it?

Indeed. He had planned to run. He'd almost allowed fear to make choices for him as he grasped at excuses as to why he couldn't stay with Sunder. Even before this had all started, he'd made a list of reasons to hold Sunder at arm's length, and yet he allowed Sunder into his home, in his bed. Sunder had gifted him with a view of nature that was beyond spectacular, even though what he'd seen frightened him. Now Sunder knocked at his heart, and Gabe was terrified.

Sunder was unlike anyone Gabe had ever met. For the first time, Gabe wanted more than the soft feelings of adoration he shared with his previous partners. He wanted to fall deeply, madly in love with someone, and he wanted that someone to be Sunder. What if Sunder only wanted a couple of weeks of bedroom fun before going home? What would Gabe do if he fell in love with Sunder, but Sunder didn't return the affection? Then he would do what he could to make sure this darksoul business was corrected. Sunder wasn't the only Feyborn male at risk. After that, if Sunder didn't want anything more than friendship, well, he would see if he could handle only being Sunder's friend—after he nursed his broken heart.

Taking one more whiff of Sunder's scent, Gabe stood up and zipped up his bag. He needed to water his plants, then contact Ronan to let him know where he'd be and ask him to watch after the loft while he was gone. Gabe dropped his bag on the couch and was crossing the room to the kitchen when the doorframe splintered and the front door, engaged locks and all, fractured and swung forcibly inward, loudly banging off the wall. The way the door gave away, Gabe thought someone had a battering ram on the other side. Instead, Sunder stood there, chest heaving with every breath, arms akimbo. He roared like a wounded lion.

What was wrong? "Sunder?"

"You're leaving me," he snarled, his lips pulled back exposing all of his sharp teeth.

"What? No, I needed to water the plants before I left." He'd thought about it—planned on running when he walked through the door, but he'd been panicked and afraid then. He didn't feel much better now, but at least his mind was clearer.

Sunder sniffed the air. "Liar. I can smell it—you... your scent... tell me the truth!"

Gabe held out his arms, suddenly aware Sunder was in just as much turmoil as he'd been, but perhaps of a different kind. "Then come smell me and tell me what my scent says."

Moving with the same swiftness Gabe had witnessed on the battlefield, Sunder was there before him with his hands fisted in the front of Gabe's shirt. He didn't balk when Sunder lifted him up and buried his nose in Gabe's neck. Wrapping his legs around Sunder's waist, Gabe grasped Sunder's forearms and held on.

Sunder trembled under his touch, face pressed to Gabe's neck. "I thought I could be patient and woo you, court you, go as slow as you wanted. I want to be your friend, and your lover, and your mate of choice, but I've found I'm not that strong, Gabe. I want you for my mate. I should've told you, but I didn't want to scare you away. I thought two weeks would be enough to convince you to come with me, to stay with me. Then I caught your scent out in the hallway, I thought... thought you'd be gone."

"Then you busted down my door." The chastisement of his words didn't make it into his voice. "I'm not going anywhere, and neither are you until someone comes and fixes my door."

Sunder groaned, licking up Gabe's neck. "Your scent... I want you to be mine, only mine." Sunder released one hand from Gabe's shirt and wrapped it around Gabe's waist.

"That is something that we'll need to talk about, but not here, and not now." Gabe wrapped his arms around Sunder's neck, his legs straining to hold him up. That was all the encouragement Sunder needed to wrap his other arm around Gabe.

Over Sunder's shoulder, he saw Paulo standing in the entryway. "I've called for someone to come repair the door. We will leave two knights to guard the loft until it's taken care of. We need to move the two of you out of here soon."

Gabe gave a nod to indicate he understood, pointing to the couch where his duffle bag sat. "I need to water the plants."

"I don't want to let you go," Sunder grumbled.

"It will only be for a couple of moments, you big baby." Gabe unlocked his legs and pushed gently to signal he needed Sunder to put him down.

Paulo coughed into his fist, then hurried to pick up Gabe's bag when Sunder turned to glare. With a little coaxing, he encouraged Sunder to help him. Sunder's tail wrapped around his thigh and a hand stayed on the small of his back as he moved from pot to pot. The plants seemed different to Gabe. Perhaps it was his imagination that they hummed with happiness. When he

finished, Sunder grasped his hand in a firm grip, and he allowed himself to be tugged out of his loft toward—Gabe didn't even know what. What he did know was that as long as Sunder wanted him by his side, Gabe would stay. Whatever the future held, he would face it. No more hiding. No more running. He would immerse himself in Sunder's world, learn everything he could so the next time someone decided they were going to purge the world of Sunder's "darksoul," Gabe would hand them their ass and make them wish they'd never attempted to lay a finger on Sunder.

Aymon called him guardian, so that was what he'd become.

Chapter Twelve

Gabe had thought his earlier clingy, overpossessive behavior with Sunder had been over the top, but after they left the loft Sunder tucked Gabe against his side, hovered and remained in contact as if he thought Gabe would disappear. For the moment, he didn't mind because the feel of Sunder's skin against his own and Sunder's heady scent soothed his frayed nerves. With Sunder filling his senses, his frantic thoughts smoothed out into something more coherent. He didn't feel as if he was going to fly apart at any second. Gabe desperately needed time and some place quiet to absorb everything. But first they had to make their way to Sunder's warship which wasn't as easy as Gabe thought it would be.

As the armored vehicle neared the gated entrance to the Chandarian embassy, barriers had been erected on either side of the street. The police redirected pedestrians and traffic away from the embassy. They were stopped at the checkpoint and Gabe wondered if the police would turn them away, too.

Coral-toned Elffin-ones lined the barrier, some waving colorful squares of cloth, others yelled and waved with tear streaked faces. The drow were stoically stony faced, but they watched the caravan of vehicles that Gabe and Sunder rode in with keen gazes.

"Can they see in here?" Gabe asked, worried that with so many Elffin-ones in one place, they would attempt to overwhelm Sunder's knights to murder him.

"No," Paulo said. He sat across from Gabe. "They can only speculate who the vehicles carry."

"Who are they waiting for? They seem really excited. Well, except for the drow. They look like your knights, as if they're guarding something." Gabe leaned closer to get a better look, wondering if they were connected to the same group who'd helped Sunder earlier.

Sunder pulled him away from the window. "It's not safe."

Gabe scowled. "Why? They can't see us."

He turned his attention away from Sunder when Paulo cleared his throat. "Because the DarkHunters who ran—"

"The ones yelling? I didn't understand anything they were saying." He thought they were just as astonished as he was that the trees were moving.

“What Paulo was trying to say is they ran away announcing the return of the Guardians,” Sunder finished, nuzzling the side of Gabe’s head.

That didn’t sound good. Aymon had called him little guardian. Surely the DarkHunters weren’t talking about him. “I don’t understand. They all wanted Sunder dead. What does a guardian have to do with anything?”

“Not all Elffin-ones are violent,” Paulo lectured. “Most of them are peaceful, tender souls. DarkHunters are a different sort—”

“And the drow, they fought with only their hands.” A shiver worked up Gabe’s spine as he recalled how Aymon twisted the head off the DarkHunter who’d attack him.

Paulo continued. “Most drow are peaceful although withdrawn. You are correct in a way, the SilverHands are fighters like the DarkHunters are.” He motioned to the people at the barrier. “Most Elffin-ones are nonaggressive; they abhor violence.”

Gabe barely kept from making a rude noise because he didn’t buy it. He’d read some disturbing rantings about Sunder online before he came to know Sunder. “They commit infanticide because they follow superstition instead of thinking logically.”

Paulo didn’t comment. Really, how did someone go about justifying such an act when the perpetrators were supposed to be peace loving?

The police allowed them through the barricade. Elffin-ones waved their cloths frantically as the armored vehicles passed. Gabe still didn’t understand why they were excited. A short time later, security stopped them at the embassy gates. Paulo said the vehicles would be scanned for bombs, which surprised Gabe.

A guard approached Sunder’s window and Sunder lowered the tinted glass. “Good afternoon, Prince Sunder.” The Felinean carefully looked over Paulo, Sunder, and then he met Gabe’s gaze.

Gabe had never seen a Felinean before. He’d read their society was primitive compared to the Pantherine and Elffin-ones, and they rarely left their homeworld. The male was covered in a light golden fur. His nose and mouth jutted out, reminiscent of a domestic cat’s facial structure, and his legs were reverse articulated allowing him to drop and run on all fours if he needed to. Unlike Sunder who had to peel his lips back for Gabe to see his sharp teeth, the Felinean’s two longest teeth protruded from his top lip to rest over the bottom.

On top of his head were two horns that curved back and up with no obvious ears. Claw-tipped fingers gripped the door. Unable to tear his eyes away, Gabe stared. From the thick bangles on the male's wrists to the long white tuft of hair between the horns, Gabe found the Felinean fascinating.

Sunder's snarling growl caused Gabe to jump. "Why the inspection?" Sunder's question was barely understandable.

The guard finally glanced away from Gabe. "King Valiant's orders after the attempt on your life today. I'll need to see his identification." He cocked his head toward Gabe.

The growl that rumbled in Sunder's chest turned low with more than a hint of danger. Gabe placed a staying hand on Sunder's thigh, reaching over so the guard could scan his hand. They waited as his credentials were inspected. The smile the Felinean got when he read the data screen was odd. Gabe didn't know if it was the effect of the extra-long teeth or if it was something else. He pressed a finger to the side of his head, and Gabe saw three small holes in the male's skin covered by an opaque screen.

"You're cleared to enter. The helliopod is waiting on the landing field." The Felinean winked at Gabe before turning away.

Sunder was agitated and Paulo frowned. Gabe just wanted to find a quiet place to pass out. An ache behind his eyes had grown to epic proportions. The vehicle pulled behind the embassy building where a helliopod sat warming up. A cross between an old-time helicopter, jet, and shuttle, the helliopod incorporated the best of all three allowing for travel planetside with the ability to break out of the atmosphere. A dozen knights boarded with Gabe and Sunder. Once they were strapped in, Gabe leaned against Sunder and closed his eyes trying to fight off the migraine he felt coming.

When he roused, Sunder was carrying him out of the helliopod onto the orbital space station. He blinked himself awake, smacking Sunder on the chest. "Sunder, put me down." Gabe hadn't been off-world before and here he was sleeping through the experience.

Sunder looked as if he would argue but thought better of it when Gabe's eyes narrowed. The space station was much larger than Gabe thought it would be. There were observation windows everywhere. The spaceships docked to the station were all shapes and sizes.

Drawing Gabe closer to one of the windows, Sunder pointed to something off in the distance. "My warship the *Oberon* is there."

He side-eyed Sunder and grinned. “King of the Fairies, huh?”

Sunder’s cheeks darkened. “The name seemed right when I chose it.”

Turning his attention back to the *Oberon*, Gabe couldn’t help but admire the sleek lines of the warship. From this distance, the shape was reminiscent of a leaping jaguar. Once the realization struck the more the image coalesced, becoming sharper. “She’s stunning,” Gabe said, looking up at Sunder, meaning it. Sunder beamed with evident pride. “I thought it was docked with the station?”

“Once the DarkHunters were taken aboard we had to pull her out for the safety for the station.”

Before they left the window, Gabe took a good look at the moon. The lights of the city of Mare Nectaris lit up the dark of the Sea of Nectar. That was where Pierce had reserved two weeks at a resort hotel. Pierce’s leaving seemed to have happened to a different Gabe. He’d always played things safe and here he was, unsure what tomorrow would bring. He couldn’t look into his future and project where he was headed. For a moment, panic clawed at him. As if he could feel Gabe’s distress, Sunder wrapped around him reminding him why the change was worth the uncertainty.

As excited as Gabe was to see the station and Sunder’s warship, the highs and lows of his emotions took a toll on his endurance. When Sunder suggested they lay down for a while, Gabe jumped at the chance, and then promptly passed out when he hit the covers.

When he woke in bed alone, the sheets still held Sunder’s warmth. Low lights softly illuminated the cabin. The sound of running water came from a room off the main cabin, the bright light casting a harsh slash across the soft shadows.

Being on a ship orbiting Earth seemed surreal, more so when the water cut off leaving absolute silence behind. He always thought people could hear something, ships’ engines or other people or *something* when on a spaceship. He didn’t realize how much noise went on in the background in a city. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d been away from the urban area. The quiet was deafening.

Sunder appeared in the doorway, his silhouette outlined by the light. If Gabe didn’t know him, he would have said that Sunder’s form and size were intimidating. How strange he never found Sunder terrifying.

“You’re awake.” Sunder towed his hair dry and Gabe sat up, the sheet pooling around his waist. He couldn’t see Sunder’s gaze but felt it like an invisible caress.

Turning, Sunder switched off the light. Gabe moved to rest on his knees, watching Sunder prowl toward him with rising anticipation. Sunder crawled onto the bed and Gabe caught his face between his hands, loving how Sunder sucked in a breath before Gabe kissed him long and slow. Sunder seemed hesitant, almost shy.

“What is it?” Gabe had never seen Sunder look so vulnerable.

Sunder glanced down. “Would you... I want you to take me.” When Sunder glanced back up, the heat in his gaze was searing. “I want you to spill within me, mark me with your scent so others will know I have been claimed. That is, if you want to claim me. The mark isn’t lasting. If you stayed with me, you’d need to renew it.” He nervously licked his lips.

Want to? Holy hell. The possessiveness burning within him that he’d been fighting flared to life. “What do I need to do?” Gabe’s voice came out low and guttural.

“I need to be on all fours, and you have to hold onto the base of my tail. That releases a hormone that will blend with your seed. It changes my scent to be intermixed with yours.” Sunder gulped audibly and by the way the red ring of his iris expanded, just the thought turned Sunder on.

That Sunder would smell like him, and others who came in contact with Sunder would know who Sunder belonged to had Gabe aching to bury myself in Sunder. “And if I wanted to make sure that you carried my scent always?”

“Then you’d need to take me every couple of days.” Sunder gave a small whimper that spoke of his need. Gabe wondered how he’d missed this desire Sunder carried.

He couldn’t resist anymore. He took Sunder’s mouth, plundered deep, nipping those dark lips. To have what he’d secretly wanted handed to him so easily—Gabe thought he’d have to convince Sunder to let him top. Sunder was dominant in bed, and yes, Gabe loved every second, but he also wanted more. He’d been fighting a rising possessive need since they’d boarded the ship. No more. He set it free, making Sunder pant and writhe under his knowing touch. He licked and bit, grasping the column of Sunder’s cock and squeezing gently until Sunder begged.

Gabe watched every nuance of Sunder's expression, determined to burn the moment into his memory. Sunder didn't have to tell him no one else had taken him. From what Paulo and Sunder both said, there weren't any who wanted Sunder enough to keep him—except Gabe. He wanted all of Sunder. As he carefully worked to open Sunder, he remember how there had been a time when he didn't understand why anyone would want to fall deeply, madly, crazy in love with someone. Now he knew why because against the odds, Gabe was falling for Sunder. And when they walked out of this cabin, no one would have any doubt how Gabe felt.

Sunder is mine. I will break anyone who tries to take him away.

“Roll over,” Gabe snarled, need and want combining into a heady mix that pushed the boundaries of Gabe's patience. Sunder quickly complied, ass in the air as his tail slowly whipped from side to side.

Gabe wanted to cuss because he was too short. “I need you to move over to the edge of the bed.” He grasped Sunder's hips to situate him to where Gabe needed him to be, Sunder giving little yowls filled with need. “When we return to Earth, you and I are going to a shop to get us some supplies. The next time I want to take you, I don't want to worry about our height difference getting in the way of me burying my dick in your ass.”

Sunder's whole body shook. Somebody liked the sound of that. When Gabe grasped the base of Sunder's tail, Sunder's ass hitched up too high, and Gabe smacked his nicely rounded cheek. The sound of a hiss and Sunder's convulsive grip on the sheets made Gabe smile. He swatted the other side, and Sunder released a low moan. Carnal delight filled Gabe as he continued to spank Sunder's upturned butt. He listened to the delectable sounds Sunder made, making sure he didn't push Sunder too far even as he thought of the other things they could pick up on Earth.

“Sun and stars. Please, Gabe, fuck me,” Sunder pleaded when Gabe ran a soothing hand over his darkened cheeks.

He wanted to prolong the moment, make Sunder beg a little more, but simply spanking Sunder had Gabe on edge. Reaching down, he tugged on his balls to stave off his orgasm. He didn't want to come as he entered Sunder. He wanted—needed—this to be perfect for Sunder. Slicking up his cock, he grabbed the base of Sunder's tail again and tested Sunder's readiness. Sunder pushed back on his fingers, snarling.

Tightening his grip on the tail and pulling up sharply, Sunder groaned loudly. “Yes, like that. Claim... My Gabriel, *please*.”

Sinking into that gripping heat, Gabe tried to go slow but Sunder wasn't having any of it and shoved back. Sunder arched his back and yowled with pleasure. Something deep within Gabe exploded outward, the growl coming from him sounding bestial. He withdrew and slammed back into Sunder, and his mate asked for more. He wanted to claw and bite, leave his mark on Sunder's skin. The magick within Sunder responded to the animal that rose in Gabe and wrapped around him. He held onto Sunder's tail, his grip on the base helping Gabe to keep Sunder exactly where he wanted him. Sunder twisted and thrashed, all the while chanting, *yes* at the top of his lungs. Somehow Sunder couldn't break away from Gabe. Perhaps the new found beast inside gave Gabe more strength than he would have normally. It was only one more odd thing that had happened within the last twenty-four hours. He didn't think about it, or try to parse it out. No, he reveled in the power as he gave Sunder what he needed. All the while, through the growls and snarls Gabe proclaimed Sunder as his.

“Say it!” he demanded. “Say it, goddamn it!”

“Yes, I'm yours, sun and stars, I'm—Gabe!” Sunder spilled, his ass gripping Gabe so tight he was forced over the edge with Sunder. He thrust in as far as he could and spilled his seed into Sunder, not releasing Sunder's tail until every drop was pulled from him.

On wobbly legs, Gabe gently pulled out and stumbled to the lavatory to retrieve a wet cloth to clean Sunder. When he returned, Sunder had rolled over onto his back with his feet on the floor. After taking care of Sunder, Gabe collapsed onto the bed, threading his fingers with Sunder's. They both were still breathing hard, the scent of sex and sweat thick in the air.

“You like a little spanking, huh?” Gabe glanced to Sunder and grinned at the sheepish expression his lover wore.

“I guess I do. No one has dared to hit me before.” Sunder ran a hand down his stomach where the black rosettes gave way to the erogenous dark strips that started below Sunder's ribcage. Sunder winced as he caressed the area.

The grin dropped from Gabe's face and he rolled, rising up on an elbow to peer down at Sunder. “Did I hurt you? I hit you too hard.”

“No! No, it's not that. The last couple of days my stomach has been tight and sore. I thought it was something I ate.”

Guilt assailed Gabe. He placed a hand on Sunder's sweaty forehead, cursing the fact he couldn't tell if Sunder ran a fever. “Why didn't you tell me you

weren't feeling well? We shouldn't have had sex, Sunder. I'm going to call Brock."

Sunder caught Gabe's wrist before he could leave the bed. "I'm not sick. I've already seen the healer and have a clean bill of health. It's just a little discomfort, nothing more."

Gabe almost insisted Sunder see Brock again, just for his own piece of mind. "You're to tell me if your stomachache becomes worse. I don't care if we're in the middle of some ceremony at the festival, let me know."

Sunder's smile was gorgeous. "You have my word. Now, we have to take a shower and find something to eat."

Gabe chuckled as he followed Sunder into the lavatory, thinking Sunder had showered not an hour before—not that he minded the view of a wet Sunder. Mate. Holy Shit. Panic and satisfaction warred within him. Did he just take Sunder as a mate? The thought alone had Gabe pushing Sunder into the corner of the shower with an aggressive snarl trapped in his throat. Sunder's eyes became heavy lidded as he cupped the cheeks of Gabe's ass. Sunder turned and pressed him to the wall. A beast had been awakened within Gabe, whether it was caused by cleansing Sunder's soul, or an element of wild nature had seeped into him, or possibly it had always been a part of him—slumbering, waiting for the right time—waiting for Sunder. As he moaned into Sunder's mouth, Gabe reveled in the stinging bite of Sunder's kiss. Slowly he accepted he was changing, becoming what he and Sunder needed in order for them to face the precarious future.

The fucking Elffin-ones had better stay out of his way. He might not know the extent of what he could do, but he wasn't afraid to find out.

Back on Earth

Akira Kaukeex waited impatiently to be relieved of security duty. The Chandarian embassy had closed up an hour ago, but with the attack on Commander—Prince Sunder, King Valiant ordered the security be tightened around all the crown's holdings. After the news of the trap, Akira had pulled some strings to be on guard at the embassy, betting that Prince Sunder and the Guardian would use the embassy's helliopod. The most logical safe place for them was on the *Oberon*.

Gabriel Barba. He wasn't what Akira had expected. The SilverHands would be happy to finally have found what they had searched for the last five hundred

years—an actual guardian. He hoped they kept their vigilance because danger still lurked. What were the odds of there being a second guardian? If something were to happen to the fragile human, all their plans would never come to fruition.

Speaking of danger.

A sleek hovercraft pulled to the curb and sat idling. Akira signaled to his teammate he would see what the person wanted before he strode down the drive. The tinted window slid down, the interior remained dark enough that from a distance no one could see into the interior—except for him. Akira didn't need superior eyesight to know who waited. He'd scented her even with the vehicle locked up tight.

Talia of Nella looked impeccable in her loose brocade robes, the Keeper's seal on her left shoulder. Her coral skin gleamed as if oiled, and her corn-silk hair was wound in intricate braids.

“What can I do for you this evening, Keeper?” Akira didn't dare stand too close. None needed to know he was acquainted with her—yet.

For a moment, Talia stared at him. He wore the Chandarian crown colors of white and green. The uniform was borrowed since he normally didn't serve the embassy. Many humans took a second look at his fur-covered body, feline face, and curled horns, and immediately thought he was a heathen—a sentiment they shared with many Elffin-ones. What did he care what anyone thought of him? He knew she had no love of Felineans, but she needed someone other than a Pantherine or Elffin-one to do her dirty work.

“Master Kaukeex, tomorrow at two in the afternoon attend the River Walk Gala.” Talia's voice was silky smooth, but her copper eyes glint with a hardness Akira had seen on many warriors who had nothing to lose. “My attendant will find you and bring you to me. Don't be late.”

Akira said nothing, merely nodded his head and walked up the drive to the waiting security guard. “They needed directions.” Akira said, already lost in thought. What would Talia do now that Sunder had slithered out of her grasp? Nothing good, he'd wager. He had two weeks to prepare, and she wouldn't make things easy for him. He didn't care, easy or hard, he'd get the job done and Gabriel Barba was the key.

Ronan stepped into Gabe's loft, inspecting the new door. Gabe had told him Sunder busted the other one. He bet that was a sight to see. A rustle behind him

had Ronan turning around, his smile growing. All of Gabe's houseplants shimmied and shivered, their excitement reaching out to him.

“How are my beauties?” Ronan moved among them, stroking leaves and testing soil. “Have you been good for Gabe? You haven't given yourselves away have you?”

His Feyborn is here. He's awakened our guardian.

Ronan sighed wistfully. “I thought so.”

To Be Continued

Author Bio

Lexi has always been an avid reader, and at a young age started reading (secretly) her mother's romances (the ones she was told not to touch). She was the only teenager she knew of who would be grounded from reading. Later, with a pencil and a note book, she wrote her own stories and shared them with friends because she loved to see their reactions. A Texas transplant, Lexi now kicks her boots up in the Midwest with her Yankee husband and her eighty-pound puppies named after vacuum cleaners.

Contact & Media Info

[Email](#) | [Website](#) | [Blog](#) | [Facebook](#) | [Twitter](#) | [Goodreads](#)