

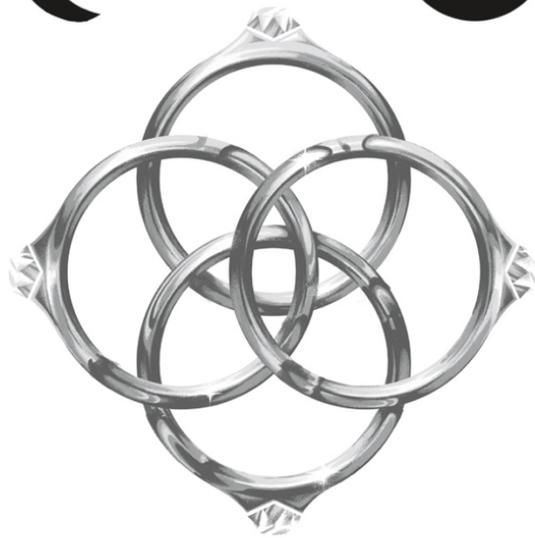
A PRISON HEALER NOVEL

THE BLOOD TRAITOR



LYNETTE NONI

THE BLOOD TRAITOR



By Lynette Noni

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Author's Note

Dear Reader,

This series has included mature themes from the very beginning, but given the ending of *The Gilded Cage*, the journey Kiva must now undertake is more challenging than anything she has yet faced. Please be aware that, while I've attempted to represent the themes in this book with as much care as possible, the following pages may contain triggers for some readers.

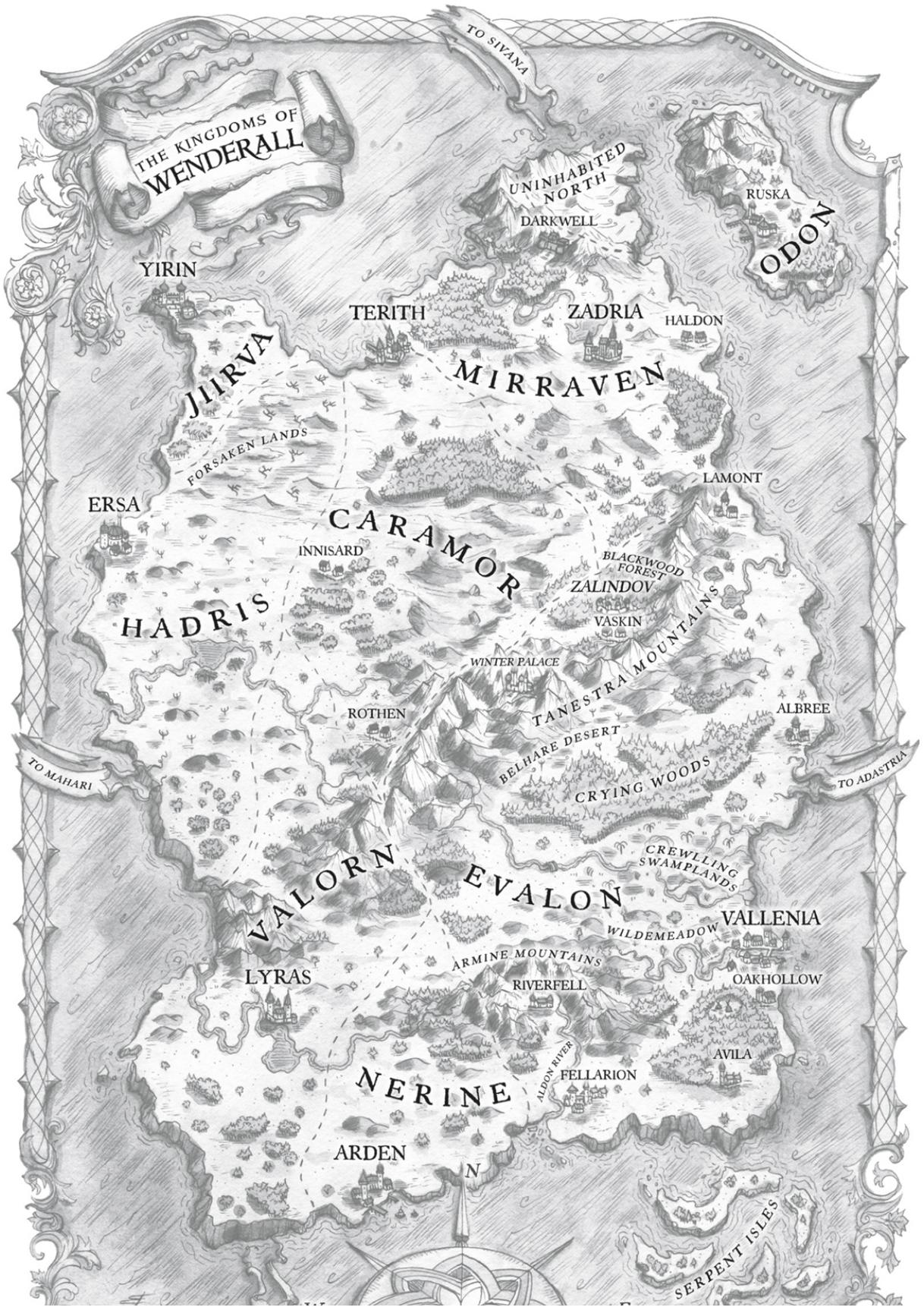
A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J. Gray', written in a cursive style. The signature is positioned below the author's note.

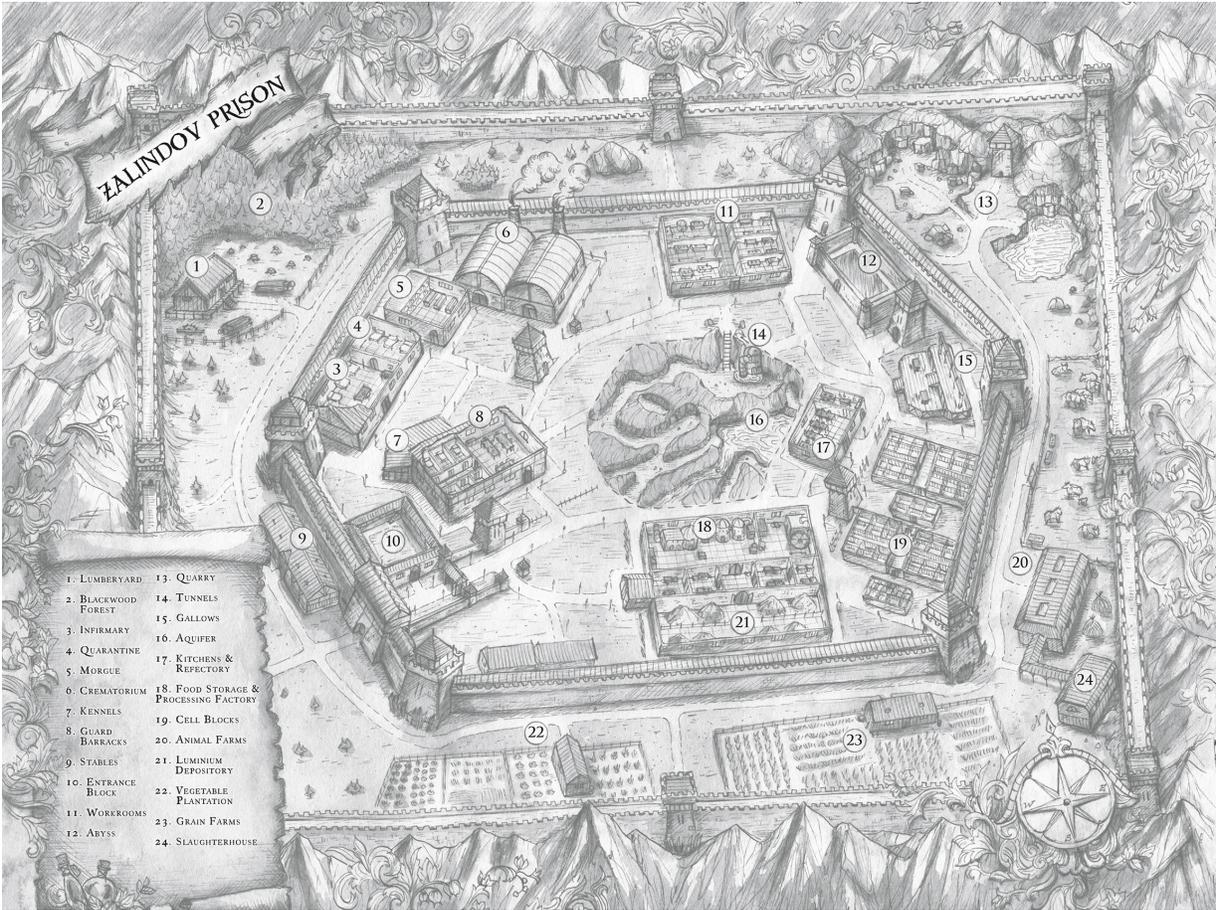
Dedication

For anyone who has ever wanted to give up
but chose to keep going
to keep trying
to keep hoping
to keep surviving:

This book is for us.

Maps





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Prologue

The woman was crying.

Tears ran like rivers down her face, dripping off her chin and soaking her tunic. She had to stay silent. No one could learn of her sorrow.

Because no one would understand.

Wrapping her arms around her knees, she stared into the darkness of her tent, praying to the long-forgotten gods. Begging for their forgiveness. Even knowing that she didn't deserve it, could never deserve it.

Not after what she'd done.

Not after what she'd *created*.

A sob buckled her body.

"I made a mistake," she mouthed soundlessly. "I want to take it back. I need to take it back."

That was how the man found her, drenched in tears, rocking with anguish.

He stilled at the entrance to her tent, then rushed over to kneel before her, taking her trembling hands in his own. "What happened, my dear? Are you ill? Hurt?"

Her watery eyes locked with his as she croaked out, "I was wrong."

He frowned. "Wrong about what?"

More tears trickled down her cheeks. "Everything."

The man didn't hide his confusion. Or his fear.

"You're unwell," he said. "I'll ask Zuleeka to come and heal —"

"*No!*" the woman cried, jerking her hands back, her tension flooding the tent.

The man sank onto his haunches, watching her closely. Softly, he repeated, "What happened?"

For a long moment, the woman said nothing. When she finally answered, her words came in a painful-sounding rasp. "Zuleeka killed them. One wave of her hand, and she snapped their necks."

The man paled. "Who?"

“The villagers — anyone she walked past. Anyone who looked at her wrong. Anyone who wouldn’t join us.” The woman swallowed. “Everyone thinks it was me. But I —” She shook her head, then whispered, “I knew her power was growing, but this . . . I never meant for this to happen. I never wanted this. She promised she wouldn’t use it again, not after last time, when she — when I —”

“You stopped her last time,” the man said, his tone soothing but firm. “You kept her from killing the prince and his guard. They’re alive and well.”

“That guard lost her *hand*.”

“She would have lost more if you hadn’t freed her from the magic binding her. And the crown prince would be dead.” Quietly, he noted, “Not so long ago, that was what you wanted. One less Vallentis to deal with.”

“I didn’t realize —” The woman shook her head again. “He’s just a boy — younger even than Torell. When I saw him, I . . .” She closed her eyes and repeated, “He’s just a boy.”

“And yet, his family stands in the way of your goals. *He* stands in the way.”

“There are other ways to take the throne. Ways that won’t hurt anyone else I love in the process. I can’t —” She choked on a sob. “I can’t lose anyone else. Not like this. She’ll kill herself if she keeps using it for harm. The magic will destroy her from the inside out.”

Choosing his words carefully, the man said, “You can’t blame yourself for Zuleeka’s actions. Her choices are her own.”

“You’re wrong, Galdric. Everything she does is because of me,” the woman said, her thoughts turning inward as she recalled what had transpired mere hours ago. Bones snapping, necks breaking, bodies dropping — men, women, and children, all dead in an instant. “Everything she knows, I taught her. This is my fault.”

A weighty pause fell, before the man — Galdric — asked, “What are your orders, my queen?”

Only then did Tilda Corentine’s emerald eyes lock with his, silent understanding passing between her and her closest friend, her most trusted adviser, as she whispered her answer. As she begged for his help.

And then, with their heads bent together, they came up with a plan.

Present Day

Chapter One

Kiva Corentine was on fire.

Flames scorched her body, and blood boiled inside her veins, causing her to moan and thrash and shove at the hands holding her down.

“She’s burnin’ up,” came a gruff male voice. “Get her some water.”

The smell of vomit overwhelmed Kiva’s senses, close enough to make her realize it was hers, causing her to gag anew.

She was sick.

No — not sick.

Somewhere in the back of her mind, she knew she wasn’t suffering from an illness.

A haze of memories came to her: blue-gold eyes and kiss-swollen lips, deadly shadows and broken glass, caramel dust and iron bars. But then her thoughts scattered, the images seared from her mind, the unrelenting heat all that she knew, all that she *was*.

“Gods, she’s a mess,” said a female voice, full of disgust.

A wooden tumbler was forced between Kiva’s lips. Water trickled down her parched throat and sloshed over her chin.

“She is,” agreed the man. “And she’s *your* mess. I don’t got time for the dead.”

The hands holding Kiva disappeared. She tried to sit up, but flames twisted around her torso. Her eyelids fluttered open for the briefest of seconds, but she could see no fire. It was her — the inferno was *inside* her.

“She’s not dead,” argued the woman.

“Give it time,” said the man, his voice further away, as if he was leaving. “She’s had too much of the good stuff to survive without it. Best leavin’ her to her fate. Or give her a mercy killin’, if you can stomach it.” A snort. “I doubt you’ll have any issues doin’ that.”

“You’re the prison healer,” the woman said angrily. “It’s your job to help her.”

Another snort from the man. “No one can help her now.”

Kiva barely heard his departing footsteps over the pounding in her ears. Her heart was beating unnaturally fast. *Dangerously* fast.

Part of her knew she should be concerned about her state, but that part couldn't do anything, couldn't even *think* beyond the all-consuming agony blazing throughout her body.

A stream of curse words penetrated her pain, followed by a calloused hand snaking behind her neck and hauling her roughly upward, the tumbler pressing to her lips once more.

"Drink," ordered the woman, forcing water into Kiva's mouth. "If you want to live, you need to drink."

Kiva tried to follow the command, choking on the liquid, all the while wondering why. If this was living, surely she was better off dead. A mercy killing, the man had said. Kiva wanted that — a quick end to the flaming hell, the gaping hole in her heart gone forever.

A hole she knew had nothing to do with her current state.

Blue-gold eyes flashed across her mind once more, the fleeting image spiking a different kind of torture, before it was gone again.

"Damn it, Kiva, *drink*," came the angry female voice.

But Kiva couldn't drink any more. Shivers began to rack her frame, fire warring with ice. Sweat coated her skin even as she trembled from the sudden cold, but when a blanket was thrown over her, she whimpered and begged for it to be taken away.

Too hot.

Too cold.

Too much.

"Please," she rasped out, unsure what — or who — she was asking. "*Please.*"

"You don't die like this," the woman said firmly. "Not like this."

But Kiva didn't believe her. Because she wanted it to end — all of it.

And when she could no longer stomach the torment, she welcomed the blissful embrace of oblivion.

When Kiva opened her eyes, the first thing she saw was the snake.

The room around her was spinning, the poorly lit space full of empty pallets and threadbare blankets, a familiar acrid smell tugging at her memory.

She was in the infirmary, whispered some distant part of her mind. Zalindov's infirmary.

A warning bleated through her, but she couldn't summon any real concern, not with the taste of caramel coating her tongue, not when the snake opened its mouth to speak.

"Snap out of it!" the serpent hissed, shaking her roughly. It sounded a lot like the woman who had shoved water down her throat.

Kiva giggled and reached out to touch it.

Her hand was slapped away. "You need to follow me down to the tunnels, or they're going to kill you. Are you listening? If you don't work, you'll be dead."

At the snake's urgency, Kiva sat up, her head lolling to the side. Through blurry eyes, she saw that she wore a soiled gray tunic, the smell of her own sick making her nose wrinkle.

"Gods, you have no idea what's happening, do you?" muttered the snake. It coiled around Kiva's back and pulled her to her feet. "They dosed you with too much angeldust on your journey here, and now you can't function without it." The serpent dragged her through the infirmary. "I managed to get my hands on some, enough to help you through the next few days. We have to wean you off it slowly, or your organs will shut down. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"Talking snakes," Kiva said dreamily, stumbling as she was towed out into the sunshine. She raised her hand and grinned at the rainbow colors all around her. "Pretty day."

The snake spat a nasty word, then said through clenched teeth, "Kiva, it's me, Cresta. Pull yourself together."

Cresta.

Not a snake, then.

But close.

Cresta Voss. The name elicited feelings of resentment and fear in Kiva, accompanied by images of a muscular young woman with matted red hair, hazel eyes, and a serpent tattoo inked down the side of her face. She was a quarrier at Zalindov, someone Kiva had known for over five years. Someone who had openly despised Kiva for those five years. Someone who was the leader of the prison rebels, loyal to Kiva's sister, Zuleeka Corentine, the now-queen of Evalon sitting atop a stolen throne after having taken everything from Kiva. Everything — and everyone.

“Bad snake,” Kiva mumbled, trying to free herself from Cresta’s arm. “Go ’way.”

“Stop that,” Cresta said, tightening her grip and guiding Kiva off the gravel onto the dead grass, heading toward the domed stone building at the center of the grounds. “You won’t last the day without me.”

“Will too.” Kiva stumbled again as she navigated the dried clumps underfoot, the colors continuing to swirl in her vision, bouncing off the limestone perimeter walls surrounding them in the distance. “Or won’t. Doesn’t matter.”

“Do you even hear yourself?” Cresta asked as they skirted a large crater dug out of the earth, something that snagged Kiva’s hazy attention. It took effort to summon the memory, how the watchtower had exploded and crumbled down on itself. There was nothing left of it now but the ghost of where it once stood.

“Mot.” Kiva breathed the name of the man who had destroyed it, a moment of clarity gripping her thoughts. “Where’s Mot?”

“Dead,” Cresta said flatly. “By the Warden’s own hand, right after the riot — the one you used to escape.”

Sorrow touched Kiva’s chest as she thought of the morgue worker who had cared for her and helped her survive the Trials, but she couldn’t hold on to it for long before it vanished like the wind. She shook her head, trying to clear the spinning colors, trying to remember what the snake had said. “No one escapes Zalindov.” A manic laugh slipped out. “Not even when they do.”

Cresta was kept from responding by the approach of more gray-clad prisoners moving stiffly across the dead field, their faces lined with fatigue as they too headed toward the domed building.

“You need to get it together before we reach the tunnels, or the guards will send you to the Abyss,” Cresta warned under her breath. “They might not even bother with that.”

“Don’t care,” Kiva mumbled, dragging her feet.

The quarrier’s grip turned painful as she hissed, “You once told me I was strong and powerful and I could survive anything. That I owed it to myself to find a reason to live. Now I’m telling you the same, Kiva Meridan.”

Slumping in Cresta’s hold, Kiva said, “That’s not my name.”

“It is.”

“It’s *not*.”

“You are who you choose to be,” Cresta declared in a hard voice. “You are *what* you choose to be. And right now, you need to choose to live. You can figure out the rest later.”

Even in her sorry state, the words left a mark on Kiva. The idea that anything was her choice was laughable. For ten years in Zalindov, she’d lived by the choices of others, fighting to survive, day after day. When she’d finally tasted freedom, the decisions she’d made had done nothing but lead her right back to where she’d started, after losing more than she’d ever imagined possible.

The hole in her heart gave a pang; not even the angeldust could mask it completely.

“Make no mistake, I don’t care about you,” Cresta went on mercilessly. “But you saved my life once, and because of that, I owe you a blood debt. So you’re going to survive today, and you’re going to survive tomorrow, and you’re going to keep on surviving until those gods-damned drugs are out of your system. After that, you can decide what the hell you want to do with yourself. Live or die, you’ll be out of my hands. But until then, you’ll listen to me. And I’m telling you to buck up and prepare yourself for the worst day of your life.”

Kiva was so distracted by Cresta’s speech that she hadn’t realized they’d arrived at the domed building and were lining up with the other inmates, all readying to descend the ladder shaft down into the tunnels.

Struggling to maintain a steady stream of thought, Kiva murmured, “Why are you here?”

Cresta made a frustrated sound. “I just told you.”

Kiva shook her fuzzy head. She must not have been given the same amount of angeldust that had kept her mostly unconscious for the last few weeks, the lower dosage affording her enough lucidity to ask, her words heavily slurred, “No, why aren’t you in the quarry?”

There was a moment of hesitation before Cresta answered, “Rooke changed my work allocation after the riot. He didn’t like that I’d survived for so long, so now I’m a tunneler, facing an exhausting and inevitable death.”

Six months Cresta would have. A year at the most. That was the fate of a Zalindov tunneler.

A fate Kiva shared, now that she was no longer the prison healer.

She should have been terrified, but she couldn't bring herself to care.

For some reason, she didn't think the angeldust was to blame.

"Next," came a bored-sounding male voice, causing Kiva to look up from the dead grass to see that they'd reached the mouth of the building, where a pair of guards were ushering prisoners toward a set of ladders poking out from a rectangular hole in the earth.

"I know you're messed up right now," Cresta said urgently as the inmates in front of them disappeared into the shaft. "But whatever you do, don't let go of the ladders." At the blank look on Kiva's face, she hurried to add, "Think of something important to you. The boy — the one with the stutter. You love him. Hold on for him."

Tipp.

A foggy memory of the freckle-faced, gap-toothed boy blazed across Kiva's mind, causing the pain in her heart to throb anew.

"Next," repeated the guard, waving toward Kiva and Cresta.

"One rung at a time," Cresta said. "Do it for the boy. I'll be right beside you."

Kiva nodded dully, her head feeling too heavy for her shoulders, but at the same time, impossibly light. She tripped over her own feet as Cresta prodded her forward, the guards watching with amusement. They knew who she was, how far she'd fallen. They were *enjoying* this.

Fire rose within her, but it didn't last, the angeldust sweeping it away by the time her hands reached for the metal rungs.

There were two ladders bolted side by side, and as Kiva began to descend the first, Cresta kept her promise and remained with her, all the way down to the first platform, then on to the next set of ladders. Down they stepped, rung after rung, platform after platform, with Cresta murmuring quiet encouragement. Kiva watched her hands as if they belonged to someone else, feeling nothing, only vaguely aware that she was moving downward, that her muscles were burning, that the air was becoming stale and chilled.

Tipp. She would hold on for *Tipp*.

Even if, after what he'd discovered, after what she'd *done*, he surely hated her now.

An agonized sound left Kiva, and Cresta looked over in alarm. But then they stepped off the final ladder, causing relief to flood the other girl's expression.

Safe. They were safe.

But they also weren't.

Because before Kiva could catch her breath, she was being pushed down a lumium-lit tunnel after a line of prisoners, all shuffling along like ants. A distant feeling of panic hit her, the claustrophobia familiar but muted by the angeldust.

The last time she'd been here, she hadn't been with other prisoners. But she hadn't been alone, either.

Blue-gold eyes. A hovering, magical flame. A perfect snowblossom.

This time the drugs didn't force the image away — Kiva did.

She couldn't think of what had happened then.

She couldn't think of *him*.

A sloshing sound caught her attention and drew her gaze downward, the earth turning to mud, then shallow water, becoming knee-deep the further they walked. When the prisoners were ordered to halt by one of the supervising guards, Kiva found that a pickaxe had been shoved into her hands somewhere along the journey. She tested the weight, waving it before her like a sword.

Caldon had shown her how to do that, training her with a wooden practice blade.

Kiva closed her eyes and forced that memory away, too, allowing the angeldust to subdue her reignited pain. She dropped her arms, trying to remember where she was, why she was there, what she had to do.

Tunneling.

She was a tunneler now, tasked with digging for water and creating passageways for it to flow into the aquifer.

It was the worst of Zalindov's work allocations. The hardest, both physically and mentally. The quickest death.

"Think of the boy," Cresta commanded from Kiva's side. "Don't stop thinking about him."

The sheer authority in her voice had Kiva obeying, and when the guards ordered them to begin digging into the hard limestone walls, Tipp's face remained front and center in her thoughts.

Kiva swung the iron axe into the unyielding rock, over and over again. The movement jarred her arms, the sound set her teeth on edge. She welcomed the burn that grew with every thrust, her vision turning hazy as dust clouded around her, her hearing overwhelmed by the clash of hundreds

of axes meeting solid stone. She was vaguely aware of Cresta working at her side, reminding her about Tipp, telling her to keep digging. She couldn't stop — if she stopped, the guards would come. They were patrolling freely, whips and batons at the ready. Don't give them an excuse, Cresta told her. Don't stop. Don't stop. *Don't stop.*

There was blood on Kiva's axe, dripping down the wooden handle, from split blisters and cracked calluses. She felt the pain, but it was muted, just like everything else around her.

Until it wasn't.

Because as seconds turned to minutes, and minutes turned to hours, the angeldust's effects began to fade.

It started with a low, persistent headache at the base of her skull. Next came the taste of copper on her tongue, followed by a tremor in her fingers, making it difficult to keep hold of her blood-slicked axe. When the guards finally announced the end of the workday, Kiva was chilled despite the arduous labor, and finally cognizant enough to realize that what she'd survived was nothing compared to what was ahead.

"I feel awful," Kiva moaned as they waited their turn to climb back up to the surface.

"I'll bet," Cresta murmured. "Is there anything in that infirmary of yours that might help?"

"It's not my infirmary anymore," Kiva replied, swaying from exhaustion. Her freedom from Zalindov had granted her access to regular food and exercise, and that, combined with the numbing effects of the angeldust, had given her enough strength to endure the day's hard labor. But she was feeling it now, every part of her hurting. Her thoughts, however, were clearer than they'd been for weeks, so she battled to keep her focus, rattling off a list of plants all known to ease withdrawal symptoms.

"The only way out is through," Cresta said sagely, brushing her twisted red locks away from her damp face. "I'll see what I can scrape together."

Kiva mumbled a reply, unsure what words left her mouth as her chills grew and her body began to tremble. She couldn't remember climbing out of the tunnels, nor could she remember Cresta supporting her all the way to the dormitory building and dumping her unceremoniously on a pallet, dust and mud coating her skin, her tunic still stained with her own vomit. She had no idea how much time passed as she lay there, shaking and sweating, her muscles aching, her bloodied palms now throbbing mercilessly.

“Give me your hands.”

Cresta was back. Kiva didn't know how long she'd been gone, or how long since she'd returned. Her snake tattoo was almost indistinguishable beneath a layer of grime.

Wet slid across Kiva's palms, eliciting a sharp sting. She tried to tug them back, but Cresta held firm.

“You need to keep these clean, or they'll get infected.”

Kiva stilled, the words echoing across her memory. She'd heard them before. She'd *said* them before.

You need to keep these clean, or they'll get infected.

Strong hands attached to a strong body, tousled gold-brown hair, perfect lips quirked into a knowing grin, blue-gold eyes dancing.

The hole in Kiva's heart tore open, the pain enough to halt her tremors, if only for a moment. But she wasn't in the infirmary right now. And *he* wasn't with her.

Not this time.

Never again.

“Swallow these,” Cresta ordered, reclaiming Kiva's attention. She held out a fistful of thin green bulbs, along with a mix of yellow and orange flowers, and a lump of black, charred wood.

Kiva didn't ask how Cresta had snuck into the infirmary's garden, nor did she dwell on how the charcoal must have been acquired from the crematorium. But as she shoved the offering into her mouth, grimacing at the texture of the chalky wood, she did say, “I didn't mention charcoal.”

“You're not the first person I've seen through withdrawal,” Cresta murmured, still cleaning Kiva's hands. “It'll soak up the toxins in your blood.”

Kiva wanted to ask who else Cresta had helped, but her torso spasmed with a stomach cramp, and she gasped, curling in on herself.

“You need to eat.” Cresta said. There was no warmth in her tone, no concern for Kiva's well-being, just a statement of fact.

“I'll just” — another spasm hit Kiva, and she gritted her teeth — “bring it back up.”

Cresta began arguing, but Kiva didn't hear her, the cramping in her stomach turning violent enough to demand all of her attention. It would take time for the hashwillow bulbs, tilliflowers, buttercress petals, and charcoal

to take effect, but even then, their relief would be limited. If Cresta truly intended to wean Kiva off the angeldust, then she was in for a rough night.

The next thing Kiva knew, there was a piece of broth-soaked bread being pressed between her lips. Sweat dotted her forehead, her skin turning hot then cold then hot all over again.

“No,” she moaned, shifting her face away.

“You’ll need energy to get through tomorrow,” Cresta said, shoving more bread into her mouth. “You can’t survive on angeldust alone.”

“Angeldust,” Kiva gasped, half choking on the food, her voice hoarse and desperate. “Please . . . I need . . . just a little.”

Through blurry eyes, Kiva saw Cresta’s face harden. “What you need is to eat, then to sleep. I’ll give you more in the morning.”

Denial had Kiva shaking her head, her teeth rattling from the tremors controlling her body. “I need it *now*.”

“Eat.” Cresta pushed more bread between Kiva’s lips.

Kiva gagged, but Cresta clamped a hand over her mouth, making her swallow.

“The charcoal should help you keep everything down,” Cresta said. “You’re facing a mental battle as much as a physical one. You just have to be willing to fight.”

Kiva groaned as she was force-fed more bread. Cresta was unmoved, deaf to Kiva’s pleas, unwilling to provide even the smallest dose of angeldust to see her through the night.

For hours, they waged war against each other, with Kiva wailing as her body shrieked for the slightest hint of relief.

“Would you shut ’er up? We’re tryin’ to sleep here!” grumbled the other prisoners close enough to hear her suffering.

“Go cry to your mother,” Cresta snapped back at them, ignoring their complaints — and Kiva’s, too.

But then, sometime in the middle of the night, Kiva descended so far into her madness that she screamed, loud enough to wake half the dormitory, “GIVE IT TO ME! I NEED IT! *YOU HAVE TO GIVE IT TO —*”

Cresta swore and slapped a hand over Kiva’s mouth, hauling her damp, shivering body off the pallet and past glaring, sleep-rumpled inmates painted in moonlight. She didn’t stop until they stumbled into the darkened bathing chamber, where she dragged Kiva beneath a showerhead and turned on the icy spray.

Gasping and spluttering, Kiva tried to escape the water, but Cresta held her in place, becoming equally drenched in the process.

“*LET ME GO!*” Kiva bellowed.

“I won’t,” Cresta gritted out, her grip unyielding. “Not until you calm the hell down.”

Kiva tried to fight her way free, but it was no use, her body too weak to manage the barest of attempts. All too soon she was panting and leaning against Cresta, the ex-quarrier bearing most of her weight.

“Are you done?” Cresta demanded.

Kiva could only nod, her strength gone, her spirit broken.

The water turned off, and then Kiva was sliding to the ground beside Cresta. The two of them sat against the wall of the shower block, dripping and shivering, their labored breaths echoing into the darkness.

“You’re a pain in the ass, you know that?” Cresta grunted.

The words summoned an image of Caldon, since he’d said the same thing to Kiva — more than once. Despite her heartache, Kiva’s lips quirked, ever so slightly. Through chattering teeth, she croaked out, “You’re n-not the first person to t-tell me that.”

“I doubt I’ll be the last.”

“I’m s-sorry,” Kiva whispered. The freezing water had sobered her enough that she was appalled by her behavior, even if it had been the drugs making her act that way. “And th-thank you. For helping m-me.”

“We’re not out of this yet,” Cresta warned. “There’s a long road ahead.”

Kiva knew that. And when she was through it — *if* she made it through — she would find a way to thank the ex-quarrier, even if Cresta was only repaying a debt.

“You said you’ve h-helped someone else th-through withdrawal,” Kiva said, relishing the cold that was keeping her thoughts clear. “Who w-was it?”

Cresta was quiet for long enough that Kiva thought she wasn’t going to answer. But in the darkness of the shower block, she eventually said, her voice barely audible, “When I was a child, long before Zalindov, my sister found a stash of angeldust and didn’t realize what it was. She overdosed, nearly died. I didn’t leave her side until she recovered.”

“How o-old were y-you?”

“Ten,” Cresta answered. “She was eight.”

So young. “Your p-parents?”

“Things weren’t good at home,” Cresta said without emotion. “My sister had the gentlest soul of anyone I’ve ever met, but my father saw that as a weakness. He had no place for a meek child in his household, so he wiped his hands of her, caring little whether she lived or died. And my mother . . . she was too busy trying to survive my father. I was all my sister had.”

There was pain in Cresta’s voice, though Kiva could tell she was trying to hide it. Through still-chattering teeth, she asked, “What h-happened?”

“I got her through the overdose, and then through the withdrawal. She stayed far away from angeldust after that.”

“No,” Kiva said, rubbing her arms to generate heat. “What happened t-to your family?”

This time, Cresta’s silence lasted longer. “I have no family. Not anymore.”

Kiva closed her eyes against the depth of feeling in those words. Cresta had arrived at Zalindov over five years ago as a teenager — perhaps sixteen years of age. Whatever had led her there . . . however she’d lost her parents, her sister . . . there were too many missing pieces for Kiva to have any insight into the ex-quarrier’s past.

“How —”

“Story time is over,” Cresta said, her voice hard enough to remind Kiva that they weren’t friends. Until recently — even *presently* — they were closer to enemies than anything else. “Try to sleep.”

Kiva blinked into the darkness of the shower block. “H-Here?”

“You can’t go back into the dormitory. Another episode like that, and the guards will come investigate,” Cresta said, shifting into a more comfortable position.

“But it’s f-freezing.” Even as Kiva said it, warmth began to flood her again, her withdrawal symptoms returning now that the shock of the icy water had faded. And while the shower had been frigid, the late spring air was temperate enough. Once she was dry, it wouldn’t be too awful. She’d slept in worse places — but never while being weaned off an addictive substance.

“Sleep,” Cresta ordered, ignoring Kiva’s complaint. “While you still can.”

Kiva wanted to argue, wanted to ask the million questions she had while her mind was clear, wanted to bask in her current clarity before she

succumbed to more angeldust come morning. But Cresta was right — she needed to sleep while her body would allow it, gathering her strength to get through all that was ahead, both mentally and physically.

And so, clenching her jaw against the hot-and-cold sensations streaking beneath her skin, she closed her eyes and allowed exhaustion to pull her under.

The next three days were some of the worst of Kiva's life, the following four nearly as awful, and another week after that almost as unpleasant.

Through it all, Cresta honored her debt and remained by Kiva's side, giving her just enough angeldust every morning to survive the workday — less each day — and sleeping beside her in the shower block every night. Often, Kiva would thrash and scream, fighting the ex-quarrier for all she was worth. Equally often, Cresta had to hold back Kiva's hair as she purged her stomach. Even the charcoal lost its effectiveness as the angeldust ran low, with there being no relief from the nausea, the stomach cramps, the sweating, and the chills. Every inch of Kiva's body ached, not just from her repeated toiling down in the tunnels — something she was barely aware of doing, her hours underground a haze of mud and dust and pain — but also from battling against her very self, night after night, without end.

It was too much, too hard, *too much*.

Every day, she wished for death, her agony too great to bear — and not just the agony of her withdrawal. As the drugs began to leave her system, the memories began to invade, the things she'd witnessed, the things she'd *done*. And the people she'd done them to.

It was a different kind of pain — the worst kind of pain. The kind she would never heal from. The kind she didn't *deserve* to heal from.

And so she shoved the memories away and embraced the torture of her withdrawal, until, two weeks after her return to Zalindov, her tremors began to ease, her nausea began to settle, her desperation began to fade.

It was over.

But the worst was still to come.

Chapter Two

Kiva looked down at her palms, noting the bloody blisters and torn calluses, but she felt nothing. Just as she'd felt nothing for weeks.

Nothing but cold. Nothing but numb.

She couldn't summon any concern.

She deserved this.

Penance, she told herself, even if she knew it would never be enough.

"Eat."

A lump of stale bread was shoved under Kiva's nose, the hands holding it covered in dust but without any blood. Hands that had seen hard labor for years and were used to wielding a pickaxe hour after hour, day after day.

Warden Rooke had been wrong about Cresta dying swiftly in the tunnels. The ex-quarrier was like a cockroach; Kiva was beginning to doubt anything would kill her.

"Five minutes!" called the nearest black-uniformed guard, his hands on his whip as he swaggered along the luminiun-lit underground passageway. There was no need for the announcement — the lunch break was the same length every day.

"Eat," Cresta repeated, pressing the bread into Kiva's hands. They sat in line with the other inmates, their backs slumped against the limestone wall, their tools resting at their sides while they shared a brief moment of respite.

When Cresta elbowed her in the ribs, Kiva mechanically brought the offering to her lips, chewing through the dryness.

"Now drink," the redhead commanded, and Kiva did so, scooping a handful of murky water from a puddle near her feet. It tasted like dirt, but it washed the bread down and kept her hydrated.

Survive. That was the most she could manage these days, even if she was only delaying the inevitable.

Kiva had always known her end would come quickly in any allocation outside of the infirmary. She wasn't like Cresta — she couldn't keep up with the grueling labor indefinitely. Having arrived back at the prison just over five weeks ago, Kiva was surprised she'd lasted as long as she had,

and she knew it was only because of the ex-quarrier. Whether out of pity or something else entirely, once Cresta had seen Kiva through her withdrawal, she hadn't abandoned her, as Kiva had assumed she would. She wasn't warm, she wasn't friendly, and she barely spoke aside from forcing Kiva to see to the most basic of human needs, but somehow in the last five weeks, they'd become partners. If one fell down, the other was there to pull them up — with Cresta doing most of the lifting.

Kiva still didn't understand why. There was so much left unspoken between them, not the least of which was Cresta's role as the leader of the prison rebels, and whether she knew who Kiva really was. Prior to Kiva's escape, she hadn't, but so much had changed since then — including how there were no longer any prison rebels left for Cresta to lead.

Warden Rooke had seen to that.

Despite so many inmates having perished in the riot — Grendel, Olisha, and Nergal, among others whom Kiva had known — the Warden had still ordered a mass execution afterward. None of Cresta's circle had been spared the hangman's noose, with her alone having been reallocated to the tunnels in Rooke's sadistic attempt to prolong her suffering.

It was the only reason Kiva could think of for why the redhead remained by her side — because in some twisted way, Kiva was familiar, she was *safe*. And maybe Cresta needed that, having lost almost as much as Kiva.

No, Kiva thought, staring at her bloody hands again, *not as much*.

It hurt to think his name, to recall his face, but she made herself do so while reaching unconsciously for the amulet resting beneath her tunic, the guards having been ordered not to take it from her upon her arrival.

I want you to have it as a reminder of tonight — of everything you helped make happen, Zuleeka had said through iron bars deep beneath Vallenia's River Palace.

Even without the royal crest hanging around Kiva's neck as a constant, choking reminder, she would never forget. It was impossible. She saw him every moment of every day, his blue-gold eyes filled with pain and horror as he realized the truth: that she'd taken everything from him — his throne, his magic, his heart.

Jaren Vallentis.

The once-heir to the kingdom of Evalon, now forced out of his own palace and on the run — all because of Kiva.

And it wasn't just Jaren. There were others she cared about who now suffered because of her choices: Naari, Caldon, Tipp, even her brother, Torell. She had no idea what had befallen any of them in the weeks since that night when everything had been torn apart.

When she closed her eyes, she saw Naari lying in a pool of blood after being struck by Zuleeka's death magic; she saw Caldon looking down at the barely alive Jaren before screaming at Kiva to flee, his loyalty to his family at odds with his love for her; she saw Tipp's devastation when he realized she'd lied to him for years, followed by his small body crumpling after a blow from Zuleeka, who had claimed he'd be a liability until Kiva had a chance to explain — a chance she'd never been given. He'd been placed in the care of Rhessinda, who had promised to watch over him, just as she'd promised to care for Torell after he'd been stabbed during the skirmish with their Mirraven abductors. But it wasn't the abductors who had nearly killed him — it was Zuleeka.

It was *always* Zuleeka.

Everything that had happened could be blamed on Kiva's sister, who had partnered with Mirryn Vallentis to overthrow Evalon, the princess having been coerced by Mirraven's King Navok to turn on her own family for the sake of her love for Navok's sister, Serafine.

But despite knowing all of that, Kiva still blamed herself. Because *she* was the reason they'd succeeded. She'd told them everything they'd needed to steal the throne, betraying everyone she loved in the process.

Betraying *Jaren*.

He was never going to forgive her.

She was never going to forgive *herself*.

People like her didn't deserve forgiveness.

They deserved death.

It was only fitting that she was back in Zalindov, awaiting her end. There was no escaping this time — no one was coming for her. She was on her own, just the way it should be.

She'd earned that, the suffering, the pain. But even so, there was no punishment in the world that could mend what she'd broken. That was something she had to live with — and soon enough, die with.

"Time!" called the nearest guard, with the word being echoed by other guards spaced further along the tunnels. "Back to work!"

Kiva heaved herself up to her feet, aware of Cresta at her side, as always. Once, Kiva had dreaded encountering the other girl around the prison, her antagonistic attitude and penchant for stirring up trouble making Kiva steer clear of her. And despite whatever stalemate they'd reached now, Kiva would never forget that Cresta had once threatened Tipp's life, claiming she would kill him if Kiva failed to keep the Rebel Queen alive. Kiva hadn't needed the motivation, seeing as Tilda Corentine was her own mother.

Or she had been, once.

Tilda was dead now.

Kiva hadn't been able to save her.

She hadn't been able to save her father, either.

Or her brother, Kerrin.

Half of her family, gone.

Despite their deaths not being her fault, Kiva was plagued by the knowledge that the healing magic in her blood *could* have kept them from the everworld, if she'd had the chance to use it. If she'd had the *courage* to use it.

She'd failed them.

And now she was paying the price.

For that, and for so many other things.

"What are you doing?" Cresta murmured. "*Dig.*"

Kiva blinked, realizing that while her fellow prisoners had reclaimed their tools, she was just standing there, staring at her hands again.

Hands that were covered in blood.

And filled with power.

If she wanted, she could summon the magic to the surface, calling it forth in a blaze of golden light. Or, with one wrong thought, one wrong *desire*, she could summon the death magic inherited from her ancestor, Torvin Corentine. The same magic that had cursed her mother and corrupted her sister. It was inside her now. It had *always* been inside her.

Kiva shuddered and balled her hands into fists.

"*Pick up your axe,*" Cresta hissed.

As if through a haze, Kiva looked across at her, noting the urgency puckering her serpent tattoo. And then she saw the reason for Cresta's concern: the guard who had just rounded the corner and was heading straight for them.

It was Bones.

A latent survival instinct caused Kiva to swiftly collect her axe and swing it toward the limestone.

Along with the Butcher, Bones was one of two guards whom she had come to truly fear during her ten years at Zalindov. The pale, black-eyed man was wild and unpredictable, usually found with a crossbow over his shoulders, patrolling atop the outer walls or posted to the guard towers. That he was underground now . . .

Kiva's skin crawled as he approached, waiting for him to pass.

He didn't.

Instead, he stopped directly behind her, his hand shooting forward until his fingers curled around her axe, tugging it away.

Cresta slowed her digging, tension emanating from her as she kept one eye on Kiva and the other on Bones, her hazel gaze screaming a warning.

Kiva swallowed and turned to face him.

"Hello, healer," he purred.

The gleeful look in his eyes pierced through the numbness she'd felt for weeks, causing fear to flood her veins. Before, as the prison healer, she'd had a modicum of protection from guards like Bones. Not just because she was the only person who could competently provide their medical treatment, but also because she'd had the favor of the Warden. While that hadn't guaranteed her safety, she'd never faced some of the horrors many of the other prisoners had suffered through.

As a tunneler, she no longer had that protection. And she certainly didn't have Rooke's favor anymore.

Bones moved a step closer, and Kiva automatically shifted backwards, her shoulders colliding with the limestone. The inmate to her left hesitated, but then he continued to dig, faster than ever, as if not wanting to draw attention to himself.

But on Kiva's right, Cresta stopped digging entirely.

"Can we help you?" she asked, leveling a look at Bones.

He barely glanced at her. "Get back to work, Voss."

It didn't bode well that he knew Cresta's name — guards rarely addressed prisoners by anything other than their identification numbers.

Moving his free hand to rest on his crossbow, Bones smirked at Kiva and said, "Let's take a walk."

He threw her axe to the ground and reached for her, causing Kiva's stomach to somersault. But before he could make contact, Cresta wedged her way in between them.

"I like walking," the redhead said conversationally. "Where are we going?"

Bones slitted his eyes toward Cresta. "This is your only warning."

She was unmoved, remaining between them like a human barrier.

"Cresta —" Kiva attempted, but her mouth was too dry to continue.

"If Kiva gets to stretch her legs, we should all get to stretch our legs," Cresta stated, heedless to the danger. Perhaps reveling in it. "Fair's fair."

Bones cocked his head to the side as he considered her. "Normally, I'd be curious to see how this plays out. But I'm not in the mood today." He looked past her and signaled to a pair of tunnel guards, who quickly approached, before his eyes flicked back to Cresta. "You can start digging again, or they can make you. Your choice."

Kiva's anxiety grew when Cresta remained defiantly in place, prompting the new guards to grab her, one on each side.

Mirth flashed across Bones's face as he watched Cresta struggle in their arms, but then he turned back to Kiva. "You. Come with me."

Kiva shot a panicked glance toward Cresta, only to realize that the redhead was about to do something foolish — like attack the guards — so she quickly croaked out, "It's fine. I'll be back soon."

She wasn't sure if that was true, since she had no idea what Bones wanted, but she couldn't stand the thought of Cresta getting punished on her behalf. If the ex-quarrier pushed the guards any further, then Kiva didn't want to consider what consequences she might face.

Holding Cresta's eyes, Kiva silently begged her to stand down, until finally she stopped struggling and gave a terse nod of agreement.

A relieved breath left Kiva, but then her body locked when Bones spun on his heel and strode away, calling over his shoulder, "If I don't hear your footsteps behind me, the next place you'll be heading is the morgue."

Cresta shook off her guards and gave Kiva a hearty shove forward, saying, "Bones doesn't make threats — he makes promises. Hurry."

"But you —"

"Will do as he said and be a good little tunneler," Cresta said sourly, pushing Kiva again. "Go."

With one final *Why aren't you moving?* look, Cresta returned to her place against the limestone wall and resumed digging. The two guards watched her closely, but Kiva knew the redhead was smart enough not to give them any more trouble. Cresta had already risked much by challenging Bones, who had earned his nickname from callously snapping the bones of prisoners, sometimes for no reason other than that he was bored.

Guilt churned within Kiva at the thought of what could have happened if he'd lost his patience with the ex-quarrier. But then she remembered he was waiting for her to follow, so with one last glance to make sure Cresta was safely back to work, Kiva hurried after the guard, catching up just as he reached the ladders. He seemed almost disappointed to see her behind him, his hand gripping his crossbow as if he'd been looking forward to using it.

Kiva eyed the weapon nervously, causing Bones to smile, but he only jerked his chin at the ladder shaft and said, "Up we go." Mockingly, he added, "Ladies first."

Hyperaware of Bones monitoring her every move, Kiva obediently climbed the rungs. It felt like an eternity before they reached the surface, so many questions popping into her mind, none of which she could ask.

But none of which she had to, because as soon as she followed Bones out into the afternoon sunshine, she saw why he had retrieved her.

Or rather, who had summoned her.

The Warden stood waiting just beyond the entrance to the domed building, his dark face blank as he took in her sweat-soaked, dust-smearing appearance.

She came to a sudden stop at the sight of him.

Five weeks, and she hadn't seen him once, not since she'd first arrived, her mind having been so drug-addled at the time that she barely remembered the encounter. A flash of teeth revealing his delight, coupled with some jeering words welcoming her back — that was all she recalled. She'd been so out of it that she hadn't felt anything then, unlike now.

Her vision turned red as she looked at the man responsible for the deaths of so many people.

Including, years ago, her father.

"So it's true — you're still alive," Rooke said without preamble.

Kiva didn't reply, reminding herself that if she tried to physically harm him, Bones would take her down. Caldon had begun training her to fight during her time at the River Palace, but she'd had nowhere near enough

lessons to take on both Rooke and Bones — or even just one of them. Her skills were lamentable, and that was without the weeks of malnourishment and neglect that came with being a prisoner. She had to be smart and bide her time, even if she longed to make him pay for what he'd done.

"I have to admit, I didn't think you'd last this long," Rooke went on. "Especially given the state you were in when you arrived. I'm reluctantly impressed." His eyes held hers, his diamond scar more menacing than ever. "Then again, you always were a survivor, weren't you?"

Kiva raised her chin, but remained silent.

"Nothing to say?" He cocked a brow. "Pity. But I didn't come to hear you speak. You've caused me no end of trouble since you left, Kiva Meridan — or should I say, Kiva *Corentine*."

She tried not to react, but her face drained of color, causing Rooke's expression to flare with triumph.

"*That* came as quite the surprise," he said. "Though I now understand why you volunteered for the Trial by Ordeal. Your own mother — how tragic."

At his taunting words, Kiva clenched her hands hard enough for her fingernails to pierce her skin.

"But none of that would have mattered — I would have left you alone, if not for that prince of yours," Rooke said, his voice growing heated. "Did you know he tried to remove me as the Warden? He even tried to bring charges against me, if you can believe it. But I don't answer to Evalon — or not *just* Evalon. I'm governed by the leaders of all eight kingdoms, and when it comes to orders, the majority rules. Unlike your Prince Deverick, *they* appreciate my competence here, knowing I keep the worst offenders in Wenderall locked away from the world. How I do that, they don't care. Or they *didn't* — until you and your prince put a spotlight on me."

Kiva stilled at the dark look on Rooke's face.

"They might have decided not to act on Deverick's allegations, but they're watching me much more closely now," the Warden said. "I don't like that. Not at all."

He leaned forward, the movement slight and yet still ominous enough to fill Kiva with foreboding.

"Since he's no longer here to feel my displeasure, I've decided that, now you're feeling better, you'll get to experience it on his behalf."

Kiva's foreboding grew as Rooke waved his hand and two of his personal guards appeared like smoke from around the side of the building.

"The Butcher is expecting you, N18K442," Rooke said as the new guards latched on to Kiva's arms.

It took a moment for his words to process, but when they did, her heart stopped.

Rooke's lips stretched into a grin as he finished, "He's got a special cell prepared, just for you."

Chapter Three

Darkness.

That was all Kiva knew — all Kiva *was*.

Curled up in the corner of a pitch-black cell inside the Abyss, she tried to find the will to survive, her inner demons whispering that she should give up, that everyone hated her and no one would ever forgive her. That there was no reason to keep on living.

Such thoughts had plagued her ever since the angeldust had faded from her blood weeks earlier, but the unnatural darkness of the Abyss amplified them, leaving her slumped over herself and covering her ears, as if doing so might keep the damning voices at bay.

She was in her own personal hell — and it was a hell of her own making.

Kiva had felt the despair of being locked in an isolation cell only once before, right after Jaren had saved her from the Trial by Water. The sensory deprivation had nearly destroyed her, but thanks to Naari's warning, Kiva had known she would be released for her final Ordeal.

This time, she had no guarantees. All she knew was that the Butcher's ruddy face had lit with anticipation upon Rooke's guards delivering her to the punishment block earlier that afternoon, his delight enough that, for one stomach-dropping moment, Kiva had feared he would drag her straight to the flogging post. She still had nightmares about his bloodied whip tearing Jaren's flesh open. But the Butcher had spared her that cruelty, having other plans for her, other torments.

"Pain fades, but darkness lingers," he'd said gleefully, dragging her to the Abyss and throwing her in, leaving her with no distractions from her own merciless thoughts.

Guilt, sorrow, shame — they were her constant companions as the seconds crawled by, then the minutes, then the hours. All the while, she saw the same faces over and over again: Jaren, Naari, Tipp, Caldon, Torell.

She heard Jaren's final words to her: *How . . . could . . . you?*

She heard Caldon's dead-sounding warning: *You need to run.*

She heard Tipp's wobbling, tear-filled accusation: *You're a C-Corentine?*

And then she saw her sister's smug face, her moon-pale skin and honey-gold eyes laughing as her damning words repeated endlessly in Kiva's mind: *Well done, sister. I couldn't have done this without you.*

If Rooke had wanted to torture Kiva, he couldn't have picked a better punishment than to lock her in with her own demons. The darkness only made them grow.

"I can't do this," Kiva whispered, trembling and rocking in place. "I can't survive this."

She didn't *want* to survive it. What was the point, when she'd lost so much? There was nothing left for her — nothing, and no one.

She wanted the darkness to take her.

Wanted it to be over.

Wanted it to *end*.

But then there was a crack of light, momentary and blinding, followed by the groan of another human as they were thrown into the cell with Kiva, their body crashing onto the hard stone as the door slammed shut behind them.

"*Sonofabitch*," hissed a familiar voice, weak with pain, near Kiva's feet.

Kiva wondered if she was dreaming. Or if she was already dead. "Cresta?"

A grunt of confirmation. "Who the hell else?"

For a moment, Kiva's mind blanked, but then another pained groan prompted her to feel through the darkness until she found the other girl, the lightest of touches causing Cresta to gasp and flinch away.

"What did they do to you?" Kiva asked, reaching more carefully. "Where does it hurt?"

A bark of strained laughter left Cresta. "The better questions are, what *didn't* they do, and where *doesn't* it hurt."

Kiva halted her searching hands, not wanting to cause more damage. Hesitantly, she asked, "Is this because of what happened in the tunnels?"

"This may come as a shock," Cresta said dryly, "but guards like Bones don't take kindly to prisoners who talk back to them." There was a rustling sound, followed by a string of muted oaths. When she spoke again, she was panting lightly, her voice now coming from beside Kiva, indicating that

she'd managed to pull herself upright. "It was worth it, just to see his surprise."

"It's my fault," Kiva whispered. "You're here because of me."

"I'm here because of *me*," Cresta said sharply. "No man should be able to lord his power over those weaker than him. If you hadn't stopped me, I would have taken great pleasure in turning things physical. Trust me on that."

Her words triggered one of Kiva's hazy memories from the early days of her withdrawal, when Cresta had shared about her own family, mentioning that her mother had sought to "survive" her father. Kiva hadn't needed her to fill in the blanks — by the sounds of it, Cresta had endured a lifetime of abusive men, with today being no different.

"What can I do?" Kiva asked, hovering uselessly. She could see nothing — if not for Cresta's labored breathing, she wouldn't have even known the other girl was there.

"You can quit fussing," Cresta said. "The only reason the Butcher tossed me in here is because he knew you'd be cut up about what he did to me, and the sadistic bastard wanted to add to your torture. But I've had worse — and I'll heal soon enough." There was a loaded pause, before she added, almost too casually, "Unless you feel like speeding it along with that magic of yours."

Kiva pushed past her shock and said, almost accusingly, "So you *do* know who I am."

Cresta was silent for long enough that Kiva wondered if she'd passed out. But then she replied, her words chosen with care, "When the riot started, I ran straight to the infirmary. I'd been told to keep Tilda alive — she was my ticket out of here. The rebels were going to take me with them when they came for her. Or so I was told." The last was grumbled under her breath, but then her volume returned to normal. "I didn't make it in time. The boy — Tipp — was already on the ground, barely conscious, and Tilda was —" She stopped, as if suddenly remembering who she was talking to, then went on more cautiously, "She heard me approach and reached out, using the last of her strength to pull me close. And then she said your name."

Through numb lips, Kiva asked, "Did she — did she say anything else?"

“I told her I wasn’t you, but she just tugged me closer and said, *Tell her I love her. Tell her I’m sorry. Tell her I tried to . . .*”

Tears welled in Kiva’s eyes. “Tried to what?”

Cresta’s voice was uncharacteristically soft when she said, “She wasn’t able to finish.” Quickly, she continued, “I figured the boy was a goner, so I left him and returned to the fighting, furious that the Rebel Queen’s death meant I’d lost my chance to escape — and furious that I’d never figured out who you were. Not until that moment.”

“No one knew,” Kiva said quietly. “No one was meant to know.”

Another pause, and then Cresta said, “You healed the boy.”

Kiva nodded, even if she knew Cresta couldn’t see her.

“But your mother died before you could heal her, too.”

Kiva said nothing, her silence telling.

Cresta blew out a breath. “That’s rough.”

A startled — if pained — laugh left Kiva. “You could say that.” A tear fell down her cheek as she admitted in a whisper, “And that’s not even the worst of it.”

In the darkness of the Abyss, Kiva threw aside caution, realizing it hardly mattered anymore, and told Cresta the rest. Everything she’d kept bottled up for too long came pouring out, starting with how she and her father had been sent to Zalindov and the ten years she’d spent waiting for vengeance, before moving on to how she’d ended up at the River Palace living with her blood enemies — only to discover that they weren’t her enemies at all. She then shared everything that had happened at the masquerade, before finishing with how she’d been drugged and delivered back to Zalindov.

It was only then that Cresta whistled through her teeth and said, “No wonder you’re so messed up.”

Kiva saw no point in responding. It was true — she *was* messed up. Beyond repair.

Cresta scoffed, making Kiva realize she’d said the last part out loud.

“There’s no such thing as beyond repair,” the ex-quarrier stated firmly. “You’re breathing, aren’t you? You’re still alive — that means you can fix what you’ve broken.”

Kiva shook her head in the dark. “There’s no fixing this.”

“Gods, I forgot how stubborn you are,” Cresta muttered. “That assclown tunneler, the one I punched in the face for protecting your virtue or

whatever — he turned out to be your blood-sworn nemesis, didn't he?"

"'Nemesis' is a strong word," Kiva argued weakly. Under her breath, she added, "So is 'assclown.'"

"He lied about who he was, and it wasn't a small lie — it was a life-changing lie, right?" Cresta pushed.

"I lied to him, too," Kiva defended Jaren. "And my lies continued for longer — and caused much more damage."

Cresta made a frustrated noise. "Work with me here. He lied to you, but you still forgave him. He represented everything you'd avowed to hate —"

"Avowed?" Kiva pulled a face. "Who says that?"

"— and yet," Cresta went on, sounding like she was grinding her teeth, "you still managed to fall in love with him."

Kiva snapped her mouth shut, pain lancing her heart.

"Don't you think it's possible that, if he cares for you as deeply as you do him — and from what you said, all evidence is in your favor — then maybe, just *maybe*, there's still a chance for you?"

"He won't forgive me," Kiva said, her voice raspy now. "And it hardly matters, because I'll never see —"

"Maybe he won't," Cresta agreed, cutting her off. "But after what you did to him, doesn't he deserve to have you at least *try* to earn his forgiveness?"

"There's nothing I can —"

"And Naari," Cresta went on, speaking over Kiva's objections. "I liked her. For a guard, she was half decent."

She was more than half decent, but Kiva didn't correct Cresta, certain the redhead would only interrupt her again.

"Something tells me she'll hold a mean grudge, but even when she was here, it was obvious she cared for you," Cresta said. "Do you really think she'd want you to roll over and give up? That she'd want you leaving them to the mess you created without even *attempting* to make things better?"

Kiva's throat tightened.

"And I can't speak for the other prince, what's-his-face —"

"Caldon," Kiva offered quietly.

"Yeah, him," Cresta said. "But by the sounds of it, he's the only one who knew the truth about you, and he *still* stood by you, even after your sister stabbed his cousin and stole their kingdom. My guess is, it won't take much to regain his trust, if you ever lost it in the first place."

Kiva pressed her lips together to keep them from wobbling.

“As for your brother, I have no idea why you think you failed him — he’s the gods-damned general of the rebel forces. If anything, *he* failed *you*, by not getting you out of here.”

“He tried,” Kiva croaked, remembering how Torell had attempted to rescue her and Tilda, only to be called off by Zuleeka.

“He should have tried harder — and sooner,” Cresta said firmly, reminding Kiva that she, too, had been awaiting rebel intervention. “And beyond that, he should have figured out what that psychotic sister of yours was up to and stopped her before it was too late. Death magic? Are you kidding me with that?” Cresta made a disbelieving sound. “They say love is blind, but it’s not *that* blind.”

“He had no way to know she —”

“And then there’s the boy,” Cresta cut her off — again. “If no one else, you should at least fight for *him*. You’re all he has.”

The words cut Kiva deep. “He’s better off without me.”

“Do you really believe that?” Cresta asked.

“I lied to him.”

“You lied to *everyone*.” Cresta’s tone was indifferent. “We’ve already covered this. And so what? Everyone lies. I lie to you all the time, but you’re still sitting beside me.”

Kiva’s forehead scrunched. “What do you lie about?” She then added, “And it’s not like I have a choice. We’re locked in here.”

“*That* we can’t do anything about,” Cresta said, ignoring Kiva’s first question. “It’s out of our control. But do you know what’s *not*?”

“What?” Kiva asked, unsure if she wanted to hear the answer.

“We might be stuck in the Abyss — for *now* — but it’s up to us how we see it. We can look at the darkness and let it consume us, or we can recognize that it’s only temporary, trusting that once it passes, the light will return,” Cresta said. “It’s all about our attitude.” She paused for a beat, then said, quieter, “You used to be a fighter, Kiva. Don’t you think your friends would want you to fight — not just for yourself, but for them? After everything, don’t you owe them that?”

There was a lump in Kiva’s throat that refused to budge. She could hear it in her voice when she forced out the words, “What does it matter? I’ll never see them again.”

“You’ve escaped Zalindov once. Nothing seems to be impossible for you.”

“I had help, though,” Kiva said. “This time, no one knows I’m in here — no one but Zuleeka and Mirryn and the transfer guards I traveled with.”

Cresta made a thoughtful sound. “I’ll admit, that *does* complicate things. But still, never say never.” Her clothes rustled as she moved again, then a pained moan slipped out, reminding Kiva that she was injured.

Casting her tumultuous thoughts aside, Kiva said, “Before you list all the reasons why I should prepare for a prison break, stay still for a moment and let me heal you.”

She shifted until her palms connected with Cresta’s torso, then closed her eyes, calling forth the magic in her blood. She had no training — no idea what she was doing — but for years her power had lingered just beneath the surface, always waiting for her, ready for her command. Even when she’d buried it as deep as it would go, she’d still felt it whispering to her. It was only after she’d escaped Zalindov that it had started bursting out of her uncontrollably, demanding her attention.

When she tried to summon it now, Kiva was startled to realize that she hadn’t felt the touch of her power in weeks — not since the night of the masquerade.

Opening her eyes again, she saw nothing but the blackness of the Abyss, and her body froze as her mind conjured images of Zuleeka’s shadowy magic. That same evil was inside Kiva. With a single thought, instead of healing Cresta, she could kill her.

“Is something meant to be happening?” Cresta asked impatiently.

“I —” Kiva swallowed. “I just need a second.”

Biting her cheek, she ignored the anxious sweat dotting her skin even in the chilled cell, and banished all thoughts of dark, shadowy magic tendrils. Her magic was good — it helped others, healed others. She would never use it for evil.

With a steady inhale, Kiva summoned it again, this time feeling it stir within her. But just as a tinge of golden light began to glow from her hands, panic swept over her, and the light vanished again, leaving them in darkness once more.

In a wry voice, Cresta said, “You’ve picked a hell of a time to have performance issues.”

Shaken, Kiva replied, "I'm sorry. I think — I'm just tired. Magic takes energy, and I don't have a lot of that these days."

Surely that was it, Kiva told herself. She was exhausted, underfed, and soul-weary. There was nothing left to fuel her power. That had to be why it had been so quiet for weeks. If she'd had magical training, she might have known how to summon it regardless, but everything she knew about her power had been self-taught. And mostly trial and error — with a lot of luck thrown in.

That luck had, apparently, run out.

"Don't worry about it," Cresta said. "I already told you I'm not that bad — a few days, and I'll be all better."

Kiva felt the guilt of her failure wash over her — *another* failure. Cresta had helped her through so much since her return to Zalindov, and she couldn't even repay the ex-quarrier by easing her pain.

"It's almost like I can hear you thinking," Cresta murmured. "Stop it. I'm fine."

"You're hurt," Kiva returned. "And I —"

"This is nothing," Cresta said. "You should have seen what they did to me after the riot. *That* was unpleasant."

Kiva winced. She might not have liked Cresta then — it was debatable whether she liked Cresta *now* — but she'd never enjoyed knowing others were suffering.

"If I'd been smarter, I would have stayed in the infirmary after I realized who you were, since I should have figured out that if you made it through the Trial, you'd go directly to your mother and the boy," Cresta mused. "Then I could have escaped with you."

Kiva tried to picture it — Cresta leaving Zalindov alongside her, Naari, Jaren, and Tipp — but the image was too strange for her mind to conjure. It did, however, prompt her to ask, "All along, you expected the rebels to break you out?"

"Fat lot of good that came to be," Cresta muttered.

"How did you — I mean — I've always wondered —" Kiva tried again. "How did you become a rebel?"

"Get up."

Kiva jerked. "What?"

"If you want the answer, you need to earn it," Cresta said. "So get your ass up."

Kiva's brows bunched together. "I don't —"

"My mother always said movement is the best thing for when you're feeling down. Stay still for too long, and your troubles only catch up with you," Cresta said. "You have a lot of troubles, and they've been weighing too heavily on you. I told you earlier that you need to get your fighting spirit back, and that starts now."

"But, I —"

"Ass up, healer."

"And do *what*?" Kiva asked, exasperated. "It's not like I can go anywhere. This cell is barely large enough for the two of us."

"Remember what I said about attitude?" Cresta asked. "There's plenty you can do in a small space. You told me about your training with that prince — the cousin —"

"Caldon," Kiva said again.

"Aside from the running, most of what you did focused on strength, balance, and endurance, all using contained movements and repetition."

Kiva frowned. "Yeah, but —"

"So you'll do that here. For as long as we're locked away, you'll move, you'll train. It'll get your blood flowing and cleanse your thoughts," Cresta said. "And just maybe it'll stop you from hating yourself long enough for you to see that you *do* have a reason to live — and that there are people who, despite you believing otherwise, need you to live, too."

Tears prickled Kiva's eyes. "Why are you doing this?" she whispered into the darkness. "Why do you care?"

"I didn't, when you first arrived," Cresta answered bluntly. "But you're like an annoying rash — you've grown on me."

Unbidden, a snort left Kiva.

Cresta turned serious then, her voice quieting as she said, "Everyone deserves to have someone fight for them, even — and especially — when they're unable to fight for themselves. You did that for me, once. You fought for me, you saved my life, and I've hated you every day since because it meant that I then had to make the same choice: to fight, and to keep fighting, day after day. And that's *hard*. It's exhausting and it's painful and it *hurts*. But I eventually realized that it's also a part of life, and it will all be worth it one day. I have to believe that — for me, *and* for you." Louder, firmer, she finished, "So get your ass up, healer. It's time to train."

A storm of emotion swept through Kiva, frustration, anger, and resentment, but there was also a flicker of something that she hadn't felt for so long: hope.

Cresta was right — Kiva owed it to those she loved to get up, to keep going, to *fight*. She had no idea how to make things better, nor did she know if she'd ever get the opportunity, locked away as she was, but if there was the slightest chance that she could earn their forgiveness, then she had to try. For their sakes — and for hers.

So she stood up.

And then, at Cresta's urging, Kiva began to go through the exercises Caldron had drilled into her every morning at the River Palace. She didn't have a wooden box to step onto, so she modified by squatting until her thighs burned. She couldn't run around the barracks, so she jogged on the spot until her lungs screamed. She didn't have a practice blade, but she still went through all the lunges and parries she could remember until sweat dripped down her face.

All the while, Cresta fulfilled her promise and shared her tale.

"I already told you that I was ten when my sister overdosed," she said as Kiva balanced on one foot with her arms stretched high in the air. "A year later, my father lost his temper, worse than ever before, and he started taking that out on me. But my sister jumped in to stop him, defending me with a fury he never expected. He — she — they —" Cresta broke off. When she started again, her voice was hard and emotionless. "In one night, I lost everyone but my mother. I was barely eleven years old. We were alone and terrified, owning nothing but the clothes on our backs. I still don't know how we survived those first few weeks."

Kiva was scarcely breathing, hearing the heartache in every word. *Feeling* the heartache. Her right leg began to tremble, so she lowered it back to the ground and swapped to the other foot, raised her hands again, and waited.

"For a long time after that we lived by the mercy of strangers as we traveled from village to village, making our way south out of Mirraven, until we finally managed to sneak illegally into Evalon."

Kiva was surprised enough to say, "You're from Mirraven?"

"I was, once," Cresta said.

"You don't have an accent."

“We wanted to blend in after we crossed the border,” Cresta said. “It’s easy to hide what you don’t want others knowing. You of all people should know that.”

Kiva acknowledged her point, and switched legs again.

“For a few years we moved aimlessly, never staying in one place for too long. Mother didn’t have a plan — she was just in survival mode, trying to keep us both alive. But then, when I was sixteen, she got sick. Lungrot. It spread quickly, and soon she was coughing up blood and having trouble breathing.”

Kiva winced. Lungrot was a terrible disease, with very few viable treatments. Patients usually died in a matter of weeks, sometimes days.

“Ever since we’d arrived in Evalon, we’d heard whispers that a Corentine heir had taken over leadership of the rebels,” Cresta went on. “We didn’t care about the ancient feud between Sarana and Torvin — nor did we care who sat on the Evalonian throne. We wanted nothing to do with a foreign royal dispute, so we stayed far away from any Vallentis or Corentine loyalists, keeping to ourselves and avoiding any personal connections. But when Mother’s sickness left her bedridden, the village healer made a passing comment about Tilda Corentine’s magic, saying it was a pity the rebels weren’t recruiting in the area.”

Kiva thought back to what Torell had shared about the early years of Tilda’s leadership, how she’d used her magic to heal anyone in need. It was only later that she’d begun to make them earn their healing, requiring that they prove themselves loyal to the rebel movement before receiving the reward of her power. If Cresta had been sixteen at the time, then that was around five years ago — Tilda would have still been healing people then.

“I knew it was a slim chance, but Mother was all I had left in the world, and I was willing to do whatever I could to save her,” Cresta said. “So I left her in the care of the healer and took off in search of the Rebel Queen.”

Nearly losing her balance, Kiva wobbled for a moment before steadying again. “Did you find her?”

“No,” Cresta answered in a flat voice. “I followed enough leads to get close to the rebel camp, but then I made the mistake of asking the wrong person for directions. He turned out to be an undercover Royal Guard and arrested me on charges of conspiracy to commit treason.” Her tone turned hoarse as she said, “I received a missive from my mother’s healer right

before I was loaded into the prison wagon, telling me she'd passed. I didn't even get to say goodbye."

Kiva set her foot back down, her hands lowering to her sides. "Cresta . . ." She trailed off, having no idea what to say.

"Didn't you ever wonder why I tried to kill myself when I first arrived here?" Cresta asked.

Of course Kiva had wondered. But she'd never realized —

"You're not the only person to have felt like you've lost everything," Cresta said, her voice quiet. It regained strength as she went on, "I meant what I said earlier — I hated you for saving me. Every time I saw you, I remembered that you'd taken that choice from me. In return, I went out of my way to make your life unpleasant."

Unpleasant was a generous description, Kiva thought.

"But in hindsight, I'm grateful for what you did. So grateful," Cresta said. "Life is worth living, even the parts that make us feel like we want to die. That's something I've learned in the last five years." She hesitated, then added, "I know I've never said it before, but thank you. I wouldn't be alive today without you."

Kiva tried to rein in her emotions as she replied, "You're welcome. But we both know the same can be said for me. I never would have made it through my withdrawal without your help. Or survived any of the days since then."

"I thought you didn't want to survive them?" Cresta asked, her tone pointed.

Kiva huffed out a sound that was part amused, part annoyed. "Turns out, I've grown close with this self-righteous ex-quarrier who seems to think I should hang around for a while. Something about making amends and earning forgiveness."

"She sounds wise," Cresta noted. "You should listen to her."

This time, Kiva's amusement won. Stretching out her tight muscles, she commented, "I still don't understand how you ended up being a rebel."

"Despite the impression I gave, I was never one of them — I was just working for them. Sort of," Cresta answered. "One of the guards here was secretly a rebel, and he recruited me, telling me he'd ignore some of my more problematic indiscretions in return for me reporting back about —" Cresta broke off suddenly. "Gods, I can't believe I never realized."

"What?" Kiva asked.

“Part of my role was to convert prisoners and stir up trouble, but I was also meant to spy on the other inmates, especially *you*,” Cresta said. “I thought it was just because you were the Warden’s bosom buddy and they wanted someone on the inside watching you both closely. Now I can see that those orders must have come from your family, with them wanting to keep tabs on you.”

Kiva thought back to her decade locked away, with only sporadic coded messages revealing anything about how her mother, brother, and sister were doing, and similarly, only the briefest of details from her own life being sent outside the walls. She didn’t know how she felt, hearing that they’d been keeping an eye on her through other people. But she let it go to say, “You said before that you wanted nothing to do with the feud between my family and — and Jaren’s.” Kiva stumbled a little over his name. “I guess I’m just confused about why you agreed to work with them. Especially after — well, they’re the reason you ended up here, in a roundabout way. Weren’t you angry with them?”

“I was angry with everyone. You know that.”

“Then why —”

“They offered me a deal,” Cresta said. “If I turned enough prisoners to the rebel movement, then they’d come and break us out. I never believed in their cause — I meant what I said about wanting to avoid any royal complications. Corentine, Vallentis, I don’t care who rules Evalon. But I saw an opportunity to earn my freedom, and I took it.”

Kiva mulled over her words, realizing that most people would have done the same thing in Cresta’s position. No wonder she’d been so desperate for Kiva to keep Tilda alive — she’d seen it as her chance, finally, for the rebels to come and free her, free *them*.

The wheels started turning in Kiva’s head, and she asked, “What happened to the guard? Might he help us get word out to —”

“He’s dead,” Cresta said without feeling. “He was patrolling on the watchtower when it exploded.”

Kiva grimaced. “Who do you report to now?”

“No one,” Cresta said, yawning. “As far as I’m concerned, my rebel days are over. Especially after everything you shared about your sister. Do you really think I’m crazy enough to stay involved in *that*? No, thank you.”

“She’ll be disappointed,” Kiva murmured, recalling what Zuleeka had said about Cresta: *She’s doing great things for our cause, even behind those*

walls.

Kiva felt a smug satisfaction in knowing that Cresta had never worked with the rebels out of loyalty, but had cooperated only for pragmatic, self-serving reasons.

“Life is full of disappointments,” Cresta said, yawning again, louder this time. “And besides, I have no desire to be anywhere near someone who can stop my heart with a thought.”

An awkward, strained silence fell, before the redhead coughed and amended, “Present company excluded.”

Instead of allowing dread to grip her, a choked laugh bubbled out of Kiva, the lightness of it surprising her after so long without any joy. And then Cresta was laughing with her, the two of them delirious from a combination of pain and fatigue, and merely from being once-enemies who were now locked in a tight, dark space together after having candidly shared their traumatic pasts.

Only when they finally sobered did Kiva hear Cresta yawn again, prompting her to say, “It’s late. You’ll heal faster if you sleep.”

“And you need to rest so you can continue your exercises tomorrow,” Cresta returned, her tone daring Kiva to argue.

But Kiva only said, “I know.”

Because something had changed in her — a spark, reignited. After weeks plagued by internal darkness, she was finally able to see a glimpse of light, even if it was just a speck in the distance. She would have to reach for it, to fight for it. But as she was beginning to realize, half the battle was finding the will to try.

And so, as Kiva curled up on the cold ground and closed her eyes, instead of dwelling on everything she’d lost, *everyone* she’d lost, she summoned their faces again — Jaren, Naari, Caldon, Tipp, Torell — and thought about how much she loved them.

For them, she would fight.

For them, she would *live*.

And even if she had no idea how, she would find a way to earn their forgiveness.

Because they deserved that — and so did she.

Chapter Four

Neither Kiva nor Cresta was able to keep track of how long they were locked together in the Abyss. Days passed, enough for Cresta to heal entirely and then join Kiva in her daily exercises, the two of them stumbling around in the dark and tripping over each other.

They attempted to mark the passage of time by the delivery of food, twice a day from what they could tell — more than what Kiva had been allocated before her Trial by Ordeal, but still less than what their bodies required, especially with them training so much. Kiva was constantly hungry, but she took that as a good sign, since for weeks, she'd had no appetite, too consumed by her misery. Cresta's mother had been right: the more Kiva worked her body, the better she felt, both physically and mentally. She almost enjoyed being locked away with Cresta, whose biting personality kept her on her toes, while challenging her to push herself to her limits and beyond.

And then, roughly ten days after they were locked away, the door to their cell opened.

"Get out here," came the Butcher's gruff voice.

Having just finished a set of grueling sit-ups, Kiva was resting against the wall to catch her breath, but at the barked command, she quickly straightened, her heart leaping into her throat.

"Hurry up," he said, impatient.

Scrambling to her feet, Kiva followed Cresta out of the cell, both of them shielding their eyes from the shock of the luminium lights after so long in darkness.

"Not you," the Butcher said, grabbing Cresta's shoulder and pushing her back. "They didn't ask for you."

He slammed the heavy stone door shut again, leaving Cresta locked in the cell — and Kiva on her own.

"Move," he said, shoving her forward. He then scrunched his nose and put some distance between them. "Gods, you're ripe."

Normally Kiva would have been mortified, but instead she was delighted that ten days of limited hygiene resulted in the Butcher keeping his distance.

“No time to clean yourself up,” he continued. “They’re gonna have to put up with your stink.”

They who? Kiva wanted to ask. But seeing his fingers clenched around his whip, wisdom kept her silent.

The Butcher led her up the stone staircases and along the gloomy corridors of the punishment block before they finally stepped outside. Spring had turned to summer while Kiva had been locked in the Abyss, and the bright sunshine was painful enough to make her blink back tears as the Butcher prodded her onward.

“Keep moving.”

Kiva stumbled as her eyes adjusted to the glare. She was desperate to know where he was taking her, but then dread filled her as he led her across the grounds, past the tunnel entrance, and toward the front gates. The Warden’s personal quarters were situated above the southern wall — had he summoned her? Had he pulled her out of the Abyss only so she might suffer a new kind of torture?

Raising her chin, Kiva was determined to endure whatever he threw at her. If her time spent in the Abyss had taught her anything — if *Cresta* had taught her anything — it was that her attitude mattered. Rooke only had as much power as she gave him. He could break her body, but he couldn’t break her spirit. Not unless she allowed him to.

For weeks, she’d succumbed to the darkness of Zalindov, enough that she’d wanted to die in order not to feel the agony of her own mistakes. And while her heartache still lingered — and it would remain, until she had the chance to try and make things better — she was no longer controlled by her pain.

She had survived that, and she would survive whatever came next — not just because *Cresta* would kick her ass if she didn’t.

Fortifying herself mentally, Kiva continued to follow the Butcher past the guards’ barracks and toward the iron gates forged into the imposing limestone walls. This was as close as she’d been to the outside world since her arrival nearly seven weeks ago. Adding the fortnight of drug-induced travel from Vallenia, Kiva had been gone for over two months. Her insides clenched as she wondered what might have transpired in that time, but she

quickly silenced her fears, knowing there was nothing she could do — not yet.

“Wait here,” the Butcher said, stopping just before the gates.

Kiva’s brow furrowed, her confusion growing when he disappeared into the watchtower looming over the prison entrance.

While tempted, she knew better than to bolt. There was nowhere to hide, and if the guards had to search for her, she would suffer the consequences. But even so, her mind was bursting with questions — and they multiplied when she peered through the gates to see four dark horses hitched to a black carriage. It was fully enclosed, with trimmings crafted out of burnished silver and heavy curtains blocking out the windows. On the raised front seat sat two men, one holding the reins, both wearing similar outfits to the Zalindov guards except that their leathery armor was gray instead of black.

Kiva inched forward for a closer look, but she jumped back again when a small group of guards streamed out of the watchtower and headed toward her. Leading them was the Warden — whose thunderous expression prompted Kiva to take another step backwards — and at his side was the Butcher. But it was the three unfamiliar people in gray leathers that held Kiva’s attention, two men, one woman, all studying her with interest.

There was nothing lecherous about their glances, and that was the only reason why she managed to keep her trepidation at bay. If anything, they seemed curious — and also disgusted, given her appearance.

“You couldn’t have given her a fresh tunic?” said the woman, her brown hair pulled back in a strict bun. Her accent made Kiva suck in a sharp breath and inspect their clothes again, the familiarity causing a knot of apprehension to ball within her.

The woman was Mirravish. And her armor — *all* of their armor — was identical to the fighting leathers worn by the group of Mirraven soldiers who had abducted Kiva to bait Jaren — the same Mirraven soldiers sent by King Navok, who had allied with the rebels after their promise to aid him in his invasion of Evalon. It was a deal Kiva’s mother had struck in order to end up at Zalindov — a deal that had also promised Zuleeka as Navok’s bride, binding their two kingdoms by marriage.

Nervously eyeing the gray-clad group, Kiva wondered if she’d made a mistake in not running and hiding, consequences be damned.

“You said to get her,” Rooke answered the woman, a muscle feathering in his jaw. “You didn’t say what condition you wanted her in.”

The woman scowled, but one of her companions, the taller of the two men, interjected with an equally thick accent, “It matters not. We’ll find her something on the way.”

Kiva replayed the words, trying to make sense of them. It sounded as if . . .

But no. Surely she must have heard wrong.

“You understand that if you take her, you’ll be courting the wrath of Evalon’s new queens,” Rooke said, a threat in his voice. “They won’t take kindly to you freeing one of their most valuable prisoners.”

Kiva stared at him, then turned to gape at the gray-clad soldiers, hardly daring to hope. Were they truly there to take her away from Zalindov? Could her freedom be within reach?

“Queen Zuleeka authorized this herself,” said the woman, still scowling at Rooke. “Kiva Corentine is required for the royal wedding. You have your orders — she’s to be released into our custody. Immediately.”

The royal wedding. Kiva was stunned to hear Zuleeka really was going through with it. She was marrying Navok, a man she’d never met, as far as Kiva knew. The new king of Mirraven was said to be cunning, perceptive, and incomparably brutal — enough that he’d killed his own father to take the throne. How could Zuleeka consent to their mother’s deal, especially if it meant tying herself to someone like *that*? And — perhaps more pertinently — *why* was she allowing Kiva to attend the celebration? Had she grown a conscience in the last two months and wanted to make amends? Had Torell found out where she’d sent Kiva and demanded her release? Was there some other reason for Zuleeka’s apparent generosity?

There was no way for Kiva to know — nor did she know why it was Mirraven soldiers who were retrieving her, and not Evalonian guards.

Nothing about this made her comfortable, but if it meant she could escape Zalindov, if it meant her freedom . . .

Kiva would be stupid not to take advantage of the opportunity. It would mean she was one step closer to seeing her friends again — and to earning their forgiveness.

Unable to believe her luck, she turned to the Warden. He was grinding his teeth loud enough for them all to hear, but he gave a jerk of his chin,

indicating his reluctant consent. His dark eyes were full of fire as he locked them with Kiva's and said, "You'll be back. And I'll be waiting."

He then signaled to the guards on gate duty, a silent order for them to stand down, before he turned and stalked away.

The Butcher followed him, but only after smirking over his shoulder at Kiva and saying, "I'll tell your little friend goodbye for you."

Cresta.

Kiva looked in the direction of the punishment block, even knowing it was too far away to see. After everything the ex-quarrier had done, Kiva hated the thought of abandoning Cresta, but she could do nothing as the three Mirraven soldiers ushered her through the iron gates toward the carriage.

"I have a friend —" she tried to say.

"Quiet," the woman snapped.

"But she —"

"You can be quiet, or I can cut off your tongue."

Kiva turned cold, instinctively aware that the woman wasn't bluffing. There were numerous weapons strapped to her leathers, and the confident way in which she moved indicated she knew how to use them. Whatever orders she was following, she clearly hadn't been told to be gentle.

Maybe Zuleeka hadn't had a change of heart after all — not that Kiva would believe her, even if that was what she claimed when they were reunited.

Turning back just once more as she was hustled into the carriage, Kiva struggled to reconcile all she was feeling. Mostly, it was relief from her unanticipated freedom, concern about her newest captors, and sadness for leaving Cresta behind.

Of them all, relief won, but her sadness dampened it.

I'll come back for you, she mentally vowed. I promise.

And then the carriage door sealed shut, leaving her alone in the luminiun-lit space sitting opposite the taller of the two men, with the woman and the shorter man having mounted horses to ride on ahead, leading the way out of Zalindov.

Leading Kiva to her freedom.

Chapter Five

It only took a short journey through the dense Blackwood Forest for Kiva to realize they were heading north, not south. That explained the presence of Mirraven's soldiers — the wedding must be taking place at Navok's castle in Zадria, rather than at the River Palace in Vallenia.

Kiva was disappointed — and alarmed — by the discovery, since every mile they traveled was another mile between her and her friends.

So many questions bounced around her mind as they ventured toward the wild northern kingdom. Was Zuleeka already with Navok? When was the wedding? Would Kiva be sent back to Zalindov afterward? If so, how would she escape and make her way back to Vallenia alone?

There were just too many unknowns, all of which occupied Kiva's mind as the scenery shifted from the lush alpine forests of Evalon into the craggy, barren landscape of Mirraven, becoming a rocky gray wasteland the further they traveled. There was nothing welcoming about this kingdom, but Kiva endured it by reminding herself that every day they moved closer to the capital was a day closer to when she could leave.

For the sake of her sanity, when they stopped each night — usually to camp on the side of the road, or at a tavern in one of the sad little villages along the way — she made sure to do the exercises she and Cresta had disciplined themselves with in the Abyss. The strenuous movements helped keep her thoughts at bay, fighting back the darkness that had overwhelmed her during her early days at Zalindov. She would be no good to anyone, including herself, if she fell back into that all-consuming hopelessness. And with the food the Mirravens were shoveling into her — *You're nothing but flesh and bone*, the woman had said with a frown — she was beginning to regain the health she'd lost after leaving the River Palace. She still had a long way to go, but she was determined to be as strong as possible, mentally and physically, for all that was ahead.

As their northward journey continued, Kiva considered what she knew of Zадria and the Kildarion royals. She already knew to avoid King Navok, but his sister, Princess Serafine, was said to be his polar opposite, kindness

epitomized. Then again, she *was* in love with Mirryn, so that alone made Kiva skeptical about her nature.

Aside from the royal siblings, she knew little else about the family. Thanks to Navok, their father, Arrakis, was dead, and years previous, their mother was said to have fled, abandoning her two children — with rumor claiming she'd barely left the castle grounds before Arrakis had hunted her down and killed her. That was the extent of Kiva's knowledge, limited as it was. She also knew nothing about Zadria other than that it was the capital of Mirraven and, being located at the center of the kingdom, was completely landlocked. Despite her unease, she was interested to see how a city might survive in the middle of such a rocky wasteland.

After twelve days of uncomfortable travel, they finally made their approach to Zadria, crossing the last of the desolate, cracked earth before it began to rise in a steady incline. Kiva didn't hide her curiosity as she pushed the carriage curtains wide, gaping openly at the sight before her.

The city was built into the side of a rugged gray mountain. There were no trees — nothing but rock and stone as far as the eye could see. The sun had already fallen beyond the horizon, so lanterns lit the dark buildings that spiraled all the way up to the top of the mountain. At the peak sat a castle made of blackened stone, more a fortress than a palace.

Kiva's insides knotted as they approached a fortified wall enclosing the city, easily thrice the size of Zalindov's limestone perimeter in both height and depth. There were no gates — the entrance to the capital was carved *into* the wall, which opened slowly like a giant stone doorway once the soldiers on duty approved them for entry.

Goose bumps broke out on Kiva's skin as the carriage trundled over jagged cobblestone paths, winding ever upward toward the imposing castle. She tried to look out the window, but it was difficult to see much in the darkness, with the buildings blurring together and any people out braving the bitter cold having the hoods of their thick cloaks raised to cover their heads. If this was summer in Mirraven, Kiva didn't want to imagine how miserable their winter months must be. She ran her fingers over the travel clothes she'd been given soon after leaving Zalindov — a belted forest green tunic, brown trousers, and a pair of lined boots — and found herself grateful that her guards, surly and silent as they were, had made sure to give her warm blankets each night. Relatively speaking, they'd taken good care

of her — much better than anything she would have experienced at Zalindov.

Kiva's heart gave a pang at the thought of Cresta still locked away, but she reminded herself that the ex-quarrier had survived five long years, and she would survive a while longer. After the time they'd spent together, she also had to hope that Cresta would believe Kiva would come back for her — that she'd know Kiva owed her that much and would fulfill that debt as soon as she could.

Pushing the redhead from her mind, Kiva grew alert when the carriage reached the highest part of the city and began to slow. She briefly considered throwing herself out the door and making a run for it — surely that had to be better than facing her sister and her soon-to-be brother-in-law — but one look at the keen-eyed woman sitting opposite her, and she knew such an act would be futile.

Kiva gathered her courage as they rode across a stone drawbridge — *how* they'd dug a moat into the mountain, she didn't know — and made sure to keep breathing as steadily as possible. Whatever her sister might say to defend herself, nothing could excuse her actions. Kiva would not yield — and she would not forgive. Not unless Zuleeka was willing to give up her stolen crown. And Kiva already knew that was never going to happen.

The carriage finally drew to a halt after passing through two sets of iron gates, stopping at the base of a granite staircase that led up into the castle entrance. Someone stood at the top of the steps, backlit by the strong luminescence of lights bleeding out into the night, making their face unidentifiable. Their figure, however, was female, causing Kiva's breath to hitch, but then they moved closer and she could see that it wasn't her sister, allowing her racing heartbeat to settle again.

I'm not ready for this, Kiva thought, having no idea how she was going to handle seeing Zuleeka after everything her sister had done.

The betrayal.

The death magic.

The angeldust.

The imprisonment.

It was too much.

And yet, I have no choice, Kiva realized, pulling herself together as the female guard opened the carriage door and pushed her out into the cold.

Kiva tripped down the steps and threw a glare at the woman, who ignored her and signaled to the two drivers, plus the other soldiers who had accompanied them on horseback for the journey. After quick nods, the Mirraven escorts continued deeper into the castle grounds, likely seeking the stable complex or barracks.

Now that Kiva was closer, she could see that the land around her was surprisingly flat, as if an ancient god had sliced a blade across the peak, establishing the foundation for a castle with expansive grounds sitting like a crown above the city. If not for her absolute dread, Kiva would have been fascinated and desperate to explore. Instead, nervous sweat broke out on her skin despite the frigid air, the feeling growing when the female guard shoved her toward the staircase.

The woman who had come to greet them had silver hair coifed in a low bun and heavily wrinkled skin. She wore a black dress with a blood-red apron tied around her waist, her expression saying there were a million other things she would rather be doing.

Kiva stepped forward — partially pushed by the guard again — and said, “Um, hello, I’m Kiva Mer — er, Corentine. Is my sister —”

“I’m Madam Merit, head of housekeeping,” the silver-haired woman interrupted. Her voice was lightly accented, her speech trim and formal. “Welcome to Blackmount Castle.”

Despite her words, there was nothing warm about Madam Merit’s greeting.

“Thank you,” Kiva said, haltingly. “Could you please tell me —”

“If you’ll kindly follow me,” Madam Merit cut her off again, “we’ll get you cleaned up and ready for presentation to His Majesty. No doubt you’re weary from your travels, but he has a busy schedule and wishes to see you before you turn in for the night.”

Kiva’s blood chilled at the thought of meeting King Navok so soon. She’d hoped to at least talk with her sister first. “I’m sorry, but is Zuleeka —”

“This way, please,” Madam Merit spoke over her, turning and gliding up the staircase into the castle.

Kiva watched, frozen in place, until the female guard said, “You can’t leave the grounds without an escort — you’ll be struck down before you set foot on the drawbridge. That leaves you with two options: you can follow Merit, or I can drag you after her.”

Throwing her an annoyed look, Kiva hurried up the stairs after the housekeeper, noting that the guard didn't follow. Her threat about the drawbridge must have been real if Kiva no longer needed a babysitter. She might as well have been back in Zalindov, a prisoner once more.

Disheartened, Kiva quickly caught up to Madam Merit and kept a brisk pace with her through the building's dark interior. Where Vallenia's River Palace was full of light, with white marble floors and gold trimmings, Blackmount Castle was carved out of obsidian, with silvery luminium threaded into the walls to create an eerie effect, especially with the suits of armor interspersed between the scarlet tapestries and floor runners. It was beautiful — but in an unnerving, haunting way.

Kiva followed Madam Merit up black staircases with silver balustrades and along corridors with artwork depicting gruesome battle scenes. When they finally came to a halt in front of an ornate door, she was hugging her elbows, the ominous feeling of her surroundings bleeding into her soul.

The housekeeper opened the door and ushered Kiva inside, revealing a luxurious bedroom in shades of black and crimson with silver highlights, the colors identical to what Kiva had seen in the rest of the castle. A large bed piled high with cushions sat against one wall, and a luminium chandelier hung from the center of the ceiling, casting a welcoming glow around the otherwise dark space. There was no balcony, but heavy scarlet curtains were drawn over three sizable windows. Kiva hoped they'd offer a view down the mountain across the city, and she was eager to investigate — but later.

For now, her attention was pulled toward the sole occupant in the room, a young woman with hair braided around the crown of her head and down one shoulder, the color so fair it was almost white, and eyes such a pale blue that they were nearly silver. She wore an outfit similar to Madam Merit's — a black dress, hers with laces up the chest, and a blood-red apron strapped to her waist.

"Lady Corentine," the young woman said in a thick Mirravish accent, approaching Kiva and ducking into a curtsey. "It's an honor to serve you."

Kiva barely managed to hide her flinch at the title.

"This is Brynn, your lady's maid," Madam Merit said. "She'll see to your needs here at Blackmount." The housekeeper turned to the younger woman and ordered, "Prepare her for the king, then deliver her to his receiving room on the ground floor."

Brynn bobbed another curtsy. “As you wish, madam.”

Without another word, Merit strode back out the door, closing it behind her.

Something eased within Kiva at the departure of the strict older woman, but then Brynn approached, and she braced all over again.

“Come, my lady,” the maid said, placing a gentle hand on Kiva’s arm and drawing her toward another door off to the side of the room. “We’d best not keep the king waiting.”

Kiva followed without protest. “Please, call me Kiva. I’m not a lady. And I’m definitely not Lady Corentine.”

Brynn blinked, a hint of surprise touching her features. “Begging your pardon, my lady, but you’re royalty.”

“I’m not,” Kiva said quickly as they entered a lavish bathing chamber, the dark, claw-foot bathtub already full of steaming water. “My ancestor was, a long time ago, but he rightfully lost that title when he stopped serving his people and started hurting them.”

The maid’s surprise only deepened. “But your sister is the queen of —”

“She stole what was no longer ours to claim,” Kiva cut Brynn off. She then dropped her shoulders and said, “It’s a long story, and none of it is enjoyable to relive. So please, just . . . if you don’t mind, I’d really prefer it if you call me Kiva.”

Brynn’s silvery eyes locked with Kiva’s for a long time — much longer than Kiva would have thought normal for a submissive maid, especially one at a place like Blackmount — but then a strange light crept into her features, a mixture of wonder and respect, with no small amount of curiosity.

“Very well, Kiva,” Brynn said, prompting a faint smile from Kiva — her first since leaving Cresta twelve days earlier. “Now, please disrobe and get in the bath.”

It was only when Kiva was soaking in the tub a few minutes later, allowing the hot water to ease her travel-stiff body, that she dared ask, “Will I be seeing my sister tonight? Before the king? I’d really — it would be good if I can speak with her first.” Quickly, she added, “Even better, do you know if my brother is here? Torell?” Did he even know where Kiva was — and where she’d been?

Brynn paused her scrubbing of Kiva’s fingernails. “I’ve been ordered not to answer your questions until Navok has had a chance to speak with

you.”

Raising a brow, Kiva repeated, “Navok?”

“King Navok,” Brynn said quickly. “Forgive me.”

Kiva let the maid’s informality slide. “Can you at least tell me when their wedding is?”

There was another pause, before Brynn bit her lip and said, “I’m sorry Lady — uh, Kiva. I don’t wish to speak out of turn.”

Disappointment flooded Kiva, but she understood the maid’s reticence. “Never mind,” she muttered. “I’ll wait and ask the king.”

That wasn’t something Kiva looked forward to, but she hadn’t traveled this far just to hide in her — admittedly opulent — bathroom.

As soon as Brynn dubbed Kiva clean enough, the maid helped her into a gown made of crimson silk, the outfit much more formal than anything Kiva had worn at the River Palace, aside from the night of the masquerade. Both the front and back dipped daringly low, and the split up her leg went nearly to her hip, making her itch to hold the two sides together.

“Is there a cloak I can wear over this?” Kiva asked, indicating the amount of bosom and leg on display. Under her breath, she muttered, “You can see the whole of Wenderall in this thing.”

Her last wasn’t said quietly enough, and Brynn coughed to hide her laugh, her silvery eyes dancing. But then she sobered and said, “I’m sorry. His Majesty requested you wear this.”

The look on her face told Kiva everything she needed to know about the maid’s feelings toward the king, and how he would react if his orders were disobeyed. Despite Kiva’s discomfort, she didn’t want Brynn to get in trouble for something as trivial as a dress, so she adjusted her amulet as best as she could over her cleavage — drawing a curious look from Brynn, who clearly wanted to ask about the Vallentis crest but managed to hold her tongue — and allowed her hair to be styled until it flowed in waves down her back.

Only then did Brynn step back and say, “Beautiful.”

Kiva didn’t feel beautiful. She felt like a spectacle — a *barely clothed* spectacle — but she nodded her thanks, wanting to get the meeting with Navok over with so she could return to her room and plan her next steps.

Declaring Kiva ready, Brynn led the way out into the castle corridors, beginning a downward spiral. They passed only a handful of people, other maids and manservants dressed in similar black-and-red attire to Brynn, as

well as gray-clad soldiers patrolling various hallways or standing at attention beside closed doors. It was only when they reached a quiet stretch with no one in sight that Brynn spoke.

“Can I ask — that is, if you don’t mind —” she started, then stopped.

“Go ahead,” Kiva invited.

“It’s just — months ago, word traveled around that you survived the Trial by Ordeal and then escaped Zalindov prison,” Brynn said haltingly.

“I did,” Kiva confirmed, “but only because I had help.”

“So — I’m sorry, but how —” Brynn cleared her throat, seeming embarrassed. “I heard that the Gray Guards were sent to retrieve you from there. Is that true?”

The Gray Guards — a fitting name for Navok’s soldiers, Kiva thought.

“It is,” Kiva said. She then answered what Brynn was struggling to ask. “I’m not sure how much you know about what happened in Evalon, but the night my sister stole the throne, there was a lot of collateral damage. She knew I didn’t approve of her actions and that I would do whatever it took to set things right again, so she and Mirryn Vallentis drugged me and secretly shipped me off in a prison wagon to keep me from helping my friends reclaim their kingdom.”

Brynn’s eyes were wide with shock, and she repeated in question, “Your friends?”

“Jaren Vallentis — Prince Deverick, I mean,” Kiva corrected, her heart hurting just saying his name, “and his cousin, Caldon. Among others.”

There was a long pause as they descended another flight of obsidian stairs, until Brynn asked, “Doesn’t being friends with the princes go against everything your family stands for? The Corentine-Vallentis feud is legendary.”

“I told you, it’s a long story,” Kiva said, unable to hide the pain in her voice. “But Jaren and Caldon . . .” Her throat tightened. “They make it very hard not to love them.”

When Kiva glanced across at Brynn, she found the maid watching her, as if trying to decide whether or not she was lying.

“Trust me,” Kiva said defensively, “if you met them, you’d understand.” But then she remembered that the princes had visited Zabria for diplomatic purposes in the past, and she asked, “*Have* you met them? How long have you worked here?”

“Only a few months,” Brynn said. “If they visited in that time, then I didn’t see them.”

Before Kiva could confirm that neither would have been there — they were both too busy dealing with her drama, first in Zalindov and then later in Vallenia — the maid halted before a closed set of double doors with two Gray Guards standing at either side. She shifted from foot to foot, her gaze darting to the soldiers and away again as if she was debating her next words.

Finally, she leaned in close and whispered, “The king is known for his temper. Make sure you curtsy deep and don’t rise until he bids you to do so. Don’t speak without his permission. Don’t hold his gaze for too long, or he’ll think you’re challenging him. Don’t leave without his consent. Treat him as you would a wild animal — one that might turn on you at any moment.”

Kiva had already been nervous about meeting Navok, but now her insides roiled. “Aren’t you coming in with me?”

Brynn shook her head, her expression apologetic. “One of the Gray Guards will escort you back to your room when you’re done. I’ll be waiting for you there.”

That brought Kiva some comfort, but not much. There was something about the maid that she was drawn to, the openness of her features offering a quiet promise that she was on Kiva’s side, that she could be trusted.

But Kiva knew better than to trust blindly. Especially in a place like Blackmount Castle.

“Go,” Brynn urged, signaling to the nearest guard, who knocked on the door and proceeded to open it. “You’ll be all right. Just remember what I said.”

Kiva swallowed, before reminding herself of all that she’d gone through in her seventeen years. She could face a king, even a cruel one, especially if it meant she would receive answers. Temper or not, Navok would soon be her brother-in-law, and he had no reason to harm her. She would meet with him, ask her questions, then leave him to his business.

With her goals set, Kiva steeled her spine and indicated to Brynn that she was ready, before stepping past the guards and entering the king’s receiving room. Inside she found the same black, scarlet, and silver colors from floor to ceiling, with a roaring fireplace drawing her attention to the

far wall. In front of it and facing away from her were two dark velvet lounges, one of which was occupied.

King Navok didn't turn at the sound of the soldiers closing the doors behind Kiva; all she could see of him was the back of his head, his hair a burnished bronze, streaked liberally with shades of auburn and copper, making it appear as fiery as the blaze in the grate.

Unsure of herself, Kiva hesitated in the doorway.

"Don't be shy," Navok called, still without turning. His voice was smooth and cultured, his accent not as strong as the others Kiva had met from his kingdom. "Come closer and let me have a look at you."

An unpleasant sensation crawled up Kiva's spine, especially when she recalled how Brynn had said he'd chosen the revealing gown himself. But she made herself walk forward, moving around the unoccupied lounge until she was standing between Navok and the fireplace. Following the maid's instructions, she kept her eyes averted and dipped into a curtsy, painfully aware of the low cut of her dress and grateful for the Vallentis crest hiding what it could of her chest. There was nothing she could do about the split at her leg, the crimson material gaping to near-indecent levels.

Remembering Brynn's warning, Kiva maintained her lowered position, gritting her teeth when Navok kept her genuflecting for what felt like an obscene amount of time. She barely kept from shooting him a glare when he finally said, "Rise."

Kiva straightened, the fireplace at her back close enough for her to feel its burning caress. She didn't move forward, since that would bring her closer to Navok. Nor did she take a seat on the second lounge, waiting for his permission to do so — permission he failed to give.

When Kiva lifted her gaze to meet his, going against Brynn's advice, she found his eyes roaming over her, causing her skin-crawling feeling to deepen. But rather than focus on it, she stared right back, fighting to hide her reaction as she took in his black-clothed form lounging on the velvet chaise.

If Kiva had given any thought to what the Kildarion ruler might look like, she would have envisioned angry eyes and hard features, someone who was as unattractive on the outside as he was said to be on the inside. But Navok was . . . not that. Even reclined, she could see he had a strong, healthy physique, with broad shoulders in a muscled frame. And his face —

Kiva pressed her lips together, irrationally annoyed that the cruel northern king looked like *that*.

His eyes were light brown, bordered by thick lashes, his fiery hair making them stand out in his striking face, his square jaw dusted with auburn stubble. He wasn't classically handsome — he was something more than that. Rugged. Wild.

Dangerous.

“Well, aren't you a pretty little thing,” he finally drawled, swirling amber liquid in a crystal chalice.

Kiva's eyes narrowed and she bit her tongue to keep from saying anything that might get her tossed into his dungeon. “Where's Zuleeka?” she asked.

Navok didn't answer.

The bare skin on Kiva's back was beginning to feel unpleasantly warm, but she remained in place, ignoring the crackling flames behind her. Unable to bear his silence, she pressed, “Can I speak with her?”

That elicited a reaction from Navok, his lips curling with amusement. “The last time you encountered your sister, she banished you to Zalindov. Are you so keen for a rematch?”

Kiva crossed her arms, before realizing the move only amplified her cleavage, so she quickly returned them to her sides. “I'm here now, aren't I? She had your guards drag me out of prison for your wedding, and I'd like to know why.”

Navok tilted his head to the side, and repeated, “My wedding?”

“Yours and Zuleeka's,” Kiva said, growing impatient. Unable to rein in her sarcasm, she added, “Congratulations, you've found yourself a real catch. When's the happy day?”

A bark of laughter left the king, the sound causing alarm bells to ring in Kiva's ears. He placed his chalice on the stand beside his seat and rose gracefully, striding forward until he was right in front of her. She fought the urge to back away, partly because she didn't want to seem cowed, and partly because she had nowhere to go, the fireplace blocking her escape.

“She didn't tell you, did she?” Navok said, his eyes bright with mirth. “You really have no idea.”

The alarm bells grew louder, until they were all Kiva could hear. “Tell me what?” she managed to ask, some part of her already knowing, even if she couldn't believe it — didn't *want* to believe it.

“I’m not marrying your sister,” King Navok said, a dark, amused grin stretching across his face. “I’m marrying *you*.”

Chapter Six

For a long moment, Kiva couldn't string a thought together, her mind frozen in the wake of Navok's declaration. But then everything inside her sped up as panic set in, her heart pounding as she tried to recall the conversation she'd had with Zuleeka in the dungeon beneath the River Palace.

Are you marrying King Navok? Kiva had asked, incredulous. *Was that part of the deal?*

Mother didn't know about the Royal Ternary — she didn't know there might be another legitimate way, her sister had replied defensively, before sharing the plan to ally the rebels with Mirraven's forces, all to help them conquer Evalon and guarantee a Corentine would sit on the throne — even if that Corentine was married to a Kildarion.

It was only now that Kiva realized what *hadn't* been said: Zuleeka had never confirmed that *she* was the daughter their mother had promised to Navok during her godsforsaken deal. She'd skirted Kiva's question entirely, offering no clue as to what might await Kiva should the northern king get his hands on her.

"You look shocked," Navok said, breaking into Kiva's spiraling thoughts.

She wasn't shocked. She was horrified.

"In all fairness," he went on, "Tilda *did* come here seeking to unite me with your sister. But I could see her desperation in wanting to reach you, so it didn't take much for me to uncover her belief that you were the more powerful of her daughters — and therefore, the only one I was willing to bind myself to." He laughed. "Why in the everworld she thought I'd accept anything but the best, I'll never know."

Quick as a flash, Navok reached out and traced his fingers down Kiva's cheek. She reared away from his touch, moving dangerously close to the fireplace, causing his humor to grow.

Needing some distance, Kiva edged around the lounge, feeling immediate relief now that she wasn't at risk of catching alight — and now

that she wasn't so close to the king. To her *betrothed*.

Gods, she was going to be sick.

"There's been a mistake," Kiva said hoarsely. "I'm not more powerful than Zuleeka. Not even close. Whatever deal you made —"

"It's already done." Navok waved a dismissive hand, before reclaiming his chalice and taking a sip. "All the arrangements are in place — we're to wed in two days."

Two *days*?

Kiva swayed on the spot.

Navok prowled close again, moving like lightning to flick the amulet at her chest. "Zuleeka wrote me and said she wishes for you to keep this. A reminder, she claimed. But I don't obey your sister — and I don't enjoy seeing you wear my enemy's crest." His gaze darkened. "You have until we're husband and wife, then I never want to see this again. Is that clear?"

Kiva stared at him, unable to process everything — or *anything*. Somehow, she managed to croak out, "Is Zuleeka coming for the — for the —" Everworld help her, she couldn't even say the word, now that she knew her role in it.

Navok smirked. "For the *wedding*? No. Your sister is in Vallenia, cleaning up the mess she made. Unsurprisingly, she's having some trouble keeping her new citizens in line. And since I'm sure you're wondering, your brother has no idea where you are, let alone any knowledge about our upcoming nuptials."

Kiva's heart fell at the confirmation, her hopes dashed.

"My sister will be coming here for it, though," Navok continued. "She's on her way from Terith with her betrothed, Voshell. I sent her to be with his family for the spring, but they're due to return tomorrow, just in time to witness our auspicious day."

Despite everything, Kiva's brow furrowed. "I thought once Mirryn was queen, you agreed to release your sister from her betrothal so they could be together?"

Navok sipped his drink again, eyeing Kiva over the rim. "Serafine is better off with Voshell."

Kiva's eyes narrowed. "You mean, Mirraven is better off bound to Caramor by marriage?"

As much as she hated Mirryn for what she'd done, Kiva still felt a hint of sympathy for how devastated the princess must be, having betrayed her

whole family to be with her love — only for Navok to have reneged on his side of the deal.

The king shrugged his broad shoulders, but his gaze was cunning as he answered, “We are all pawns in the game of life. My sister understands what her value is, just as she knows what her sacrifice will do for our kingdom. Voshell is a weak prince. Serafine is a weaker princess. When they are king and queen, they’ll look to me for guidance; it’ll be as if I’m running their kingdom. Mirraven, Caramor, Evalon — Wenderall’s three largest powers, all under my thumb. The other nations will have no choice but to fall in line.” There was a glint in his eyes, as if he had greater plans than what he was sharing, but he revealed nothing else.

Kiva was so stunned by his intentions that she could only say, “You don’t have Evalon yet.”

“It’s as good as mine,” he returned.

Kiva doubled down. “Their armies won’t allow an invasion.”

“You forget, your sister rules those armies now. And if they don’t yield to her, then her rebels will clear the way.”

She shook her head. “Jaren and Caldon will stop you. Ashlyn, too.” Caldon’s sister was the general of Evalon’s forces. From everything Kiva had heard, there was no way she’d allow Mirraven to succeed.

Navok grinned. “I’d like to see them try.”

Kiva changed tactics. “You don’t know Zuleeka. You speak of pawns, but now that she has the crown, she’ll never give it up.”

The dark look in Navok’s eyes deepened. “She won’t have a choice.” He downed the last of his liquor. “Whether she acknowledges it or not, your sister is merely keeping my new throne warm.”

Kiva snorted. Clearly the king had yet to witness Zuleeka’s death magic. Once he did, maybe *then* he would realize he’d chosen the wrong sister to tie himself to.

“I can see this amuses you,” Navok said. “If you think I’m unaware of your sister’s . . . *skills* . . . then you’re sorely mistaken. But I’m not without my own weapons. One of which is *you*, my dear bride.”

Any humor Kiva felt vanished at the reminder.

Before she could ask what he meant, he continued, his tone lightening, “Speaking of which, I have a wedding gift for you.”

He curled his fingers around her elbow, herding her forward.

“Come with me,” he said, uncaring that she was trying to tug her way free. “I think you’ll like this.”

Giving her no choice, Navok escorted her from his receiving room, the two Gray Guards who had been stationed outside the doors falling into step behind them.

Kiva still had so many questions, but after everything she’d just learned, her mind had gone blank, switching to survival mode. During their entire walk through the castle and down lengthy stone staircases, she remained silent, gathering her thoughts — and her courage — for whatever the king was leading her toward.

Only when they were deep underground did Kiva begin struggling anew, because she now realized where Navok was taking her.

The dungeons.

“Settle,” he murmured, tightening his grip. “I told you, I have a wedding gift for you. We won’t stay long — once you’ve met him, we’ll leave again.”

Him? Kiva stopped trying to free herself, her curiosity — and her dread — piqued.

After navigating a complicated labyrinth of cold stone corridors and passing numerous Gray Guards patrolling more cells than Kiva had ever seen in one place, including Zalindov, Navok finally came to a stop.

In front of them was a set of rusty iron bars leading to small space lit by a single luminium lantern affixed to the obsidian wall. In the corner of the cell was a thin pallet piled high with raggedy blankets — or so Kiva thought, until those blankets *moved*.

Suddenly, there was a man forming out of them, standing slowly as he realized he had company. He’d been roughed up by the guards, his weathered face mottled with bruises and swelling, and he was swaying unsteadily on his feet. To Kiva’s relief, there was nothing familiar about him, not his greasy shoulder-length dark hair with hints of gray, nor the unkempt beard that grew on his square jaw. His soulful brown eyes, however, were locked on hers — and wide with shock.

“Kiva?” he rasped, his deep voice barely audible from lack of use.

Unconsciously, Kiva stepped backwards, but she was halted by Navok’s hand.

“Allow me to introduce you to Galdric Shaw,” the king said, his handsome features entertained as he watched for her reaction. “As you may

be aware, he was a close acquaintance of your mother's. He'll be able to tell you anything you wish to know about her from the ten years you were parted." Navok gestured to the bruised man with his free hand. "Consider him yours to interrogate at your leisure."

Kiva gaped at the man, now realizing exactly who he was — the once-leader of the rebels, her mother's mentor and friend. She couldn't believe he was standing before her.

Mostly, because he was meant to be dead.

Galdric was the first to realize she was gone, and he went after her, probably trying to stop her, Torell had said, when revealing how Tilda had snuck out of the rebel camp to head to Mirraven. But he never came back. All we found was his cloak, covered in blood.

Tor and Zuleeka had assumed Galdric had been killed by Tilda, claiming she wasn't in her right mind toward the end. But whether or not Tilda had attacked him, he'd clearly survived, after which he must have followed her all the way to Zадria.

Kiva did a quick mental calculation, deducing that Tilda had arrived at Zalindov six months ago. That meant Galdric had been locked in Navok's dungeon for half a year, presumed dead by the rebels, with no hope of freedom.

"Is it really you?" Galdric croaked out, staggering closer to the bars. His gaze remained locked on hers, and then he whispered, "It is. You have your mother's eyes."

All the breath fled Kiva as she realized this man had known her mother better than perhaps anyone. He knew how Tilda had changed from a woman who had never wanted to touch her magic, to someone who had used it freely to heal others, and then to the person who had succumbed to evil and become a monster. He'd witnessed her at every point in the journey. He had answers to questions Kiva didn't know how to *begin* asking.

But . . . she also didn't want to ask anything with an audience present, and especially not with Navok listening in.

"I'd like to speak with him alone, please," Kiva said, her throat tight.

"Not tonight," the king said.

He began to pull her away.

"No, wait —"

"Not tonight," he repeated, his voice firm. "You've had a long journey. Rest up, then you can visit him again tomorrow."

Kiva looked over her shoulder, finding Galdric's steady gaze on her as she was towed down the corridor. He didn't call out, didn't beg to be released. But there was a promise in his expression.

There was also pain.

It wasn't from his bruises — it was from seeing *her*. Whatever he felt when he looked at her *hurt* him. Whether that was because of what her mother had done, or perhaps because of how much he missed his friend, there was no doubting the connection he shared with Tilda. Nor was there any doubting how much he longed to speak with Kiva.

Tomorrow, Navok had said. She could wait one more day.

But as she was dragged back up the many staircases toward her room, she knew she couldn't wait any longer than that. Because in two days, she would be forced to marry, and that meant she needed to be long gone from Blackmount Castle before she was bound to its king forever.

Chapter Seven

Brynn was waiting in Kiva's bedroom when Navok pushed her through the door and left without saying anything.

Clearly, her husband-to-be wasn't interested in wooing her, but Kiva already knew he only wanted her for one thing — a blood tie to Evalon's throne. Or perhaps two things, as he seemed to think she was a weapon he could wield against her sister. *That* wasn't going to work in his favor. She was almost tempted to linger at Blackmount if only to witness his inevitable confrontation with Zuleeka — but that temptation was nowhere near strong enough for her to risk having to *marry* him. No, Kiva's priority was to escape the castle and put as much distance between herself and Mirraven as possible.

"You're very pale, Lady — uh, Kiva," Brynn said, rushing to meet Kiva in the doorway and guiding her toward the bed. Her silvery gaze was alert — and concerned — as she asked, "Did he hurt you?"

Kiva was both curious and alarmed by the question. Brynn had warned that Navok was known for his temper, but the idea of him being physically violent hadn't crossed Kiva's mind.

"No, I'm fine," she answered, slumping down onto the velvety blankets and resisting the urge to hug a cushion in comfort. Now wasn't the time to dwell on her feelings, or to wonder why her mother had offered her to Navok on a platter. Her emotions and questions could come later — what she needed now was a plan.

She also needed Brynn to leave, since despite her intuition saying she could trust the maid, the danger of her being an informant was too high.

Sensing that Brynn was about to ask what had happened in Navok's receiving room, Kiva quickly said, "It's been a long day. I'd like to be alone."

Brynn grimaced down at the blood-red carpet. "I'm sorry, but Madam Merit told me to remain with you. Just in case you need anything in the night." She indicated a pallet Kiva hadn't noticed, set up on the far side of

the lavish room. “I promise you won’t know I’m here — unless you call for me.”

No wonder Kiva hadn’t been locked in her quarters, something she’d wondered both times she’d been left there. Brynn would know the moment she tried to sneak out.

Kiva muttered a curse, but then made herself take a deep breath, mentally acknowledging that it was late and her mind was too knotted to figure anything out right now. She still needed to speak with Galdric tomorrow, so she would have to wait until after that to make a move anyway, and then . . .

Then, what? Kiva asked herself. Even if she *did* escape Blackmount Castle — which the female guard had said was impossible — what was her next move? She needed to return to Evalon, but she might as well try to reach the moon for how far away her home kingdom seemed.

“Begging your pardon,” Brynn said, cutting into Kiva’s grim thoughts, “but I —” She stopped herself with a sheepish look, before trying again. “I’ve been told I’m far too curious for a maid. It’s my worst trait.” She fiddled with her fingers, then summoned the courage to ask, “You didn’t know about the marriage, did you? You asked earlier when *their* wedding was. You didn’t realize it was *yours*.”

The maid might be curious, but she was also shrewd.

“I had no idea,” Kiva admitted. “I thought he was marrying my sister.”

“It’s good news, though, isn’t it?” Brynn asked, her words sounding hopeful but her expression strangely piercing. “You’re a Corentine. Your family now rules Evalon. Marrying King Navok will join the two kingdoms by blood.”

Kiva shook her head wearily. “I told you earlier — my sister stole the crown. It doesn’t belong to us. The sooner the Vallentis family is back on the throne, the better. And trust me, the *last* thing I want is to marry someone like Navok. He can scheme as much as he wants, but I’ll never help him take Evalon.” Kiva shut her mouth quickly, remembering who she was speaking with, but then realized it didn’t matter. Navok already knew her feelings — airing them to the maid couldn’t make her situation any worse.

Brynn’s gaze remained piercing, and she eyed Kiva for a long moment, before declaring, “You really mean that, don’t you?”

“With every part of me.” Kiva scrubbed a hand over her face. “I’m tired, Brynn. Can we not —”

“Of course. I apologize,” the maid said, hurrying to the wardrobe and returning with a clean set of nightclothes. “I’ll turn down the bed for you. You’ll need your rest for all that’s ahead.”

Brynn had no idea. But as much as Kiva wanted a fresh mind for the challenges of the next day, after she slipped beneath the blankets, it still took hours of tossing and turning before she finally drifted off into an exhausted sleep.

A loud pounding on the door woke Kiva the next morning. She shot up in bed, feeling as if she’d barely had a minute’s sleep, her thoughts like cobwebs.

Through hazy eyes, she watched Brynn hurry to answer it, but the door swung open before she reached it and King Navok walked straight through.

Kiva had a split second to consider her reaction. Feeling vulnerable in bed, she wanted to stand, but she recalled her silky attire and hated the thought of being on display before him. She tugged the blankets up to her chin, shooting him a glare that told him exactly what she thought of his early morning visit.

Brynn, Kiva noticed, had pressed herself into the wall, her gaze lowered and her posture tense, as if she hoped to melt into the nearest tapestry. Kiva wanted to do the same herself.

“You’re still in bed,” Navok observed.

Even knowing it was unwise, Kiva couldn’t help baiting him. “Am I? Are you sure?”

The king was no less attractive in the light of day, even while scowling at her. “Get up,” he ordered. He spun on his heel and called over his shoulder, “If you’re not in the throne room in half an hour, I’ll return for you. And believe me, you don’t want that to happen.”

He disappeared out the door, gone as fast as he’d appeared.

Kiva released a shaky breath, then pulled herself out of bed as Brynn approached.

“I should have woken you,” the maid said, wringing her hands. “But you had such trouble sleeping, and I —”

“It’s not your fault,” Kiva assured her. “Do you know what he wants? The wedding” — she choked on the word — “isn’t until tomorrow.”

Brynn gathered fresh clothes for Kiva and bustled her into the bathing chamber. “It could be anything. His sister and Prince Voshell are due to return today. Perhaps they’re already here and he wishes for you to meet them?”

Kiva hoped that was it. She was curious about the royals, especially the woman Mirryn had fallen in love with. But even so, the disruption would be costly. Every minute she lost was another it would take for her to find a way to flee the castle.

Brynn was efficient in helping Kiva don another gown, this one black. The material clung to her flesh, emphasizing the curves she was slowly beginning to regain and the hint of muscle she was working to build.

“Are there any *normal* clothes I could wear?” Kiva asked, frowning at yet another lewd slit up her leg. Aside from that, she was grateful not to have as much flesh on display this time, though the bodice did stretch diagonally across her chest and up over one of her shoulders, leaving the other bare.

“I’m sorry,” Brynn said. “His Majesty —”

Kiva sighed. “Let me guess: he chose it himself.”

“Just wait until you see what he picked for your wedding gown,” the maid muttered, her tone full of disgust as she began working on Kiva’s hair.

The words prompted a sick feeling inside Kiva, but the way they were said gave her pause. “You don’t like Navok much, do you?”

Instead of looking afraid and jumping to his defense, Brynn surprised Kiva by snorting. “He’s not the kind of person who inspires likability. Not even his sister enjoys his company, and she’s the sweetest, kindest person you’ll ever meet. If that doesn’t tell you everything you need to know about him, then nothing will.”

Kiva’s respect for the maid was growing by the second. Carefully, she asked, “You said last night that you’ve only been here for a few months. Has he . . . *done* anything to make you have that opinion of him?”

Brynn stilled her fingers and shifted around to meet Kiva’s eyes. “No, nothing like that.” She indicated her maid’s outfit. “Dressed like this, I might as well be a piece of the furniture. I could be his long-lost mother and he wouldn’t know because he’s never deigned to so much as look at me. In his mind, servants are beneath him, so he treats us as such — like we don’t exist.” Her eyes turned mischievous as she shared, “There have been too many times when I’ve been cleaning his rooms and he’s continued

meetings, unaware that I was even there. You would not *believe* the things I've heard."

As if she hadn't just admitted to having potentially treasonous knowledge, Brynn returned to Kiva's hair, styling it into a complicated updo with glittery beads placed intricately among the layers.

"Isn't it a bit . . . much?" Kiva asked weakly, looking in the mirror.

"You're betrothed to a king," Brynn said, hustling her from the bathing chamber back into the bedroom, where a breakfast platter brimming with fruits and pastries had been delivered. "This is nothing."

Kiva pulled a face before turning to the food. She had no appetite, but since her plans that day included escape, she knew she should fuel up for the long journey back to Evalon.

Ignoring her queasy stomach, she consumed a full meal, finishing only when Brynn declared it was time to leave. The maid then guided her through the castle once more, both of them remaining silent as they walked, lost in their own thoughts.

"Any warnings this time?" Kiva asked as they approached a large set of gilded doors, with yet another pair of Gray Guards standing like statues on either side.

Instead of answering, Brynn touched a finger to the amulet Kiva wore around her neck — a bold move on Kiva's part, since the king had already expressed his displeasure regarding it. But he'd given her until their wedding to wear it, and she didn't care if she was flaunting her true loyalties in his face.

"I've heard tales about the Vallentis crest," Brynn said. "Claims that it can hold protective magic."

"It can," Kiva confirmed. "But it's drained. There's no power in it right now."

Brynn's face tightened. "Then to answer your question: all the warnings I gave you last night, and any others you can think of. Navok might look pretty, but he's dangerous, and whatever he wants with you . . ." The maid shook her head. "Just be careful, Kiva. He won't tolerate disobedience, not even from his betrothed."

Seeing Brynn's serious expression, Kiva's stomach clenched.

"You'd better get in there," the maid said, though she looked unhappy about leaving Kiva alone. "I'll be waiting in your room when you're done."

While Kiva appreciated the solidarity, her mind jumped to the possibility of sneaking away between seeing Navok and returning to her quarters. Perhaps she could offer an excuse to her guard escort, and then —

Galdric, Kiva remembered, swearing inwardly. She still needed to visit the dungeons before she could leave.

Foiled for now, she turned from Brynn and walked toward the Gray Guards, who opened the doors at her gesture. Her insides fluttered as she strode down a scarlet carpet runner that covered black marble tiles and traveled the length of the room, all the way up to a raised obsidian dais holding a crimson-and-silver throne. Numerous banners hung from the ceiling, each with a red background and a black panther standing on its hind legs, claws striking and teeth snarling. On the wall behind the throne was the Kildarion crest: the same panther paired with its mirror opposite, both facing a shield with two swords crossed in the center. Large arched windows interrupted the other walls, all looking down the mountain toward the city. The view captured Kiva's attention for the briefest of moments before her eyes locked with Navok's, the king seated on his throne and watching her every move.

"You took your time," he said when she halted in front of him.

She held his gaze — and didn't curtsy. "I'm not late."

Navok didn't move, one elbow resting casually on the arm of the crimson velvet, his fist pressed to his cheek, his legs stretched out in front of him. Despite his relaxed posture, there was a tension about him, enough that Kiva instinctively backed up a step.

A smile curled his lips, as if her reaction pleased him.

"I want to see what you can do," he said. "Show me."

Kiva blinked. "Pardon?"

Navok waved a hand toward her. "Your magic," he clarified. "I wish to see it. Now."

A disbelieving laugh bubbled up from Kiva. "Just like that?"

The king's brown eyes narrowed. "I won't ask again."

Kiva's humor fled, and she crossed her arms over her chest. "Are you injured? Sick?"

"No."

"Then what, pray tell, would you have me *heal*?" Her voice revealed how foolish she thought his request was.

Navok's expression darkened. "Last chance, my bride."

Kiva scowled and couldn't keep from snapping, "Don't call me that. And I'm not going to use my magic for you. Even if I wanted to — which I *don't* — that's not how it works."

The king rose and moved toward her so fast that she scrambled away, but he was quicker, grabbing her forearm and ending her retreat. His grip was like a steel band around her flesh, enough that she whimpered, feeling her bones crunch together.

"We don't know each other well yet, so let me make something clear," he said, leaning in close to hiss the words into her ear. "When I tell you to do something, you do it. You don't argue — you obey. Is that understood?"

His fingers tightened enough that tears burned Kiva's eyes, but she clenched her teeth, refusing to let him see her pain.

"I asked you a question." His voice was low, menacing. "Answer me."

Despite the fear flooding her, Kiva replied, "I thought I wasn't supposed to argue?" She knew it was unwise, but she'd faced too much in her life to be bullied by a power-hungry king. Navok was to be her husband — regardless that she had no intention of going through with the marriage — and misguided or not, he'd already admitted to needing her for his inevitable confrontation with Zuleeka. That meant she should be safe from him, relatively speaking.

Hearing her response, the king released her, affording her a moment of smug satisfaction.

But then he raised his arm —

And backhanded her across the face.

There was so much power behind his blow that Kiva cried out and fell to her knees, her hand coming up to cover her cheek, her eyes watering all over again. Vaguely, she noticed the handprint-shaped bruise already blossoming on her forearm, but her more immediate concern was the throbbing beneath her eye, the skin over her cheekbone instantly beginning to stretch and swell.

"Get up," Navok ordered, merciless.

Kiva bit her tongue to keep from saying something that would make her situation worse, and shakily stood.

"Now, heal yourself," he commanded.

Kiva shook her head, not because she was denying him again — she wasn't stupid — but because her magic wouldn't work on her own body. "I can't. It won't —"

“You still refuse me?” Navok interrupted, incredulous. He didn’t wait for her reply before moving back to his throne. There, he rang a bell, then took his seat again, before saying, “It would seem you need more motivation.”

The look on his face told Kiva that he was past the point of listening even if she tried to explain. She wondered how far she would get if she attempted to flee the throne room. But before she could take a single step, the doors opened and a man walked through them, his skin and hair dark, his eyes like bottomless black pits.

“Tua Carem,” the man greeted the king in Mirravish, bowing deep. Like Navok, he wore black from head to toe, but unlike the king, whose outfit was formal and edged with crimson embroidery, the man’s attire was more like the leather armor Naari would wear, only without any visible weapons. “Geh nerro eh jakoweh ken darra?”

“Rise,” Navok told him in the common tongue. To Kiva, Navok said, his voice conversational enough that it was as if he’d forgotten that he’d just struck her, “This is Xuru. He has a particular skill set that I find valuable when it comes to my enemies. And, it would seem, my disobedient bride.”

Kiva swallowed, wondering again whether she should risk fleeing. But Navok anticipated her thoughts and called to his Gray Guards, summoning them into the room and ordering them to stand beside the inner doors, blocking her escape.

The king then spoke to Xuru in a string of Mirravish. The look of anticipation that filled the new man’s features caused a coil of apprehension to twist in Kiva’s middle.

Turning back to Kiva, Navok said, “My patience has run out. Show me your magic, or you’ll leave me no choice but to force it from you.”

Good luck with that, Kiva thought, but she knew better than to speak this time, and only nodded and raised her hands. She wouldn’t be able to heal herself, but she could still obey his request and show him proof of her magic, thereby avoiding Xuru and his “skill set.”

But . . . Kiva had never tried to summon her power without needing to heal someone. And the last time she’d attempted it — to heal Cresta in the Abyss — nothing had happened.

Now wasn’t the time to doubt herself, so she clenched her jaw against the pain radiating down her face and called to the magic in her blood. Just a

hint of golden light — that’s all she needed to show him. Then he would leave her alone.

Sweat trickled down Kiva’s spine as she sought to draw her power out, but it was as if it was ignoring her, refusing to rise to the surface. Almost like it knew there was nothing to heal — or even if there was, that it wanted no part in it.

Please, Kiva whispered inwardly, dreading what the king might have Xuru do to her if she didn’t comply. *Please*.

It felt like a century passed while she tried to coax her power out, to no effect. She was just about to offer some pleading excuse to Navok, when suddenly, she felt it. A tingling in her fingertips, a warming of her hands, and then the slightest tinge of golden light glimmering from her palms. It was nothing compared to the blinding radiance of a full healing, but it was evidence that she had magic, and she looked triumphantly at the king before it spluttered out into nothing.

He cocked an eyebrow. “Is that it?”

Kiva remained silent, unwilling to court his wrath again.

“Your mother claimed you were powerful. Incomparably so. And you give me, what? A little bit of a glow?” Navok snorted. “Pathetic.” He jerked his chin at Xuru, speaking to him in Mirravish again, then turned back to Kiva and finished, “Seems you need that motivation after all.”

That was the only warning Kiva received before Xuru raised his hands and thrust them forward. She would have thought the move ridiculous, if not for the fireball that appeared out of nowhere and shot toward her.

Three thoughts came to Kiva as the flames reached her:

Xuru had elemental magic.

He was an anomaly.

And she was *burning*.

Chapter Eight

Kiva barely had time to spin and duck before Xuru's magic collided with her, the fireball slamming into her bare shoulder from behind. The damage would have been considerably worse had it hit her straight on; instead, it only glanced off her flesh. But the searing pain came instantly, causing her to scream and curl in on herself.

Her body quaked as she swiveled her neck to inspect the damage, but all she could see was —

Kiva gagged at the sight of her scorched, blistering flesh.

“That looks uncomfortable,” said Navok, and Kiva pivoted back to face him, tears trailing down her cheeks. “Heal yourself, and you’ll be all better.”

The agony was enough that Kiva struggled to *think*, let alone respond. Through clenched teeth, she bit out, “I *can't*, you bast —”

“Do you want to feel that again?” the king interrupted. “Because Xuru can keep going all day.”

The fire-wielding anomaly grinned and summoned another flame to dance between his fingers. Kiva flinched, the motion tugging at both her burned skin and her still-throbbing cheekbone, though the pain in her face was nothing compared to the ache spreading across her shoulder and upper back.

“If you would just *listen* —”

“What’s it going to take for you to obey me?” Navok interrupted her again, leaning forward on his throne. He jerked his chin at Xuru and said, “Again.”

The anomaly’s grin widened, and he wound back his arm, preparing to launch the flames toward Kiva once more.

“*NO!*” she cried, her voice cracking as she raised both of her hands protectively.

“What in the everworld is going on in here?”

At the soft, feminine voice, Xuru peered beyond Kiva and swiftly extinguished his magic. She followed his gaze to find a young woman

striding into the throne room accompanied by a young man, both dressed in elegant travel clothes.

“Nav?” the girl pressed, her auburn hair darker than the king’s and glimmering with sun-kissed streaks, her eyes a calming shade of pale green. Everything about her was delicate, from her porcelain skin to her pixie-like features.

Her companion was the opposite, though no less striking. His skin was a rich dark brown, his body lean but with clear muscle definition, his black hair cropped short with a gold circlet at his brow. He painted such an alluring picture that, even in her pained state, Kiva had trouble taking her eyes from him.

“This doesn’t concern you, Sera,” Navok replied, proving what Kiva had assumed: the newcomers were his sister and her betrothed.

“Is that the greeting you offer her after months apart?” Voshell asked, his faintly accented voice deep and honeyed — and simmering with anger.

Kiva was surprised; the look on the prince’s face didn’t indicate any of the weakness Navok had implied. Rather, Voshell’s features were hard as he eyed the Mirraven king.

“Don’t bother, Vosh,” Serafine said wearily, laying her hand on his arm. “I’d rather know what we walked in on when we —” She broke off in a gasp when Kiva turned slightly, unintentionally revealing her burn.

Serafine had been walking casually toward the throne, but the moment she caught sight of Kiva’s wound, she quickened enough that her travel cloak fanned out behind her. She only slowed when she noted the look of fear that Kiva failed to hide.

“It’s all right,” Serafine said soothingly. Once she was close enough, she tried to get a better look at the damage, but Kiva edged away from her, wary and uncertain.

“Did you do that?”

Kiva thought Voshell’s enraged words were aimed at her, but then she realized he was still glaring at Navok, even fiercer than before.

The king’s eyes flared in warning, but his tone was light, even bored, when he said, “My clumsy bride tripped and fell into a luminium lantern. It looks worse than it is.”

Serafine’s eyes locked on to Kiva’s hot, throbbing cheek and narrowed into slits.

“And what of her face, brother?” the princess asked, her tone still soft, but there was a lethal edge to it that Kiva hadn’t expected. “Did the luminium lantern do that, too?” She indicated the handprint bruise on Kiva’s forearm. “And that?”

Navok’s jaw tightened. “As I said, she’s clumsy.”

Xuru was nodding at his side. Kiva hated them both.

Serafine raised her chin. “Clumsy or not, my sister-to-be is hurt. I’ll see her to her room and make sure her wounds are treated.”

An odd thing happened then: Navok laughed. It wasn’t a humor-filled sound, but something mean and spiteful. It had Serafine visibly tensing, as if she regretted her choice of words.

“Still looking to fill that space, after all these years?” Navok asked in a taunting voice. “I should have known *my* wedding would bring *you* more joy than me.” He sent a lascivious look toward Kiva, and added, “Though the wedding night shouldn’t disappoint. At least that’s one thing I can look forward to tomorrow.” A pointed pause. “If I can wait that long.”

It wasn’t just Kiva’s shoulder that was burning now as dread and loathing seared through her veins.

“No one is forcing you to get married,” Voshell told Navok, his mouth twisting with distaste. “And that’s your intended you’re talking about. Have a care with your words.”

Navok sent him a haughty look. “Or what, Vosh?”

The Caramor prince didn’t stand down, as Navok had clearly anticipated.

“Or you and I will have more problems than we already do,” Voshell stated.

The king leaned back in his throne, eyeing his ally thoughtfully. His expression turned calculating as he mused, “It seems something has happened since we last spoke.”

“Indeed,” Voshell said shortly. “We have much to discuss.” His gaze swept the room, from the trembling Kiva to the eager-eyed Xuru, and he finished, “In private.”

Navok’s interest was piqued, even if he couldn’t quite hide his annoyance — whether because he could no longer torture Kiva or because Voshell wasn’t acting like a weak-willed fool, Kiva didn’t know. Nor did she care. Because the longer she stood there, the more her desire to throw up — or pass out — deepened.

Sensing her growing anguish, Serafine turned kind eyes to her and said, “Come. We need to see to your wounds.”

Kiva didn’t dare look back at Navok as the princess carefully wrapped a supportive arm around her waist and led her from the throne room. Every slow step was agony, her shoulder on fire, her face throbbing.

She just needed to make it to her room, Kiva told herself. Then she needed to get rid of the princess. And somehow get Brynn to leave, too. Then she had to find her way down to Galdric.

And *then* she needed to escape.

Kiva whimpered at the thought of how impossible all of that seemed *without* her having become so injured that she could barely walk unassisted. But she refused to let hopelessness overwhelm her. There was no alternative — she absolutely had to be gone from Blackmount before she was forced to set foot anywhere *near* an altar.

As they ascended their second staircase, Kiva’s burn became so excruciating that she was desperate for something to take her mind off it, so she said, perhaps unwisely, “I know about you and Mirryn.” When the princess tensed at her side, she went on, more hesitantly, “I’m sorry about Voshell.”

Serafine relaxed again, and sent a small but genuine smile to Kiva. “Voshell is a good man. I feel worse for him than for me. He deserves someone who can love him in a way that I can’t.”

“You deserve that, too,” Kiva said. Even if she despised Mirryn for her betrayal, she could still understand *why* the Vallentis princess had allied with Zuleeka. Love made fools of them all.

“Mirry and I . . .” Serafine shook her head sadly. “We’re not meant to be.”

There was a deep sorrow in her voice, one that was mirrored in her expression.

Kiva’s heart went out to her, and she asked, “I heard the betrothal was your brother’s idea. Why go through with it?”

Serafine sighed. “You wouldn’t understand.”

“Maybe not,” Kiva said. “But I’d like to.”

If anything, the princess only looked more miserable. “He’s all I have left in the world. If I disobey him . . .” She shuddered slightly against Kiva. But then something changed in her, as if she suddenly remembered she was

speaking to Navok's intended bride. "He's not always terrible. He can be — he can be very protective."

Possessive, more like, Kiva thought bitterly.

"And he rewards those who are loyal to him," Serafine went on, as if listing Navok's qualities would make Kiva forgive how he'd treated her. *Tortured* her. "He's also incredibly ambitious and goal-oriented."

"Enough to want to conquer kingdoms that don't belong to him," Kiva muttered.

Serafine stiffened again, and this time she didn't relax. Her voice lowered as she said, "I'm not defending what he did to you. He has a temper, but he doesn't usually get physical. What he did was wrong, in every possible way. But I just —" She glanced away, the green in her eyes dulling. In an emotion-clogged voice, she shared, "Late at night when the world is asleep, I stare up at the stars and dream of how different things might be, in another life. I dream of the family I wish I had, of the freedom I long to feel. I dream of someone loving me enough to save me from all of this." She looked down at her feet. "Voshell isn't who I hoped for, but he'll take care of me. And I know this won't make sense to you, but I'll be making my brother happy. That means something to me — even if I wish it didn't." She turned her sad gaze to Kiva and repeated, "He's all I have left."

Despite Serafine's assumption, Kiva *did* understand, and worse, could relate. She knew the strength of family bonds, how they could influence beliefs and actions. Serafine had lost her mother at a young age, and her father much more recently. If she went against Navok's wishes, she risked losing him too, leaving her all alone. Kiva could appreciate that fear more than most, and while part of her wanted to shake Serafine and tell her to stand up to her brother, the other part wanted to wrap her in an embrace and say that everything would be all right — even if they both knew it was a lie.

"You know," the princess said as they finally approached Kiva's bedroom, her voice deliberately bright, as if she wanted to forget their conversation up until now, "I just realized we were never properly introduced."

"I think we're beyond introductions," Kiva said, biting back a moan when she felt a renewed surge of pain.

Serafine hummed with agreement. "Despite the circumstances, I'm looking forward to getting to know you, Kiva Corentine." Her words were

heartfelt and honest. Quietly, she added, "I promise it won't all be bad. And I also promise to help you every step of the way."

Kiva was quickly coming to understand why Serafine was so beloved; it was impossible not to be drawn to her gentle spirit and sincere kindness. What Navok considered Serafine's weakness, Kiva considered her strength.

But regardless, she had no intention of remaining in Mirraven long enough to take the princess up on her offer.

"Thank you," Kiva said, not revealing her plans. "I'll need all the help I can get."

The smile Serafine sent her was tooth-achingly sweet. "Let's get you inside and resting," she said as they reached the bedroom door. "I'll find Madam Merit and have her send for a healer."

Kiva quickly considered her options, and said, "Brynn can do that."

If the maid was given a reason to be out of the room, Kiva could leave undetected. No pain in the world would stop her from taking advantage of that opportunity.

"Brynn?" Serafine asked as they stepped through the doorway.

"My lady's maid," Kiva answered, looking up to see the girl in question frozen on the far side of the room. She was hard to make out, hidden in the shadows beside the now-open curtains, but her silhouette was familiar enough for Kiva to recognize her.

"Goodness, my lady, you're hurt!" Brynn exclaimed, before speeding toward the bathing chamber and disappearing inside. From there, she yelled back to them, "I'll get some clean linens!"

"Lady Kiva requires a healer," Serafine called to Brynn, helping Kiva to her bed.

"I'll see to that at once, Your Highness!" the maid replied, loud enough for them to hear. She didn't reappear, though, and Serafine frowned in her direction.

"Please, Princess," Kiva said, caring little about Brynn's lack of etiquette. "You must be exhausted from your travels. Thank you for helping me back here, but Brynn can see to me now." She needed Serafine to leave before the maid went for a healer, otherwise the princess might feel obligated to remain. "As your brother said, it looks worse than it is."

Kiva was lying, and Serafine knew as much. But the princess only shifted uneasily and said, "Are you sure?"

"You've given me too much of your time already," Kiva insisted.

It was obvious the princess wanted to stay, whether out of concern or because she herself wanted the company, but thankfully, she took the hint, and began to move toward the door.

“If you need me, please don’t hesitate to have your maid come and get me,” Serafine offered. She sent a dubious look toward the bathing chamber, clearly doubting Brynn’s competence, and murmured, “Or perhaps send someone else.”

Kiva almost smiled. “I will. Thank you.” She wanted to say how nice it was to have met her and that she hoped things worked out with Voshell, but she couldn’t risk showing her hand, so she only offered a quiet goodbye, breathing a sigh of relief when the door shut behind her.

“Is she gone?” Brynn asked quietly, peeking into the bedroom.

This time, it was Kiva who frowned, since she now realized the maid hadn’t been helping — she’d been *hiding*. Even from their short acquaintance, Kiva could tell Serafine was nothing like Navok, so there was no reason for Brynn to fear her. “What’s going on with you?”

The maid ignored the question and hurried over, her lips thinning as she took in the swelling on Kiva’s cheek, and a hiss leaving her as she examined Kiva’s shoulder.

“The burn goes deep,” Brynn said, easing Kiva’s dress away from the wound. The fire had hit her bare shoulder, so thankfully no fabric had melted into her skin.

“I know,” Kiva said, feeling every agonizing blister. She was shaking visibly now, and sweat dotted her forehead despite the bone-deep chill setting in as her adrenaline faded. But she couldn’t yield to what she was feeling; she was running out of *time*. Repeating Serafine’s request, she said, “Can you please go and find me a healer?”

She needed Brynn gone — *now*.

But the maid shook her head. “A healer can’t do much for a wound like this. Not in time for —” She broke off, but Kiva knew it was only to avoid mentioning the wedding.

“Please, Brynn,” Kiva begged. “It really hurts.” That part wasn’t a lie.

There was a furrow in the maid’s brow as she continued to inspect the burn, but then she seemed to come to a decision and ordered, “Lie down. On your stomach.”

“No, truly, I need you to go and —”

“Now, Kiva,” the maid said, her voice firm.

But it wasn't just her tone that shocked Kiva — it was that she waved her hand and a glossy green plant appeared, growing straight out of the floor.

If Kiva hadn't already been sitting on the bed, she would have stumbled backwards.

Brynn had earth magic.

"You're an anomaly," Kiva breathed. For seventeen years, she'd only ever heard whispers of anomalies, and now she'd encountered two in the space of an hour.

"Lie down," Brynn said again, pointing to the bed.

Kiva was too stunned to do anything but obey, wincing as the move aggravated her shoulder. She was careful to press her uninjured cheek to the pillow, watching in awe as Brynn summoned another plant to appear alongside the first. Both were familiar to Kiva, but she'd only ever used one before.

The first was aloeweed, and Brynn quickly pulled a small blade from her apron and sliced open the green stalk until its gel-like sap began to ooze out.

"You need to use the redwort first," Kiva said, indicating the second plant. "It'll clean the wound."

"It'll also sting enough to make you wish for the everworld," Brynn argued.

"If it gets infected, I may end up *in* the everworld."

The maid lowered the aloeweed — reluctantly — and reached for the reddish plant, but then she cocked her head and waved her hand again. Two new flowering plants appeared beside the redwort, one having bright white petals with yellow tips, the other a startling shade of violet with red shoots sprouting from the center. Kiva had never seen either before.

"Milkmist," Brynn said as she plucked one of the white flowers, causing Kiva to jerk in surprise. Her father had mentioned milkmist once, claiming it was incredibly rare and famous for its strong anesthetic properties.

Sure enough, the moment Brynn cut open the bulb and dribbled the sap onto Kiva's shoulder, her pain vanished into numbness so complete that she moaned with relief.

"I could kiss you right now," she murmured into her pillow, aware that she might actually stand a chance at escaping if the numbness remained long enough for her to sneak out of the castle.

The maid chuckled and proceeded to clean Kiva's shoulder using the redwort. "Want to tell me what happened to you?"

"Not really," Kiva answered, her trembles beginning to ease now that her pain had faded.

Brynn's fingers paused. "I'll rephrase. As the person currently helping you, I'd like you to tell me what happened."

Kiva grumbled, "You're very forceful for a maid." When Brynn said nothing, and didn't continue cleaning the wound, Kiva added, "Fine, but please hurry. I have . . . things to do."

"What things?"

"Just — *things*," Kiva said defensively, wishing the maid would act more maid-like.

Brynn's voice was filled with humor as she said, "The time will pass quicker if you share what happened while I work."

Kiva doubted that, but when Brynn recommenced cleaning her shoulder, she offered an overview of Navok's demands in the throne room and how Serafine and Voshell had interrupted Xuru's second attack, finishing with an offhanded mention about the tension she'd felt between the Mirraven king and the Caramor prince.

"Navok and Vosh are meeting in private?" Brynn asked as she smeared a liberal amount of aloeweed gel over the top of Kiva's wound to make a soothing protective barrier. "Right now?"

"I guess so," Kiva answered.

Brynn didn't ask anything else as she shifted to dab aloeweed onto Kiva's cheek, her silvery eyes narrowed with displeasure now that she had confirmation that the swelling was from Navok himself. She took off into the bathing chamber, returning with a tumbler half full of water. Only then did she reach for the purple flower, plucking some petals and shoots and dropping them into the liquid.

"Drink this," she said.

Kiva tried to sit up, but Brynn placed a hand on her good shoulder and pressed her back onto the bed. "Stay down until the aloeweed sets. Just lift your head and drink it that way."

"What is it?" Kiva asked as she took a tentative sip. It had a subtle floral taste, almost fruity.

"I doubt you'll have heard of it — it's a flower native to the Serpent Isles. The monks sequestered there call it Serpent's Kiss," Brynn said. "It

speeds up healing, but you should only use it in extreme circumstances.”

“Why?” Kiva asked, taking another sip.

“Because it’s poisonous.”

Kiva spat out her mouthful. “*What?*”

Brynn rolled her eyes. “You’ll be fine.” She paused, then amended, “You might have a bit of a headache and some stomach pains, maybe temporary blindness. But don’t worry, in a few hours, you’ll be back to normal. And you’ll be feeling much better. Just don’t take any more for at least a month, or you’ll be in trouble.”

Kiva gaped at the maid. “You gave me *poison?*”

“It’s mostly men who it kills,” Brynn said breezily. “Your odds are good.”

But Kiva barely heard her, because she belatedly processed what else Brynn had said, and all but shrieked, “Did you say a few *hours?*”

Brynn pried the tumbler from Kiva’s dread-stiffened fingers. “I did. And unfortunately for you, I need to be somewhere else right now, but I don’t trust that you won’t do something foolish while I’m gone — like try to flee. So this will actually work out well, since you can sleep off the Serpent’s Kiss without ever feeling its effects.”

There was so much to what Brynn had said that both stunned and alarmed Kiva, but she couldn’t say anything — because she couldn’t *breathe*.

No matter how hard she tried to inhale, it was as if her body had forgotten how to process oxygen. And it wasn’t just breathing that she was suddenly incapable of doing — she also couldn’t *move*, her limbs unresponsive, like something heavy was pressing her to the bed, refusing to let her up.

“I’ll be back as soon as I can,” Brynn said, her voice gentle, even as Kiva looked at her with wide, terrified eyes. “Everything will be all right, Kiva. Trust me.”

And then, starved for air, Kiva’s vision blackened and she succumbed to unconsciousness.

Chapter Nine

“Wake up, Kiva. We need to go.”

A hand was shaking Kiva, and she roused slowly, her mind fuzzy. It took her a moment to remember why she was lying on her stomach, why she'd even fallen asleep to begin with — no, not *asleep*. She'd been knocked unconscious by Brynn, the elemental anomaly who had not just earth magic, but air magic as well.

Brynn, who was now standing over Kiva, her hands raised in apology. “I can explain.”

Kiva didn't give her the chance. Heedless to her wounds, she rolled off the bed and tackled the maid to the floor. Moonlight was leaking in from the open curtains, indicating that she'd slept for almost the *entire day*. Brynn had stolen a massive chunk of what little time Kiva had to escape Blackmount. Her wedding was *tomorrow*. She needed to leave *right now*. And as much as she liked the maid — poisoning and forced sleep aside — she couldn't allow Brynn to keep her from her freedom.

“What — are — you — *doing?*” the maid grunted as Kiva used her own body weight to keep her pressed to the carpet. She was grateful the milkmist was still numbing her shoulder, but she would have preferred the excruciating pain to having lost the last few *hours*.

Kiva didn't answer, busy searching for something she could use to knock Brynn out. But the maid quickly flipped them over, the move effortless enough to stun Kiva, before she began to wrestle anew.

“Would you *stop,*” Brynn said, exasperated. “You'll aggravate your wounds.”

Kiva didn't care. She struggled even more violently, and Brynn, seeing the damage it was causing, let her go and jumped to her feet. Kiva did the same — and then launched herself straight at the maid again.

In a second effortless movement, Brynn shifted her body to the side and grabbed Kiva's good arm, tugging her off balance and spinning her around. The next thing Kiva knew, both her hands were trapped behind her back,

the maid standing behind her and ordering, “Kiva, *stop it*. I’m trying to *help* you.”

“Let me *go*, Brynn!”

“My name isn’t Brynn — it’s Ashlyn. And if you want any chance of escaping tonight, you need to *listen* to me.”

Kiva stilled — not just at the maid’s words or her sudden lack of Mirravish accent, but at her *name*. “Ashlyn?” she croaked in disbelief. “As in, Ashlyn *Vallen* —”

“*Shhhh!*” the maid — who was definitely *not* a maid — hissed. “Do you want to get us both killed?”

The next second, Kiva’s hands were released, and she turned around slowly to look at the young woman standing before her — the general of Evalon’s armies. Her hair was so much fairer than the gold of her brother, and her eyes so much paler than his cobalt blue, but now that Kiva knew to look for it, there was the slightest hint of Caldon in her features, and especially in the way she stood, tall and proud and utterly in control of her own body.

“What are you *doing* here?” Kiva breathed. “Why are you a *maid*?”

“We need to leave while we still can,” Ashlyn said, striding over to a chair and collecting a wad of dark material, thrusting it into Kiva’s hands. “Put this on while I give you some quick answers, and then we need to move.”

Kiva looked down to find herself holding a maid’s outfit identical to what Ashlyn wore: a black dress that laced up at the chest, paired with a blood-red apron. At Ashlyn’s urging, she began to take off her gown and replace it with the new clothes, all while the princess spoke.

“I’ve been here for three months, spying on Navok,” Ashlyn explained, tying the apron around Kiva’s waist. “I was planning to leave a few weeks ago, as soon as word reached me about what happened with your sister and Mirryn in Vallenia, but then I heard Navok laugh about how they’d secreted you back to Zalindov, and that he intended to retrieve you and bind you to him, and I knew I had to stay. I’ve been keeping tabs on you ever since your Trial by Ordeal — I know who you are, and I also know how much you mean to Jaren and Caldon.” She flicked the amulet now hiding beneath Kiva’s clothes, the move implicit. “They’d never forgive me if I left you to be married against your will.”

Kiva swallowed, then said, hoarsely, “I’m not sure about that. Things didn’t . . . end well. Especially with Jaren.”

Ashlyn’s lips pressed together. “I heard about that, too. And that’s something you’ll have to figure out with him. But I know my cousin, and he’d be horrified if you were forced to wed Navok. So we need to go, right now.” She indicated Kiva’s shoulder. “Does it hurt?”

“Hardly at all,” Kiva said. “The milkmist hasn’t worn off yet.”

“Good.” Ashlyn straightened Kiva’s clothes and stood back to inspect her work. “If we run into Navok, keep your head down and he won’t give you a second glance in this outfit,” she instructed, reminding Kiva of what she’d said that morning — and also revealing how she’d gone unnoticed by the Mirraven king for so long, hiding in plain sight. “But we need to avoid Sera at all costs.”

Kiva suddenly understood why Ashlyn-as-Brynn had fled to the bathing chamber when Serafine had entered the room earlier — she hadn’t been hiding in *fear* of the princess, but because, unlike Navok, the newly returned Sera would have cared enough to look at Ashlyn, and therefore, would have easily recognized her.

“I’ve pulled some favors, and I have a way for us to get out of the castle, but after that, we’re on our own,” the princess went on. “There are supplies waiting for us in the city, but once we’ve collected them, we’ll have to steal some horses and put as much distance between us and Zадria as possible before Navok realizes you’re gone. It’s going to be a long night — do you think you can manage?”

Kiva nodded slowly, her mind whirling. “If you were here to spy, don’t you need to stay?” she asked. “I should be able to make it on my own once you help me out of the castle.”

Now that she knew who Ashlyn was, and that the other girl had a verifiable escape plan, Kiva much preferred the idea of remaining in her company. But not at the risk of damaging the princess’s chances of gathering whatever information she was there to steal.

Ashlyn, however, shook her head. “As I said, I was planning to leave weeks ago. It’s a good thing I didn’t, given everything I’ve heard since you arrived. But now I need to get back to Stoneforge and share what I’ve learned before it’s too late.”

That sounded concerning, but Kiva had enough to worry about without dwelling on why Ashlyn needed to get to Evalon’s northernmost military

base, so she repressed her fears and followed the princess to the door.

“Remember, don’t make eye contact with anyone,” Ashlyn said. “And stay close.”

It was only as they stepped into the hallway that Kiva remembered there was still one more thing she needed to do that day. She swore loud enough for Ashlyn to whip around, ready to berate her, but Kiva got in first and said, “We need to go to the dungeons. There’s someone I have to speak with before I can leave.”

Unsurprisingly, Ashlyn wasn’t pleased to hear about Galdric, nor was she pleased to discover that a high-priority prisoner had been residing at Blackmount without her knowledge. But she agreed that the information Galdric had regarding Tilda and the rebels was worth the risk of venturing beneath the castle. She, however, decided that they wouldn’t just be speaking with Galdric — they’d be taking him with them.

Kiva was unsure how they would free him from his cell while avoiding the notice of the Gray Guards, but she cast aside her worries and followed Ashlyn along the black-and-red hallways. Even though they were moving swiftly, none of the servants or guards gave them a second glance, offering proof that their outfits made them all but invisible.

Finally, they reached the entrance to the dungeons, the air growing chilly and damp as they headed deeper beneath the castle.

Ashlyn’s steps slowed as she took in the numerous labyrinthine pathways. “Which way?” she whispered.

When Kiva pointed left and started leading in that direction, the princess held her back and said, “Me first.”

Her reasoning became clear when they turned the next corner and found a trio of Gray Guards walking toward them, all visibly jolting as they saw two maids wandering in a place they had no excuse to be.

Kiva was about to offer a quick lie about being lost, but before she could, all three men cried out and clutched their heads, then dropped to the ground, unconscious.

When Kiva turned woodenly to Ashlyn, the other girl just shrugged and said, “Pressurized air straight into their eardrums. They’ll be out for a while.”

Kiva winced, having felt a similar magical attack from Mirryn the night of the masquerade. She almost pitied the guards, before realizing they

would have done something much worse to her and Ashlyn.

“We need to hurry,” the princess urged.

They continued through the maze of corridors, with Kiva straining her memory for the right pathways. Finally, she was able to say, “It’s just beyond the next bend.”

No sooner had the words left her than two guards appeared from around the corner, so close that they almost collided with each other.

Ashlyn didn’t hesitate to launch herself at them, attacking not with her magic this time, but with her fists and feet, until both were on the ground, as unconscious as the first three.

It happened so fast that Kiva was left gaping.

“Never waste magic when mundane methods work just as well,” Ashlyn said, barely even panting.

Kiva nodded mutely, before pointing a finger further down the darkened stone corridor. “That one. At the end.”

They hurried over and found Galdric already on his feet, having heard the scuffle with the guards even if the angle of his cell meant he wouldn’t have been able to see anything. His brown eyes widened comically when he saw Kiva approach, and they rounded even more when he noticed Ashlyn.

“Your Highness,” he rasped, bending at the waist.

Ashlyn snorted. “Please. We both know there’s only one person here who you want to bow to.”

Kiva shifted uncomfortably, having forgotten that, as the ex-leader of the rebels, Galdric had been determined to see a Corentine on Evalon’s throne.

“But we can discuss that later,” Ashlyn continued, before adding in a hard voice, “*at length.*”

Galdric’s weathered features were solemn and, if anything, accepting of his fate.

“Now, step back,” Ashlyn ordered. “And be ready to run.”

Kiva wasn’t sure if Galdric would be capable of running. Physically, he appeared fit, and despite the gray streaks in his hair and beard, he was only in his mid to late forties, but he’d also been imprisoned for half a year. On top of that, his face was still bruised enough that Kiva had to repress her instinct to try and heal him, aware that if she managed to summon her magic — something she wasn’t confident about, given the events of that morning — then it would light the dungeons like a beacon.

Noting her concern, Galdric backed away from the iron bars on steady feet, quietly assuring her, “I’ll be fine.”

Ashlyn ignored their exchange and said, “You too,” to Kiva, who hesitated only a second before taking three large steps backwards.

The princess then waved a hand at the bars, prompting them to shake and buckle, whether from her earth or wind magic, Kiva didn’t know. A gods-awful screeching sound echoed down the stone corridor, but the iron finally shifted to the side, creating a gap large enough for Galdric to squeeze through.

“We’d better hope there are no more guards down here, or they will have heard that,” Ashlyn murmured, rubbing her ears. She turned fierce eyes on Galdric and said, “Injured or not, if you can’t keep up, we’ll leave you behind. And if you try anything — and I mean *anything* — I’ll rip all the air from your lungs and bury you so far beneath the earth that you’ll wish you’d remained in that cell. Understood?”

Galdric nodded, his expression just as solemn as before. Kiva didn’t offer him any reassurance — she still wasn’t sure where she stood with the man who had been her mother’s closest adviser, and she wouldn’t know until they had a chance to talk. For now, they needed to prioritize escaping.

Their return trip out of the dungeons was quick and quiet, with Kiva breathing a sigh of relief when she saw the opulent black-and-red décor peeking over the top of the final stone staircase. But then Ashlyn came to a jarring stop halfway up the stairs, a hissed curse leaving her mouth. Kiva looked past her to see —

No, she gasped inwardly.

At the top of the staircase stood at least a dozen Gray Guards, and at their center was the smirking King Navok.

“Nice try,” he said. “But if you think I didn’t expect something like this —”

He broke off when his gaze moved from Kiva to Ashlyn. His expression turned disbelieving, then furious, as he realized what it meant that Evalon’s general was there, dressed as she was.

“Get us outside,” Galdric whispered to Ashlyn. “Once we’re out in the open, I’ll be able to —”

He didn’t finish before Navok barked, “*Xuru!*”

The dark-eyed man stepped into view, flames coming alive at his fingertips.

“*RUN!*” Ashlyn yelled, shoving Kiva forward just as a fireball soared toward them. A wave of the princess’s hand forced it to slam harmlessly into the obsidian wall, and another wave threw Navok, Xuru, and all the guards backwards off their feet, opening a space for Kiva, Galdric, and Ashlyn to sprint through.

“I can’t take on all of Navok’s guards if he summons the entire Blackmount garrison — and he will,” the princess warned as they bolted along the hallway toward the castle entrance. “My magic has its limits.”

“We just need to get outside,” Galdric said again. He was panting loudly and turning pale beneath his bruises, but he still kept up with them step for step. “Then I can —”

“*STOP!*” came Navok’s shout.

Another fireball soared over them, narrowly missing Galdric’s head.

“*Ashlyn,*” Kiva hissed. “Too close.”

The princess flung her hand blindly backwards, and the floor behind them made a cracking sound as it opened up, forming a crevice in the middle of the hallway.

“I can’t do much else, or I’ll bring the castle down on us,” Ashlyn said, breathing heavier now that her magic was sapping her strength.

“We’re nearly there,” Galdric said, pointing to a familiar set of large doors up ahead. Beside them stood two pairs of Gray Guards who came to attention at the sight of them hurtling down the corridor, but another flick of Ashlyn’s wrist tossed all four of them a substantial distance down the opposite hallway.

“So much for sneaking out without Navok noticing,” the princess complained. “Just pray that he doesn’t lock down the city before we can make it through the outer wall.”

“Where do you intend to take us?” Galdric asked urgently as they ran through the front doors and out into the brisk night air. “When we reach Evalon, where would you have us go? Raven’s Watch? Highworth Keep?”

“Stoneforge,” Ashlyn answered shortly, leading the way across the castle courtyard in the direction of the drawbridge, not bothering with stealth, since there was no longer any point. “It’s closest, and no one would dare follow us all the way there. If we ride hard, we can make it in under a week.”

“We won’t need —”

“*Enough!*” came Navok’s voice from behind them, cutting Galdric off. His command brought all three of them to a halt in the middle of the courtyard. But it wasn’t his word that had stopped them; it was what they saw standing in their path.

“Look around,” the king said needlessly, since it was impossible to miss the rows and rows of Gray Guards between them and Blackmount’s first iron gate. “You’re surrounded. And before you think of doing something foolish, dear Ashlyn, you should know that Xuru isn’t the only anomaly I have under my command. Be very careful what you do next.”

Despite Navok’s warning, Kiva was just about to tell the princess to use her magic in any way she could. But Galdric spoke first.

“Quick, take my hands,” he ordered, thrusting his palms out for them.

“Why —” Kiva started.

“*Just do it,*” he urged, but then he took the choice from them, reaching for both Kiva and Ashlyn, his grip like steel. “Now take a deep breath — and try not to throw up.”

Kiva wanted to ask what the hell he was talking about, but then she locked eyes with Ashlyn, and that was when she felt it.

Wind.

So much wind, manifesting out of nowhere, slamming into her hard enough to steal the breath from her lungs. But that wasn’t all it did, because suddenly, her feet were no longer on the ground as a vortex of air twisted her violently around and then swept her up into the night’s sky.

A scream left Kiva but then she shut her mouth as she spun around like a human tornado. She felt Galdric’s tight grip anchoring her to him and had a moment to marvel that *he* was somehow doing this, but her wonder paled in comparison to the stomach-churning queasiness she felt as she continued to spin, spin, *spin*.

She could see nothing but the smeared inkiness of the night as the wind continued to pummel her, the air bitterly cold, the force of it enough to make her feel as if she were being bruised all over.

Then, after seconds that felt like hours, it finally stopped, leaving Kiva on solid ground once more. Her head was so dizzy that she fell straight to her knees, and while she was vaguely aware that they were now in a moonlit clearing with the faint lights of a village in the distance, that was all she noted before she had to slam her eyes shut against her nausea.

Ashlyn moaned from somewhere to her left. “What in the name of the gods was *that*?”

Galdric collapsed before he could answer.

Kiva reopened her eyes at the *thud* of him hitting the earth and pushed through the last of her dizziness. “Galdric?”

Ashlyn’s vomiting was the only response Kiva received, so she crawled unsteadily over to the ex-rebel leader to check his pulse.

“Ugh,” Ashlyn mumbled once her retching ended. But then, louder, she asked, “Is he dead?”

There was a strong heartbeat beneath Kiva’s fingers, so she answered, “I think he just fainted.”

“I’m not surprised,” Ashlyn said, standing shakily. “I’ve never seen wind magic used like that. I didn’t even know it *could* do that.” She squinted toward the village, trying to get her bearings. “He must have transported us at least —” She broke off with a gasp.

“What?” Kiva asked, seeing her shocked expression.

“I know this place,” Ashlyn said with disbelief. “That’s Sudbury. Stoneforge is barely two miles from here.” She stared at Galdric’s prone body. “That must have been why he asked where I was planning to take us — so he could bring us here himself.”

Kiva gaped into the darkness. “Are you saying — are we back in *Evalon*?”

Ashlyn nodded, the moonlight dusting her features silver. “I wouldn’t believe what just happened if I hadn’t experienced it myself.” There was a dazed look on her face, but she shook it off and moved back to where Kiva knelt beside Galdric. “Don’t try to heal him — we don’t want to draw attention,” she said, not that Kiva needed the warning. “He’s too heavy for us to carry him all the way to the base, but there’s an inn at the edge of the village.” She took hold of his shoulders. “The innkeeper is trustworthy — we can leave him with her until I can send someone to collect him.” She jerked her chin toward Galdric’s feet. “Anytime you’re ready.”

Kiva stood and grabbed Galdric’s legs, taking half his weight with a grunt. She and Ashlyn then crab-walked the ex-rebel leader toward the village. It was a relief to find that the princess hadn’t exaggerated the distance — the inn was one of the first establishments once they entered Sudbury.

The innkeeper recognized Ashlyn immediately, and while the short-haired woman did raise a questioning eyebrow at their maids' outfits, she was quick to lead them upstairs and into a free room, promising not to let Galdric leave if he woke. She locked him in for good measure, with Ashlyn assuring her that he'd be retrieved within the hour.

It was only when Kiva and Ashlyn stepped back out into the balmy night air — the summer temperature much warmer than it had been in Mirraven — that Kiva became uncertain about her next steps. Ever since Cresta had helped her regain her fighting spirit in Zalindov, she'd been desperate to reunite with her friends and brother, and now that she was free of Navok and back in Evalon, she could finally *do* that.

Only . . . she had no idea where they were. Had Jaren, Caldon, and Naari remained in Vallenia, hiding out in the city? Was Torell still loyal to Zuleeka and working by her side? Had Tipp escaped Rhessinda and the rebels and found a way to safety?

The only thing Kiva knew was that she couldn't linger at Stoneforge. She would wait until she could speak with Galdric, and then she would leave him to Ashlyn and start the long journey south. If her geography was correct, Stoneforge was half a day's ride from Lamont, nestled in the foothills of the Tanestra Mountains. Vallenia was hundreds of miles away, but if Kiva was to find her friends and Torell, the capital was where she would have to begin.

"You're very quiet," Ashlyn noted as they walked along the moonlit path, the village now far behind them and new lights shining up ahead, indicating they were approaching their destination.

"Just thinking," Kiva said, suddenly unsure where she stood with the princess. Ashlyn was a Vallentis — *and* a general. Would she even *allow* Kiva to leave, or was she just a different kind of prisoner now?

"About?" Ashlyn pressed.

Kiva weighed her response, before asking, "Why did you help me escape? You know who my family is, and what my sister did. You said Jaren and Caldon wouldn't have wanted me forced into marriage, but . . . I'm not so sure they would have cared, given everything that happened." She ignored her heartache to continue, "I don't understand why you didn't just leave me to my fate."

Ashlyn didn't answer straightaway, the sounds of crickets all Kiva could hear as they walked along the dark road, until the princess finally said, "I

already told you I was ready to leave Blackmount when I learned you were being retrieved from Zalindov. I stayed because I wanted to find out more about Navok's plans for you, and I'll admit, I was curious, too. I'd heard about your connection with my family and how much they cared for you, but after your deceit was revealed, I assumed you'd conned your way into their hearts and felt nothing for them. I was prepared to hate you — and I was also prepared to leave you in Zadria if my assumptions about you proved true." She turned to look Kiva in the eye. "But instead, you surprised me. One of the first things you did was vilify your own ancestor and then denounce your sister — all while you defended *my* family. Everything you felt was written all over your face, confirming where your loyalties lay. Seeing that, I knew I couldn't leave you there."

Irrationally, Kiva's eyes burned. "Thank you," she croaked out. "I would have had a lot more trouble escaping without you."

Ashlyn snorted. "Without me, you'd be trying on your wedding gown right now."

Kiva shuddered, then made herself ask, "Navok freed me from Zalindov, you freed me from Navok . . . so where does that leave me now?"

Ashlyn kicked a rock out of their path. "Let's wait and see what we're about to walk into before figuring out what comes next — for both of us."

Brow furrowing, Kiva looked toward the lights that were growing closer. "What do you mean?"

"I'm a Vallentis," Ashlyn stated. "That means I'm technically an enemy of the kingdom. I've heard rumors that Zuleeka has been having trouble gaining the allegiance of Evalon's armies — *my* armies — but communication was sparse while I was in Zadria, so that could have changed. I have no idea what kind of reception we might face once we reach Stoneforge, and whether my own soldiers will turn against me."

Kiva stumbled and choked out, "Then why are we heading there?"

"Because I'm hoping — and assuming — they're still loyal," Ashlyn said. There was a thread of worry in her voice, but it vanished when she continued, "And if not, they still need to hear what I learned in Mirraven. You can turn back if you want, but I have to see this through."

You can turn back if you want . . .

A weight lifted from Kiva as she realized Ashlyn had no intention of keeping her as a prisoner. She truly was free now, and for the first time in a long time, that meant she could choose her own path.

“I’m not leaving you,” Kiva said. She would eventually have to if she wanted to find her friends and her brother. But not yet. “We’re in this together.”

Ashlyn sent her a small smile, but then she bit her lip and glanced away, a strange look coming over her face.

“What?” Kiva asked, troubled by her expression.

Haltingly, Ashlyn asked, “I know it’s been a few months, but when you last saw my brother . . . how was he?”

Kiva blinked. Of everything Ashlyn could have asked — anything about Kiva’s family, Zuleeka, the rebels, even her Corentine magic — that was *not* what she’d expected. But then she remembered that Caldon had avoided his sister for the last three years, ever since their parents had died in a shipwreck. The look on Ashlyn’s face told Kiva that their estrangement was purely one-sided.

“He was . . .” Kiva trailed off, unsure how to describe all that was Caldon.

Ashlyn sighed and picked up her pace, a glimpse of a barrier fence now visible between the trees. “Never mind. I shouldn’t have asked.”

“No, it’s just . . .” Kiva tried again. “I mean . . .” She released a frustrated breath, and admitted, “I don’t know how to answer. Caldon is one of the best people I know, but he also drives me crazy. Despite that, he managed to make me love him as if he’s my own brother. I’ve never —” Kiva had to clear the emotion from her throat. “I’ve never met anyone more loyal. To me, and to others.”

There was a heavy silence, before Ashlyn whispered, “I miss him.”

Kiva felt the misery in those three words enough that she reached out to squeeze the princess’s shoulder, but the move tugged at her burn, making her realize that the milkmist had finally worn off. Even so, the pain was nothing compared to earlier, and she pushed her collar aside only to see that the wound had already scabbed over and was half healed.

A shocked sound left Kiva, and she halted on the path, trying to get a better look.

Ashlyn hummed with satisfaction. “Poisonous or not, Serpent’s Kiss works wonders.”

“*That’s* what it does?” Kiva asked, incredulous.

“If it doesn’t kill you,” Ashlyn confirmed, nudging Kiva forward again. “It’s not usually worth the risk, but I thought we had a week’s worth of hard

travel ahead, and I feared your injury would slow us down. Drastic measures, and all that.”

Kiva shot a look at the princess. “You said it’s mostly men who it kills.”

Ashlyn shrugged. “I might have fibbed a little. It’s an equal-opportunity poison.” Her silvery eyes danced as she added, “If you’d died, at least you wouldn’t have had to marry Navok. I figured you’d be happy either way.”

Deadpan, Kiva said, “Please never try to help me again.”

The princess chuckled, the sound warm and lovely. “No promises.” Her humor faded as she jerked her chin toward an access point in the barrier fence. “Time to find out if my soldiers are still my soldiers.”

Kiva’s nerves grew now that she could see how close they were to entering the outpost, the ground before them dipping into a shallow valley that made it easier to see the tidy rows of buildings lit by elevated luminium beacons. Stoneforge wasn’t Evalon’s largest military base, despite it being responsible for monitoring the Northern Pass and watching for any suspicious border crossings. But looking at the buildings spaced out in front of her, Kiva still marveled at its size.

“That’s the command center,” Ashlyn said, pointing to a structure located in the middle of the settlement. “I know it’s late, but assuming I’m still the general and we’re not dragged away to the holding cells —”

Kiva’s stomach lurched.

“— then that’s where we’ll head once we’re inside. Captain Jenaire oversees this outpost, so hopefully we’ll find her there.”

Ashlyn’s steps didn’t falter as they approached the gap in the fence, where they were intercepted by a group of soldiers wearing black from head to toe — and enough weapons to stock an armory.

Kiva’s mouth was dry as she waited for their reaction, but her fears were quickly eased. The moment they saw Ashlyn, they straightened in surprise and crossed one arm over their chests in a respectful salute. The princess didn’t reveal her relief, but Kiva sensed the tension leaving her.

The watch guards spoke briefly with Ashlyn, offering an escort to the command center, but she assured them that was unnecessary and only requested they send someone for Galdric. Immediately, two soldiers called for horses and a cart, and set off toward Sudbury.

Only then did Ashlyn give a parting nod to the remaining guards, before leading Kiva past them into the outpost.

“I guess the rumors about Zuleeka’s lack of control were true,” the princess said quietly.

Kiva’s knees felt weak. “I’m certainly not unhappy about that.”

Ashlyn grinned her agreement.

Given the hour, most of the base was asleep, though they did pass two groups of patrolling soldiers as they ventured deeper into the grounds, all of whom stared at Ashlyn with stunned eyes before quickly giving her crossed-arm salutes. It was clear that despite the kingdom being overthrown, she still had not just their respect, but also their adoration.

Kiva was suddenly reminded of her visit to the rebel camp near Oakhollow and the reverent way the people had looked at Torell. Ashlyn’s soldiers regarded her in exactly the same manner.

“Here we are,” the princess said when they finally reached the command center. It was built out of stone and largely unappealing — much like all the other buildings in the outpost. But unlike the rest, the command center had no windows and only one entrance, cleverly designed to keep eavesdroppers from learning confidential information.

“Best if you stay quiet and let me speak,” Ashlyn warned Kiva as she opened the thick door and stepped through first. “And whatever you do, don’t mention your name, or that you —”

The princess stopped talking.

Not just that, she also stopped *walking*, causing Kiva to bump into her from behind.

“Sorry,” Kiva said quickly, jumping backwards. She looked past Ashlyn into the brightly lit room, with it reminding her of the command tent in the rebel camp mixed with the Royal Council chamber beneath the River Palace — partly because of how sparse it was aside from a large meeting table, but mostly because of the many detailed maps hanging from the walls.

All of that Kiva noted only vaguely, her attention drawn to what had stolen Ashlyn’s focus.

In the middle of the room stood a young man, who had turned at their arrival. He was unknown to Kiva, his skin, hair, and eyes all dark, his physique heavily muscled, his features sharp and masculine. He held himself as one who was both confident and powerful, yet when he shifted slightly to the side, his movements were fluid and full of grace.

But Kiva only gave him a passing glance, because when he shifted, she saw what was behind him: two people gagged and bound to chairs by thick, heavy ropes.

Two *familiar* people.

Torell and Cresta.

Stunned, Kiva could only stare at them, before she came to her senses and lunged forward. But Ashlyn held her back, her eyes no longer on the man in the center of the room. Instead, she was staring directly to the right of where she and Kiva stood, her body frozen.

“Ashlyn, let me —” Kiva struggled against the princess’s strong grip, but she didn’t finish before she followed Ashlyn’s gaze, and all the fight left her at once.

Because standing together in the closest corner of the room, looking as if they’d been in the middle of a hushed conversation, were two more familiar faces.

Caldon.

And Jaren.

Chapter Ten

Kiva's shock was so acute that she just stood there, staring. She couldn't process what she was seeing, not just that Jaren and Caldon were *here*, but also that her brother was their prisoner and — perhaps strangest of all — Cresta had managed to escape Zalindov.

For a moment, Kiva wondered if she was still at Blackmount Castle and this was all one big Serpent's Kiss-induced hallucination. But Ashlyn's grip was tight enough to make Kiva realize this was no dream. And by the looks on the faces of everyone in the room . . .

It might not be a dream, but it very well could be a nightmare.

Jaren was here.

Jaren was *here*.

Caldon, Torell, Cresta . . .

Kiva was breathing too fast, unable to move, unable to *think*.

But her eyes were locked on Jaren's.

Two and a half months. That was how long it had been since the masquerade.

Since the night they'd kissed.

Since the night she'd realized she was in love with him.

Since the night she'd helped destroy him.

Seventy-five days.

He looked the same. But he also didn't. He was still impossibly handsome, still held himself with a strong, assured confidence. But his eyes — they were hollow. Empty. Like something was missing inside him.

Like something had been *stolen* from him.

My magic is a part of me. Like an arm or a leg.

Kiva nearly fell to her knees, seeing that hollowness in his eyes. But it wasn't only that — it was also the way he was looking *at her*.

Jaren had never looked at Kiva like that before.

She'd never seen him look at *anyone* like that before.

Because he was looking at her as if — as if —

As if he hated her. With every fiber of his being.

Kiva's heart shattered, and she took an automatic step backwards, but Ashlyn didn't allow her further than that.

Her move broke something in the room, interrupting the shocked silence.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Caldon demanded, the first to speak. His gaze was fixed on Kiva, as if his sister didn't exist. "And what happened to your face?"

Kiva raised her free hand to her cheek, having forgotten about the swelling. Much like with her shoulder, the Serpent's Kiss had helped speed along the healing, but clearly not enough to make it disappear entirely. She was gratified to hear that Caldon sounded concerned, but there was no denying the anger in his expression — directed at her. She had no idea how he felt after everything that had happened in Vallenia, despite him having given her the chance to run.

Struggling to untangle her panicking thoughts, all Kiva managed to croak out in response was, "Is Tipp here? And Naari?"

It was the smallest of movements, but Kiva's eyes were drawn back to Jaren when his body stilled. His jaw clenched, the gold in his eyes became a flame surrounded by ocean, his expression as hard as slate.

And then he was striding forward.

Toward Kiva.

Ashlyn's grip turned painful, but Kiva could barely feel it, every part of her coming alive as he closed the distance between them. Despite everything she'd done to him, she knew he would never harm her, not like Navok had. And yet, she still braced for his reaction, unable to keep from whispering his name, the word full of remorse, full of longing.

"Jaren, I —"

But she didn't get to finish. Because without giving her a second glance, he walked right past where she and Ashlyn stood, straight out into the night, slamming the heavy door behind him.

Kiva winced at the sound, her heart tearing into a million more pieces.

"Go after him before he does something stupid."

For one wild moment, Kiva thought Caldon was speaking to her, but then Ashlyn replied, "That's the first thing you say to me in three years? Really?"

"Ash, now isn't the time for —"

“It’s never the time,” Ashlyn said, her voice bitter, but Kiva could hear the hurt in it. Even so, the princess loosened her fingers and gave Kiva an encouraging squeeze before disappearing out of the command center after Jaren.

Left standing on her own, Kiva looked toward her brother and Cresta again, along with the unfamiliar young man guarding them. She wanted to ask if they could be released — or at least get an explanation for their presence at Stoneforge — but before she could say anything, Caldon was moving her way, his long steps full of purpose.

“You and me, outside. Now.”

Not giving her a chance to argue, he grabbed her hand and yanked her out into the balmy night air, dragging her through the entire length of the army camp until they were well away from any buildings and patrolling guards. Only when they were on the outskirts of the valley near where the perimeter fence touched the encroaching forest did he finally release her and turn so they were facing each other.

The moonlight revealed his expression still set with anger, and Kiva swallowed, unsure what to say now that he was before her. But as she looked at him, she remembered all he’d done for her, all he *was* to her. More than anyone else, perhaps even Jaren, Caldon had always been her fiercest protector, her most loyal friend. He’d known the truth about her all along, and he’d *still* found a way to love her, regardless of who she was and the threat she posed.

I’ve never met anyone who shines as brightly as you do.

Kiva’s eyes began to well as she recalled what he’d once said to her. He’d believed in her; he’d *trusted* her. And, unintentionally or not, she’d betrayed him, along with everyone else.

She deserved to have him angry at her.

She deserved to have him hate her, just like Jaren did.

She deserved to have him —

A finger beneath Kiva’s chin halted her wretched thoughts, her head tilting backwards until her teary eyes met Caldon’s. At the sight, his lips became a firm line, his anger growing, but then his cobalt gaze moved over her face, taking in her gaunt features, the bruise on her cheek, the devastated expression she couldn’t hide even if she tried.

Whatever he saw caused his anger to bleed away, and then he sighed, long and loud, before releasing her chin only to tug her forward and pull her

tight to his frame, wrapping his arms around her.

The move caught Kiva by surprise, enough that, for a moment, she just stood there, her arms hanging listlessly by her sides.

But then she finally comprehended that Caldon was hugging her, and she couldn't control her reaction.

Right there, at the edge of the military outpost, Kiva burst into tears.

Everything she'd been feeling for months erupted out of her, her isolation and self-hatred from her time in Zalindov, her terror and confusion from being with Navok, her uncertainty, her heartache, her shame, her guilt — all of that and more came out as she sobbed against Caldon, her fingers clutching his chest, her tears soaking his shirt. The whole time, his hands moved soothingly on her back as he murmured, "Get it out, Sunshine. You're all right. I'm here."

The fact that he was calling her Sunshine only made her cry harder and begin uttering sob-choked declarations that she was a horrible person and he shouldn't forgive her and she'd never wanted any part in what happened but it was still all her fault. She was hysterical, but she couldn't stop, not until she'd finally exhausted herself enough that she could barely hold up her own weight.

Caldon continued holding her until her sobs quieted and her tears dried. Only then did he ease away slightly to look into her swollen eyes and ask, "Feel better?"

Kiva sniffed and nodded. It wasn't the complete truth, but crying had left her purged and partially numb, which was preferable to the alternative.

"Good," Caldon said. He then muttered, "You'd have to, after all that." He pointed to her face. "You're disgusting, by the way. I've never seen so much snot and tears in my life. You could have filled a lake." He pulled his shirt away from his body, cringing at how damp it was. "The things I do for you."

Instead of laughing as he'd intended, Kiva felt new tears well in her eyes at how he was treating her. At how *normal* he seemed.

"No, gods, please don't start again." Caldon raised his hands in a pleading sign. "I don't have anything dry left for you to snot into."

This time, a weak laugh left Kiva.

Caldon smiled, triumphant, and quietly said, "There she is."

Kiva's lips wobbled, but she forced in a deep breath, wiped her face, and regained control.

“I’m sorry,” she said croakily. “I just — I thought you — I wasn’t sure if — And then you —”

“I get it,” Caldon cut her off. “And honestly, I’d planned to make you work harder for it. But you just looked so pathetic standing there with those puppy-dog eyes and the weight of the world on your shoulders. It was impossible not to put you out of your misery.”

It took great effort for Kiva not to start crying again. “I was scared you’d hate me. Like J-Jaren.” She stumbled over his name, as if there was a dagger caught in her throat.

“Jaren doesn’t hate you.”

Kiva shut her eyes, wishing that were true, but remembering his burning gaze. How he’d walked straight past her. How he couldn’t even *look* at her. “He does.”

“All right, maybe a little,” Caldon acknowledged, plunging that dagger deeper. “But mostly, he hates himself.”

The declaration caused Kiva’s eyes to snap open again.

“What?” she breathed.

“He hates that he trusted you,” Caldon said, his face serious. “He hates that he fell in love with you. He hates everything that happened — and he blames himself more than anyone. Including you.”

He hates that he fell in love with you.

The pain of those words slashed straight through Kiva, enough for Caldon to read it in her expression.

His own features softened as he said, “You’ve got some work ahead of you, Sweet Cheeks. I won’t lie.”

Kiva’s throat bobbed. “I know.”

“There’s some good news, though,” he went on, and Kiva looked up at him, unsure whether to risk feeling any kind of hope. “I’ve spent the last ten weeks filling him in on your . . . family situation,” Caldon said. “I can’t promise it did much good, but I explained everything I knew, and how you told Zuleeka you wanted nothing to do with the rebels.”

Kiva toed the dirt. “I still gave her everything she needed to —”

“You made mistakes, no one is denying that,” Caldon interrupted. “And you’re going to pay for them, trust me. But just . . . give him time. Deep down he knows you had nothing to do with that night, not intentionally. He’ll come around — eventually.” He paused. “And if it makes you feel any better, he was furious at me for not telling him about you. Took him

weeks to forgive me.” Caldon scratched his jaw. “Actually, he’s still pretty mad. But he’s speaking to me again, so that’s progress.”

Kiva grimaced. “I’m sorry for the position I put you in. I never meant to —”

“Quit saying sorry,” Caldon said, frowning. “I made my own choices, just as you did. I chose to believe in you, even knowing that it could end badly. But despite that, I wasn’t wrong — because you were exactly the person I thought you were all along. And I don’t regret trusting you.” His face darkened as he said, “That sister of yours, though . . .”

Kiva grabbed his hands and held his stormy gaze as she said, with feeling, “I’m going to make this right. I promise.”

Caldon linked their fingers and said, “*We’re* going to make this right. None of this ‘I’ business. You can’t just run off on your own again and stay gone for months, you hear me? I looked everywhere for you that first week, practically turned Vallenia inside out before I realized you must have fled the city. And then we had to leave —” He stopped suddenly, before asking, “Where the hell have you been, anyway?” Squinting at her, he added, “And what are you wearing? You look like someone’s grandmother.” He thumbed the ruffles of her apron, causing her to swat his hand away.

“I —” Kiva hesitated, realizing Caldon had no idea she’d been back in Zalindov. That meant Cresta must not have said anything — or she hadn’t yet had the chance. Instead of responding, Kiva asked, “My brother and Cresta, what are they doing here? Why are they tied up?”

Caldon’s golden eyebrows shot upward. “You’re kidding, right?”

Kiva matched his look, waiting for an answer.

The prince huffed out an amused breath, and said, “Your brother is the Jackal — the general of the rebel forces. What did you expect us to do?”

“You knew that before, and you didn’t arrest him,” Kiva pointed out. “In fact, you were attracted to him, last I heard.”

Caldon grinned, a wide flash of white in the darkness. “Trust me, that will never change.” He then sobered and said, “There was nothing I could do for him. He showed up here tonight and surrendered himself to the soldiers at the front gate. Said he didn’t care what we did to him as long as we helped find you.”

Kiva jerked.

“He’d barely said his name before he was taken into custody, the redhead with him.” Caldon cocked his head to the side, a new light entering

his eyes. “Cresta, is it? She’s a real firecracker.”

There was admiration in his voice, enough for Kiva to wonder if she should warn him away from the ex-quarrier or let him figure it out on his own. She decided to stay on task and said, “Why did Tor come here looking for me?”

“No idea,” Caldon answered. “We were just about to start questioning him when you arrived. You and —” He locked his jaw and turned to stare into the forest.

“Ashlyn,” Kiva said the name, her tone gentling. “I like your sister. She’s helped me a great deal in the last two days.”

Caldon said nothing, and Kiva was unsure how to proceed. But then she realized he was standing in a military base, a place he’d avoided ever since the death of his parents. Just like he’d avoided his sister. “Why are you here, Caldon?” she asked quietly. “We’re so far from Vallenia. You and Jaren . . . shouldn’t you be there?”

He exhaled loudly. “It’s a long story. But the brief version is, despite having the Royal Ternary, Zuleeka and Mirryn have been having trouble holding the throne. Legally, they’re the new queens of Evalon, but the people are . . . unhappy with the change of rulership.”

Kiva had already known as much. The Vallentis family had been beloved rulers — especially Jaren. “The People’s Prince,” they’d called him, eager for the day he would become their king.

“Aunt Ariana and Uncle Stellan were hostages in the palace,” Caldon went on. “Oriel, too. And then —” He broke off, seemed to gather himself, and said, “The turmoil was too much for Uncle Stellan. His condition — his blood illness — degenerated quickly, and he . . . he passed into the everworld.”

A soundless gasp left Kiva at the thought of the king — of Jaren’s *father* — dying.

She knew how it felt to have her father die. She hated that Jaren had suffered through that so soon after losing everything else, that she hadn’t been there for him, that she hadn’t even *known*.

Caldon cleared his throat and went on, “Everything became more chaotic after that, and Zuleeka focused the rebels on finding us, thinking Evalon would come to heel if Jaren was seen bowing to her. It became too dangerous for us to stay in Vallenia, but it was also difficult to leave, given everything with Naari.”

Hearing his voice catch on her name, Kiva asked, her pulse stuttering, “Naari? Is she all right?” She looked around as if expecting the guard to jump out of the bushes and throttle her for what she’d done. But there was no sign of her, just as she hadn’t been in the command center earlier.

“She’s . . . That night . . .” Caldon tried again. “Your sister did something to her. It’s . . . hard to explain.”

Kiva’s heart froze as she recalled Naari lying on the ground, bleeding and unconscious.

“She’s here. You can . . . see her soon,” Caldon said. The words eased something within Kiva, even if his tone was less than reassuring.

He shuffled his feet, then continued his story. “We knew the armies were still loyal to us, so we decided to meet up with Ashlyn at our central military base — Highworth Keep — and consult with her about our next steps. It took us weeks of travel, taking the back roads and avoiding people as much as possible, all while trying to care for Naari as best as we could. But when we finally arrived, we learned that Ash was in Mirraven spying on King Navok. The last missive she’d sent claimed she planned to leave soon, so we waited for her. But when more weeks passed and she didn’t appear, we grew restless and decided to travel north, figuring she’d stop at Stoneforge on her way back into Evalon.”

He waved a hand toward the base, and said, “When we got here, no one had heard from her, so we began to worry. We gave her a little more time before determining that something needed to be done, and we started planning a rescue mission. But, well . . . no need for that anymore.” Caldon shrugged. “So basically, the last ten weeks have been spent either hiding, traveling, or whiling away the days in military camps.” His gaze locked on Kiva’s bruised cheek as he finished, “And yet, something tells me that as much as I’ve hated every single minute, you haven’t had the best time yourself, wherever you’ve been.”

It was a leading statement, one Kiva didn’t want to answer. “You didn’t mention Tipp. Is he . . .” She struggled to ask, afraid of what he might say.

“He’s here,” Caldon said, and the air left Kiva in a relieved rush. But she almost choked on her next breath when he added, “He arrived tonight with Torell and Cresta. We didn’t bind him — it was clear he didn’t want to be anywhere near them. The moment he saw Jaren, he lost it. Cried almost as much as you did and latched on to him so tight I thought he’d never let

go. We had to shove a moradine tonic down his throat to calm him down. Poor kid was asleep in seconds.”

Kiva had trouble talking around the lump in her throat. “He came with Tor and Cresta? But . . . how? And — and *why?*”

The prince eyed her shrewdly. “Since you evidently don’t want to share your story yet, why don’t we go and find out theirs?”

Kiva sent him an apologetic look. She should have known he’d notice her deflecting every time he tried to question her. “I’m sorry, I know there’s a lot I need to tell you. It’s just . . .” She trailed off, unable to finish.

“What did I say about apologizing?” Caldon said, his eyes full of more understanding than she deserved. “We’ve got time. You’ll share when you’re ready.” He jerked his chin toward the base. “Now, come on, let’s go and get some answers.”

Chapter Eleven

Upon arriving back at the command center, Kiva did a stutter-step through the door when she saw that Jaren had returned. He stood with his arms crossed, his expression closed, his eyes avoiding her entirely. But he was there. And Ashlyn, too, standing at his side in a similar position, her maid's outfit making her look considerably less intimidating.

"Took you long enough," Ashlyn grumbled to Caldon, before turning to Kiva and asking, her voice much kinder, "Are you all right? Is your shoulder —"

"I'm fine," Kiva said quickly.

"What's wrong with your shoulder?" Caldon asked, peering from her left arm to her right, but her dress covered all evidence of the wound.

"Nothing," Kiva said, sending a warning look to Ashlyn, who cocked a pale eyebrow in response but thankfully didn't say anything else.

Jaren's expression hadn't changed — he'd clearly decided to ignore Kiva, and while she wanted to run into his arms and beg for forgiveness, she knew the best thing she could do was give him space. Caldon had seemed confident Jaren would warm up to her — *eventually* — so she just had to be patient and not push him into anything before he was ready.

But Kiva didn't feel like being patient. Not when he was so close, after being apart for so long. She unconsciously moved a step nearer to him, but a twitch of Cresta's head caught her attention, and Kiva looked toward the ex-quarrier only to see the warning in her hazel eyes.

Don't, Cresta seemed to be saying. You'll regret it.

Kiva bit her cheek hard enough to draw blood, but gave a nod of resigned understanding.

"Have you learned anything yet, Eidran?" Caldon asked, prompting Kiva's gaze to shoot to the unfamiliar young man, her eyes widening with realization.

Eidran was the name of the Royal Guard who had originally planned to infiltrate Zalindov, but he'd broken his leg, leaving Jaren to go in his place. From what Kiva had gleaned while eavesdropping on the Royal Council, he

was one of Evalon's best spies when it came to gathering rebel intelligence. Last she'd heard, he'd been recovering from his injury in Albree, but that had been months ago — he'd had plenty of time to heal and, apparently, find his way back to Jaren.

"The general said we should wait for you," Eidran answered, his voice quiet, calming even. Despite his formidable size, there was something very settling about him.

"Well, we're here now," Caldon said, offering no further explanation as he strode toward them, with Kiva quickly following. "Remove their gags, and let's hear what they have to say."

If Ashlyn was annoyed that her brother was giving the orders despite her outranking him, she didn't let on. Her focus was solely on Torell and Cresta as Eidran tugged the cloths from their mouths.

Immediately, Tor looked at Kiva and rasped, "Are you —"
"Quiet."

The word was low and brimming with barely restrained fury, a command even the bravest of souls would know not to ignore.

And it was said by Jaren.

It was the first time Kiva had heard his voice in weeks, and it took everything in her not to start tearing up again. She only managed because Cresta sent her another look, this one saying, *Get it together, you softhearted fool.*

Kiva fisted her hands until her fingernails dug into her palms. She was desperate to find out how her brother was there, what Cresta was doing with him, why Caldon had said Tipp hadn't wanted to be near them, and so many other things. But she knew better than to speak, the very air simmering with tension. She shot a pleading glance at Caldon, but he was too busy looking worriedly at Jaren to notice, so Kiva turned to Ashlyn. The princess held her eyes before offering a slight nod and stepping forward until she was in front of Tor.

"Torell Corentine," she said, "I'm Ashlyn Vallentis."

"I know who you are, General," he replied.

His emerald gaze was steady and full of respect, which seemed to take Ashlyn aback. But she rallied and said, "It takes either a brave man or a stupid one to turn himself in as you did tonight. You're wanted for treason, the penalty for which is a life sentence at Zalindov."

Kiva flinched, and all eyes shifted to her — including Jaren’s frosty gaze.

“Since we just came from there,” Cresta drawled, mercifully reclaiming their attention, “it’d be really annoying if you made us go straight back.”

Kiva sent her a grateful look, to which the redhead just rolled her eyes, as if reminding Kiva that it was becoming an irritating habit to save her — even from herself.

Ashlyn squinted at the ex-quarrier. “Have we met before? You look familiar.”

Cresta shrugged within the confines of her ropes. “Are you the one who arrested me five years ago?” When Ashlyn shook her head, Cresta said, “Then no, unless you’ve visited for Family Day in that time. Maybe we shared tea and cookies.”

Kiva resisted the urge to snort at the very *idea* of Zalindov hosting a “Family Day.”

Ashlyn’s mouth tightened, and she returned her focus to Torell. “You came here knowing that we’d —”

“Can we speed this up?” Cresta interrupted, shifting on her seat. “My ass is numb.” She jerked her chin toward Kiva. “You already know we’re here for her. Sure, we didn’t know she’d *be* here, so we got lucky with that. But now that we’re all together, how about you save time by leaving the threats and just asking your questions?” Cresta continued before anyone could respond, “I’ll start you off. This one” — her chin jerked toward Torell this time — “was unconscious during everything that went down with their sister at the palace.” Her hazel eyes locked with Jaren’s as she brutally added, “You know, the night you lost your throne and your magic?” She whistled through her teeth. “Not your best day.”

“*Cresta*,” Kiva hissed, the strangled word barely leaving her throat.

“What?” Cresta asked with fake innocence. “We all know what happened. Gods, you wouldn’t shut up about it for *weeks* at Zalindov. I’ve never seen anyone more broken, and that’s saying a lot, considering where we were.”

It was as if all the air had been sucked from the room. Kiva shut her eyes to block out what she might see — or *not* see — but then she felt a hand on her arm, and she reopened them to find Caldon’s pale face before her.

“You were back at Zalindov?” His voice was raw, as if he didn’t want to believe it.

Cresta snorted. “Where the hell did you think she was? After how much she’d come to care for you all, do you *really* think she would have stayed away of her own free will and not tried to fix things?” She snorted again. “Do you really think she would have stayed away from *him*?” Her gaze speared straight to Jaren again, and Kiva couldn’t resist looking as well, only to see him standing as still as death. His face remained blank, but his eyes —

They were blazing.

Kiva’s traitorous heart gave a thump of hope, but then he blinked and whatever he’d felt at the news of her being back at Zalindov vanished as swiftly as it had arrived.

“There was nothing she could do, though,” Cresta went on, her words landing like blows. “Warden Rooke sentenced her to the tunnels this time —”

A jerk of Jaren’s body had Kiva’s eyes flicking back to him, but he’d frozen again before she could decide whether she’d imagined it or not.

“— and when she arrived, she was too messed up from the —”

“*CRESTA!*” Kiva finally snapped. All eyes returned to her, including Jaren’s, and a panicked desperation came over her. He couldn’t learn about the angeldust — after the abuse he’d suffered from his mother’s addiction, Kiva feared it would only give him another reason to hate her. She might not have willfully chosen to use the drug, but she still recalled her darkest moments of begging Cresta for it. Her shame was suffocating, something she couldn’t stand the thought of him knowing about. And not just him — the others, too. So she cleared her throat and said, “It’s fine — I’m here, aren’t I? Yes, I was back at Zalindov, just for a little while. But I got out.” She held up her hands as if to prove she’d sustained no permanent damage, at least not physically. The scars on the inside . . . those were hers to bear alone.

“How did we not know?” Caldon asked, horror clear in his features.

Kiva wanted to reassure him that there was nothing he could have done, but Cresta answered before she could.

“Zuleeka and Mirryn snuck her out of Vallenia in secret. They knew she’d try to help you, and they wanted her out of the way.” The exquarrier didn’t mention the state Kiva had been in upon arrival — having clearly

noted Kiva's reaction to her previous attempt — and smoothly segued back to her earlier story. “That all happened straight after the masquerade, but when Torell woke the following day, he —”

“Why don't we let him tell his side of things?” Ashlyn cut in smoothly, her silvery eyes shifting to Tor's. “I'd like to hear it in his own words.”

Torell straightened in his chair. “After the attack, I woke up in —”

“Attack?” Ashlyn interrupted.

“Mirravens,” Caldon answered for Torell. “They kidnapped Kiva to bait Jaren.”

Ashlyn looked like she had more questions, but Caldon waved Tor on.

“Everything was hazy at first, but Rhessinda — my friend and second in command — helped me remember,” Torell said, his gaze unfocused in memory. “I'd been stabbed in the heart, but it wasn't by a Mirraven soldier — it was by Zuleeka.” He raised his eyes to Kiva's, his face haunted. “She nearly killed me. You saved me.”

The sudden spotlight on Kiva's healing magic was as subtle as a rabid bear in the corner of the room.

“Rhess filled me in on what had happened at the palace,” Tor went on. “She's never trusted Zuleeka, so as soon as she heard about the takeover, she moved me and Tipp from the rebel safe house to her hidden apartment in the city while we were both still unconscious.”

“Who is this Tipp I keep hearing about?” Ashlyn murmured.

“Unnaturally happy kid,” Cresta said, sounding bored. “Like a little brother to Kiva, until he learned she'd been lying to him for years. Keep up, would you?”

Ashlyn scowled at Cresta while Kiva fought back her pain from the too-candid answer, all while Torell continued, “That morning, I went to the palace and confronted Zuleeka. I'd had no idea that she —” He broke off, his eyes moving straight to Jaren. In a broken voice, he said, “I swear, I had no idea what she'd planned. If I'd known, I would have —”

“What?” Jaren said, his voice whip-sharp. “You would have what? Stopped her? You're a Corentine. The Jackal. The rebel general. Isn't this what you wanted? Congratulations, you succeeded.”

“Jaren, mate,” Caldon said quietly, moving closer to his cousin and placing a hand on his shoulder. “We talked about this.”

“No,” Jaren said, shrugging Caldon off. “*You* talked about this. Just because you believe he's more than what he seems, that doesn't mean *I*

have to. He's from a family of liars and murderers. Trust him all you want, but you'll only bring about your own ruin. Then you'll have no one to blame but yourself."

Jaren wasn't talking about Torell. Everyone in the room knew it, Kiva especially. Her eyes burned, every word like an arrow shooting into her chest.

"Gods, were you this dramatic when you were at Zalindov?" Cresta asked, pulling a face at Jaren. "No wonder I never liked you."

"Why are you here, Cresta?" he asked flatly.

"Tor isn't done yet," she replied, heedless to Jaren's mood. "He needs to finish before you can see how I fit into things."

Sensing everyone's patience was growing thin, Torell quickly summarized, "Zuleeka wouldn't tell me where Kiva was, and demanded that I help her take control of the kingdom. When I refused, she tried to attack me with her magic." There was enough disbelief in his tone to confirm he'd had no knowledge of her deadly power. "I only managed to escape because Mirryn arrived and talked some sense into Zuleeka, giving me a chance to flee."

Kiva's eyes widened at the thought of Mirryn intervening. Jaren, Caldon, and Ashlyn all showed visible reactions as well, making her wonder how they were dealing with the emotional fallout of her betrayal. Jaren especially.

"After that," Torell said, turning to Kiva, "it took me some time, but I found a witness from the masquerade who saw you being carried away by two guards. I assumed they were Royal Guards, so I lost even more time trying to hunt them down, only to learn they were transfer guards who had taken you back to Zalindov."

His sorrowful green gaze held hers. "I'd already abandoned you once — I wasn't going to let you rot in there a second time. But I also worried that the rebels might report what I was planning to Zuleeka, so I knew I had to go alone. Rhess agreed to stay behind as my eyes and ears inside Vallenia, and Tipp —" Torell looked down at his lap, before meeting Kiva's gaze again. "He was harder to convince, but he knew he couldn't go back to the palace while Zuleeka and Mirryn were there. Since he had nowhere else to go, he agreed to travel with me to Zalindov."

Kiva's heart shriveled, now understanding what Caldon had meant earlier. Unlike Torell and Cresta, Tipp wasn't there because he'd wanted to

find her. He was there because he'd had no other choice.

Painfully aware of how many people she'd hurt with her lies, Kiva only half listened as Torell explained how he and Tipp had stayed at the inn in Vaskin until they'd overheard some guards complaining about the new recruits who had finally arrived to replace those killed in the riot. Tor quickly realized that was something he could exploit, especially when the guards went on to laugh about "that healer girl" locked in the Abyss. It took a few days, but he eventually managed to corner a different guard and knock him out, before stealing his uniform and sneaking into the prison disguised as one of the recruits. Thanks to Tipp's reluctant sharing, Tor knew exactly where the punishment block was and headed straight there, only to find not Kiva, but Cresta.

"You'd already been taken by then, and I told him I'd only share where you'd gone if he got me out," Cresta said, shameless. "So he did."

Kiva had a feeling their escape wasn't as straightforward as they'd claimed, but she didn't pry for more details. Instead, she looked at Cresta and stated, "I would have come back for you."

Cresta's face was solemn. "I know." Her features filled with mirth as she added, "But now you don't have to get your ass stuck in there a *third* time because of some idiotic rescue attempt that was doomed to fail."

"Back up," Caldon interjected, looking between Kiva and Cresta. "Why did those guards say you were in the Abyss if you weren't?"

"Because I was," Kiva said, and she thought she saw Jaren give another twitch, just the faintest of movements. "Until Navok had me released."

This time she was certain Jaren gave a visible jerk.

"That part I *didn't* know," Cresta said. "I just lied to Tor so he'd get me out." She flashed an unrepentant grin — the expression transforming her face enough that Kiva heard Caldon suck in a swift breath — and said, "He wasn't very happy with me. Naughty Cresta."

Caldon coughed to hide his amusement, and Kiva shot him a warning look.

"Tipp was even less happy," Torell said, his tone revealing that he wasn't quite over Cresta's lie, even if they appeared to have reached a truce. "We had to come up with a new plan, but it was around then that we heard whispers that the Vallentis princes were with their army at Stoneforge, safe from Zuleeka's reach. So we headed here, hoping you'd be able — and willing — to help."

“He dragged me along, saying I owed him that much, but I would have come anyway out of curiosity,” Cresta said. “This has been the most entertainment I’ve had in years.” She wiggled her feet. “Well worth the blisters.”

Kiva eyed Cresta’s boots, taking in her travel-worn clothes properly for the first time. Somewhere along her journey she’d traded her prison tunic for a functional shirt and leggings, but both she and Torell were covered in dust and in need of a good wash.

Cresta yawned loudly, stretching her arms over her head. “As fun as this is, I’m tired. And hungry. Are we done yet?”

Caldon shifted forward, his cobalt gaze narrowed on her hands. Her *unbound* hands. “How did you —”

“Oh, was I supposed to wait to be freed?” she asked, picking up the untied ropes resting uselessly on her lap. “I’m afraid I missed the how-to-be-a-good-prisoner lecture on my first day at Zalindov.”

Despite the emotional trauma of the night, it took all of Kiva’s willpower to keep from laughing at the guileless expression the redhead was attempting to pull off.

“Eidran —” Ashlyn started.

“Never mind, I’ll do it myself,” Cresta muttered, retying her own ropes.

This time Kiva couldn’t hold back her snort, and was mortified when the frowns that had been focused on Cresta turned her way.

“Sorry,” she said. “It’s just — I mean —” She waved a hand weakly toward Cresta, as if that was answer enough.

Caldon returned the warning look she’d sent him mere moments ago, then came to her rescue by indicating between her and Ashlyn and saying, “You mentioned Navok. Is that how you two ended up together?”

Kiva nodded slowly, unsure how much she wanted to share about her own misadventures.

Ashlyn, however, had no such hesitation, and launched into an explanation of how she’d traveled to Mirraven to spy on the king, only to delay her return when she heard he was having Kiva collected from Zalindov.

“But why would he —” Caldton stopped mid-question and turned to Kiva. “The night of the masquerade, you’d just found out about a deal your family made with him, but you didn’t know what that deal was. Does this have something to do with that?”

Kiva rubbed her arms, stalling, but the look on Ashlyn's face told her that if she didn't explain, then the princess would.

"My mother" — Kiva struggled over the word when Jaren's expression tightened — "wanted to get to me in Zalindov. But she also wanted to, uh . . ."

"Take over Evalon," Cresta said, yawning again. "Blah, blah, evil queen, we all know this part."

Kiva frowned, but Cresta only winked in return, her serpent tattoo shifting with the movement.

Deciding just to get it over quickly, Kiva said, so fast that the words blurred together, "Mother allied the rebels with Mirraven."

The room stilled.

"She *what*?" Torell demanded.

Kiva swallowed and explained, "She said they'd help Navok's forces invade if he got her into Zalindov — and if a Corentine ended up on the throne. She, uh, didn't know about the Royal Ternary" — Kiva avoided looking at Jaren — "so she thought it was the best chance she had. Or at least, the quickest."

"Why would Navok agree to that?" Eidran asked, his head tilted in thought. He'd kept so quiet for most of their conversation that Kiva had nearly forgotten he was there. "He's wanted Evalon for too long to just conquer us and then hand over the crown."

Kiva dreaded sharing the answer, but once again, Ashlyn didn't hesitate.

"Navok retrieved Kiva from Zalindov to marry her," the princess said. "That was the deal Tilda made. Her daughter, for our kingdom."

Kiva stared at the ground, uncomfortably aware of everyone looking at her.

"She didn't," whispered Torell's agonized voice. "Kiva — tell me she didn't."

She said nothing. Did nothing. Just stood there, wishing for the earth to open and swallow her whole.

"And I thought my family had problems," Cresta murmured.

That made Kiva finally look up, ignoring everyone but the redhead as she said through clenched teeth, "You're not helping."

"It doesn't matter now." Ashlyn's voice was deliberately light, as if to ease the sudden waves of emotion in the room — emotion that wasn't coming from just Kiva and Torell.

Kiva didn't want to look, was *afraid* to look, but her gaze moved to Jaren without her permission.

His face —

His *eyes* —

He turned away and ran his hand through his tousled gold-brown hair. When he turned back again, his expression was blank once more.

But Kiva had seen it.

She hadn't imagined it.

He'd been horrified — for *her*.

And he wasn't the only one. Because unlike Jaren, Caldon didn't have a reason to deny what he felt, and the way he was looking at her . . .

"I'm all right," she said quietly, to him — but also to Jaren. "Ashlyn got me out in time."

"Not quite in time," Ashlyn said. "He *did* manage to torture you first."

Kiva's body locked, and she snapped, "*Ashlyn*," forgetting that she probably shouldn't speak to a princess — and a general — in such a tone.

But Ashlyn held her indignant gaze and said, "They need to know."

"*Why?*" Kiva demanded, throwing out her arms and wincing when the move pulled at her shoulder.

"They need all the facts so they can help us figure out why Navok agreed to the deal," Ashlyn said calmly. "And don't tell me you believe he said yes just so he could ally with the rebels. We both know it's more than that — something to do with your magic. Why else would he have been so desperate to see you use it? And so furious when you wouldn't?"

"Please," Kiva said, rubbing her forehead, "can we just —"

"And you're not the only thing we need to worry about when it comes to Mirraven," Ashlyn went on, ignoring Kiva's pleas. She turned to her brother and Jaren, and grimly revealed, "Navok has been collecting anomalies. Not one or two, but dozens. More than we ever thought existed. More than *should* exist. I don't know how he's finding them, but their numbers are growing, and they're seemingly loyal to him."

"*Dozens?*" Jaren repeated, eyes wide. "How is that possible?"

Anomalies were supposed to be incredibly rare. Kiva was still amazed that she'd encountered two in her lifetime — Xuru and Galdric. That Navok had found *dozens* . . . Anxiety welled within her as she wondered what he was planning.

“I wish I knew,” Ashlyn said, visibly unsettled. “Voshell found out and was furious. He feared Navok might use them as leverage against the whole of Wenderall, including Caramor, so he confronted him and demanded a guarantee of safety for his kingdom. But Navok didn’t like that Vosh wasn’t acting like a weak-minded pawn, and when Vosh threatened to break their alliance, Navok laughed and said, ‘Go ahead’ right before he —” Ashlyn exhaled unsteadily, before finishing, “Navok attacked him. If Serafine hadn’t interrupted them, Vosh would be dead right now, rather than on his way back to Terith and preparing to close Caramor’s borders. Mirraven’s closest ally — Navok willfully destroyed that. And he did it *laughing*. That means there’s more going on here than any of us realize.” Her focus returned to Kiva. “And something tells me it all has to do with you.”

Everyone in the room was as still as a statue listening to Ashlyn, even Cresta, who had paled significantly toward the end of the princess’s speech, as if finally realizing the gravity of what they faced.

But Kiva couldn’t think about Cresta, her mind too busy processing Ashlyn’s words. She wondered how badly Voshell had been hurt, whether the closing of Caramor’s borders would affect the rest of Wenderall, and what would happen to Serafine now that the alliance — and therefore her betrothal — had been broken. Her thoughts spun until she realized the others were all watching her, waiting for an answer.

“I already told you everything Navok said to me,” Kiva croaked to Ashlyn. “He thinks my magic” — she shot a quick look at Jaren, wincing as the damning word hung in the air — “can combat Zuleeka’s. But he’s wrong, because when I tried to fight her, I failed.”

“You didn’t,” Caldor disagreed, his unusually grave eyes on Kiva. “You broke her hold on us.”

Kiva shook her head. “That took almost everything I had, and it still wasn’t enough to keep her from — from —” Her eyes flicked to Jaren’s chest, right where Zuleeka had stabbed him, and she rasped out, “I couldn’t stop her. Whatever Navok thinks, whatever my mother told him, I’m not powerful enough.”

She turned back to Ashlyn, silently begging for help. The princess eyed her closely, then sighed and said, “I think we’ve all had enough for tonight. In the morning, we’ll talk with Galdric and see what he can tell us about Navok and Tilda. Hopefully he’ll be able to shed some light on the situation with the anomalies — and with Kiva.”

“Galdric?” Torell repeated, his forehead scrunching.

Kiva cursed quietly, having forgotten all about the supposedly dead ex-rebel leader who had likely already been delivered to the base.

After hearing their quick explanation about how he’d been waiting in Navok’s dungeon as a wedding gift for Kiva, Torell looked stunned, but Cresta just drawled, “This is lovely and all — weddings and reunions and people coming back to life — but have you decided what to do with us yet?” She held up her re-bound hands. “Can I take these off again?”

“No.”

The word came from multiple voices — all three Vallentis royals and Eidran — causing Cresta to grumble under her breath and slump down in her chair.

But then Caldon mused, “What *are* we going to do with them? She escaped Zalindov — do we just send her back? And Torell . . .”

Kiva’s heart jumped to her throat as he trailed off, and she turned pleading eyes to Ashlyn for what felt like the millionth time that night.

The princess sighed again and said, “Let’s sleep on it and figure that out in the morning. They came here for Kiva — they won’t try to escape without her.” To Eidran, she said, “Take them both to the barracks and allocate them bunks, but make sure they remain under watch all night.” When Cresta’s stomach rumbled loudly, Ashlyn added, “And have someone bring them some food.” To Kiva, she said, “You should eat, too. You haven’t had anything since breakfast.”

“That’s what happens when you knock me out for an entire day,” Kiva muttered, but her voice carried more than she’d intended.

“You knocked her out?” Caldon asked Ashlyn, his eyes narrowing.

“Only so she wouldn’t do anything stupid while I went to spy on Navok and Voshell,” she answered, brushing a wrinkle from her apron. “It was for her own good.”

Caldon frowned. “You make it sound like you were at Blackmount *today*. But Zадria is hundreds of miles away.”

As Eidran began to lead Torell and Cresta away — the former looking at Kiva like he wished he could stay by her side, and the latter merely yawning again — Ashlyn quickly explained about Galdric being an anomaly who had used his air magic to help them escape, causing wide eyes around the room. No one was more surprised than Torell, who heard

everything just before Eidran prodded him out the door, and who had clearly been oblivious to the ex-rebel leader's magical ability.

"Can you do the wind tornado thing?" Caldon asked Ashlyn, curiosity lighting his features. Kiva tried to focus on the conversation, but she was achingly aware that she was now alone in the room with the three Vallentis royals, one of whom would normally have been an active part of the magical discussion, but no longer had any power. Because of her.

"I'm not sure," Ashlyn said. "But that's something I'll be asking him tomorrow."

With how much they'd been through that day and all that was still ahead in the morning, Kiva felt suddenly exhausted and was desperate for someone to show her where she could sleep. But her night wasn't over yet, and she knew that when her eyes skittered toward Jaren, only to find him already staring back at her.

Her chest constricted, and she made herself hold his gaze, keeping her face as open and remorseful as possible. But her hopes for any kind of reconciliation were dashed when he turned to Caldon and said, "Bring her."

"Jar —"

"Now, Caldon."

Caldon planted his feet. "It's late, and she's been through —"

Kiva had no idea what was happening, but her alarm grew when Jaren leaned forward, his voice low as he repeated, much more firmly, "Now, Caldon."

And then he turned and strode out of the command center, clearly expecting them to follow.

Caldon swore and looked at Kiva with an apology in his eyes. "I know you must be tired, but this hopefully won't take long."

"What's going on?" Ashlyn asked, staring at the door, her face puzzled. "I know he's upset by . . . everything . . . but he's never acted this way before. Jaren's not the kind of person to lash out or —"

"He's been through a lot," Caldon defended him.

"We've all been through a lot," Ashlyn returned, her voice hard. "Some of us have even been through it alone, and still managed not to lose ourselves in the process."

Caldon flinched at the barely veiled reminder of how he'd avoided her for years, but he only said, "Jaren hasn't lost himself. The first few days after the masquerade were . . . not great . . . but he's adjusting well,

considering. He's only acting this way because of —" He stopped talking, but he didn't need to finish. They all knew Kiva being there was what had set Jaren off.

She blew out a breath and said, "Come on, we'd better follow him before he has something else to be angry at me about."

Caldon was reluctant, but when Kiva threatened to wander aimlessly around the base until she found Jaren herself, he finally led the way out of the command center, winding a path through the luminescent-lit military buildings. Ashlyn walked with them part of the way before stopping at the entrance to a watchtower that reminded Kiva a little too much of Zalindov. The princess waved them on, saying she'd find out what all the fuss was about later, but for now, she needed to locate Captain Jenaire and update her about the Mirraven situation.

Caldon said nothing as his sister disappeared into the tower, and Kiva wondered how she might encourage him to mend their relationship, before noting the set of his features and realizing that now wasn't the time. Instead, she kept in step with him and asked, "Where are we going?"

"To see Naari."

Kiva stumbled slightly. "Jaren wants me to see Naari? *Now?*"

Her insides twisted as she wondered how the guard would react to seeing her, after everything that had happened. Naari, who valued honesty and loyalty above all else.

When Caldon remained silent, Kiva's nerves grew, and she hedged, "Maybe we should wait until morning. I'd hate to wake her."

"That's exactly what we want you to do," Caldon murmured, but he said no more because they'd arrived at a clean-looking building with a healers' emblem carved into the side, indicating it was the base's infirmary.

Jaren was waiting just inside the door, impatience radiating from him as he grabbed Kiva by the arm and dragged her through the quiet, sterile space, past empty beds, right to the end of the room where a white curtain was drawn. Through all this, Kiva was aware of nothing but his warm fingers wrapped around her elbow, certain he had no idea he was touching her, even if she felt his strong yet gentle grip right into the very core of her being.

Her heart sang at his nearness, but the feeling evaporated when he released her to pull open the curtain, revealing Naari's still form lying beneath a white sheet.

The guard could have been sleeping, her amber eyes closed, her normally alert features relaxed.

But with a single glance, Kiva knew that wasn't the case, and she staggered backwards, colliding with Caldon, who had halted directly behind her.

She barely felt him steadying her, her horrified eyes locked on the guard — and on the familiar black shadows of Zuleeka's death magic swirling around Naari's body.

Chapter Twelve

“No,” Kiva whispered, staring at Naari’s unconscious form while hearing an echo of what Caldon had said earlier that evening:

Your sister did something to her. It’s . . . hard to explain.

“Heal her.”

The two hard words made Kiva turn from Naari to meet Jaren’s stormy gaze. The look on his face —

Kiva flinched and curled in on herself, unable to bear the fury in his eyes and, worse, the devastation.

“I — I’m not sure —” Her voice was choked, but she drew in a deep breath and admitted, “I don’t know how to heal this.”

Jaren’s expression didn’t change, so Kiva took a shaky step forward, touching a trembling hand to Naari’s skin. Her flesh was warm, her pulse strong. There were no wounds or signs of illness. If not for the unnatural shadows, everything about her seemed normal, healthy.

Zuleeka’s dark magic had swirled around Nanna Delora when Kiva had arrived at Murkwood Cottage, and soon after, Delora had died. But this was something different. It was as if Naari was in a coma, and if she’d been like this for weeks —

“How has she been eating? And drinking?” Kiva asked, her healer sensibilities kicking in, helping her push past her initial horror.

“She hasn’t been,” Caldon said. “She should have died from dehydration weeks ago. She should have wasted away to nothing. But instead” — he indicated her perfectly fit physique — “it’s like she’s frozen in time, kept alive by Zuleeka’s magic, but also kept, well . . . like *this*.”

Kiva marveled at what her sister’s power was capable of, even as every part of her recoiled.

“Heal her,” Jaren ordered again, his hands bunched into fists.

Kiva bit her lip. “I told you, I don’t know if I —”

She stopped abruptly when Jaren’s eyes trapped hers, like twin pools of raging fire, and he said, “It’s the least you can do after everything *else* you’ve done.”

That was a direct hit, straight to Kiva's heart. It took her a moment to fight the tears that wanted to pour from her eyes, and she only managed because Caldon moved closer, offering his silent support. *Give him time*, he'd said. But Kiva was beginning to fear that all the time in the world wouldn't help mend her relationship with Jaren.

Healing Naari was a good place to start, though.

Determined to make at least *one thing* right between them, Kiva reached through the shadows to lay her hands over the guard's chest. She refused to think about how temperamental her magic had been of late, and instead closed her eyes and focused on the power in her blood, coaxing it to the surface. Without a discernible injury or sickness, Kiva concentrated on the death magic itself, willing her golden light to appear and destroy its hold on Naari. Last time she'd only managed to break Zuleeka's power by recalling her grandmother's words: *Be the light in the dark*.

She repeated those same words to herself now.

Be the light in the dark.

I am the light in the dark.

But even without opening her eyes, Kiva knew nothing was happening, and her shoulders began to slump as fear and sadness took hold.

This was Naari — Kiva *needed* to save her, to heal her. It should have been instinctive, her magic flowing on command, and yet, not even a hint of light appeared, no matter how hard she tried to summon it forth.

"You can do this," Caldon encouraged quietly from her side, sensing her flailing spirit.

But he was wrong.

Kiva withdrew her hands and didn't look at anyone — not Caldon, not Naari, especially not Jaren — as she said, "I'm sorry." The words broke. "There's something wrong with my magic. I don't know what it is, but I can't — I can't heal her."

She wasn't surprised when the next thing she heard was Jaren's angry footsteps moving away from them. She'd failed him. She'd failed Naari. She'd failed —

"Hey, stop that," Caldon said, grabbing her hands and opening her palms to keep her nails from tearing her flesh. "You're just tired. We can try again tomorrow."

Tomorrow wasn't going to change anything, but Kiva didn't say as much, certain that if she opened her mouth, she'd only start sobbing again.

“Let’s get you to bed,” Caldon said gently, wrapping his arm around her and guiding her away from Naari.

Kiva didn’t look back as they walked away, knowing it was cowardly and hating herself for it. In an emotion-clogged, painful-sounding voice, she asked, “Can you take me to Tipp?”

Caldon tensed at her side, even as he continued leading her from the infirmary back out into the night. “The moradine tonic —”

“I won’t disturb him,” Kiva said, aware that the sleeping draft Tipp had taken would keep him unconscious until morning. “I just want to be near him. I want to be there when he wakes.”

Caldon hesitated for another moment. “I don’t think this is your best idea.”

Despite his warning, he turned and led her in a different direction, until they eventually came to a large utilitarian building shaped like an L.

“Most of the soldiers sleep in shared dormitories,” Caldon said, pointing to the longer side of the L, “but guards with higher rankings have private quarters. Jaren and I were given two rooms in this block when we arrived, and we found another for Tipp earlier tonight. He’s in here.”

Even knowing Tipp would be asleep, Kiva’s pulse sped up as Caldon opened the door to the building. Together they traversed a quiet hallway full of more doors leading to individual rooms, until he brought her to a stop in front of one of them.

Kiva’s breath hitched when she stepped inside the darkened room and caught sight of Tipp sleeping on a bed in the corner. His mouth was open, and he was snoring lightly, his freckled face at peace. The last time she’d seen him, he’d had tears in his eyes after learning the truth about who she was, and then Zuleeka had knocked him unconscious. Kiva knew she had a lot to answer for, but just being near him again and knowing he was safe eased something within her.

“There’s only one bed,” Caldon said quietly. “I’ll go find you a —”

“I’ll sleep on the floor,” Kiva said, already moving to Tipp’s side and sliding down to the ground.

“You’ll wake up sore all over,” Caldon argued.

“I’ve slept in worse places,” Kiva said, the shower block at Zalindov coming to mind, along with the Abyss. “I’ll be fine.” Unable to resist, she brushed a tendril of red hair off Tipp’s forehead.

Caldon sighed loudly, then moved toward Kiva and lowered himself beside her.

She looked at him in confusion. “What are you doing?”

“If I end up with a cricked neck, you’re giving me a massage tomorrow,” he said, leaning his head against Tipp’s mattress, his long legs stretched out in front of him. He closed his eyes and said, “Go to sleep, Kiva.”

She couldn’t keep the tears from welling this time, knowing he was only staying there for her.

“Gods, don’t start crying again,” Caldor mumbled, somehow sensing her overflowing emotions, even with his eyes closed. “Come here.” He reached out blindly and drew her closer until her head rested on his shoulder, and only then did he repeat, “Sleep, Kiva.”

And so, curled up next to him, she tried to calm her aching heart enough to follow his command.

Despite her best efforts, it took Kiva hours to fall asleep that night. When she finally woke in the morning, the first thing she noticed was that both Tipp and Caldor were gone.

Hurt flooded her as she realized Tipp must not have wanted to see her, but before she could let the pain take root, the door to the room opened. She looked up, her hopes rising, only to see Ashlyn step through, dressed in the same leather-like armor as her guards, only her outfit was white, rather than black, making the weapons strapped to her body stand out in stark contrast.

“Wow, you look thrilled to see me,” the princess said dryly.

“Sorry,” Kiva said, standing up and stretching her stiff muscles. “I thought you were someone else.”

Ashlyn’s face turned sympathetic. “They just need —”

“Time,” Kiva said glumly. “I know.”

Thankfully, the princess didn’t offer false comfort. “I brought you some breakfast. Cal said he forgot to get you some food last night, so you need to eat.” She held out a plate, then lowered a canvas bag from her shoulder to the ground. “I brought some of my clothes, too. When you’re ready, I’ll take you to the bathing chamber, but I want to check your burn first to make sure it’s healed enough to get wet.”

Kiva wrinkled her nose as she took the food. “You’re very pushy. Just like your brother.”

“He and I are as similar as we are different,” Ashlyn said, a pained note in her voice.

Carefully, Kiva hedged, “Can I ask —”

“Eat,” Ashlyn ordered, making it clear that she didn’t want to talk about Caldon. “We have a lot to do today, starting with Galdric.”

At the mention of the ex-rebel leader, Kiva obediently started shoveling eggs and beans and toast into her mouth. She finished the plate in record time and then, at Ashlyn’s urging, pushed aside her collar so the princess could inspect her wound. The tight fit of the material made it difficult to see the whole burn, so Kiva had to unlace the front of the dress and wriggle out of the sleeves, leaving her standing in the middle of the room holding the bodice to her chest, her bare back facing the door.

She didn’t hear it open.

But she did hear the growled, “What the *hell?*”

Kiva whipped around, her eyes as wide as saucers. She gripped the dress tighter, quickly checking to make sure it was fully covering her front, even knowing that a greater damage had already been done.

Because Jaren was standing in the doorway, and given what he’d said — and *how* he’d said it — he’d clearly seen her shoulder.

In three long strides he was standing before her and ordering, “Turn around.”

Kiva was frozen to the spot.

“Jaren —” Ashlyn tried, a careful warning in her voice, but he cut her off.

“Kiva, *turn around.*”

It was the sound of her name on his lips that unfroze her, and her eyes shot to his. There was something in his expression that she didn’t dare read into, needing to protect her broken heart.

But even so, she saw it.

He was concerned — for *her*.

And for some reason, that terrified her.

Kiva began trembling visibly enough that Jaren noticed. His face changed then, gentling slightly, transforming him not quite into the Jaren she’d once known, but close.

Quieter, he said, “Please, Kiva. Turn around and let me see.”

She couldn’t deny his soft, pleading voice, so she turned, baring her shoulder to him, and hearing his swift intake of breath.

“Who did this to you?” he asked, in that same quiet tone, but now it was brimming with something else: anger.

Kiva’s mouth was too dry to speak, so Ashlyn answered for her.

“I told you last night — Navok wanted to see her healing magic. When she refused, he had one of his anomalies hit her with a fireball, burning straight through to the bone. He didn’t realize she can’t heal herself. And before you ask, it happened yesterday. I had to give her *Serpent’s Kiss* just so we could escape last night.”

“*Serpent’s Kiss*?” Jaren repeated, sounding horrified. “Are you insane? You could have killed her!”

“It was that or leave her there to marry the bastard,” Ashlyn defended. “Since when do you care, anyway?”

The words were said as a challenge, but they prompted an icy silence, during which Kiva couldn’t bring herself to turn back around and face Jaren. She didn’t know what his reaction meant, whether his concern was out of habit, or whether some part of him *did* still care for her. Either way, her heart felt lighter than it had in months, until —

“Galdric is awake.” Jaren shared his reason for being there, his tone now emotionless, as if Ashlyn’s question had indeed reminded him about his feelings. “He won’t talk without Kiva being present. Everyone is waiting for you both.”

Kiva spun around just in time to see Jaren disappearing through the doorway.

Ashlyn winced. “Sorry. I saw the look on his face, and I just — I thought that would go differently.”

“It’s not your fault,” Kiva said, releasing a frustrated breath. “I’m as surprised as you that he . . .” She trailed off, feeling foolish for even *thinking* the word “cared.”

“Love isn’t something you can turn on and off at will,” Ashlyn said gently. “From what I just witnessed, whatever Jaren once felt for you hasn’t changed, no matter how hard he might be trying to ignore it.”

“That’s what makes this so hard, though,” Kiva said, staring woefully at the empty doorway. “He’s torturing himself. No — *I’m* torturing him, just by being here. I’m a constant reminder of everything he’s lost.”

“I think you might not be giving him enough credit,” Ashlyn said, helping relace Kiva’s dress. “Jaren is one of the smartest people I know. You lied to him and betrayed him, but from what I’ve heard, you also chose

him over your own family. And *you* didn't stab him with the Eye of the Gods — you saved his life. He's acting emotionally right now, but he'll come to his senses. You'll see."

Kiva appreciated Ashlyn's confidence, even if she struggled to feel the same way. And yet, as she followed the princess to the communal bathing chamber and showered quickly before donning her new clothes — leathery white armor almost identical to Ashlyn's — she couldn't help envisioning Jaren's face again. Not the angry, blank expression he'd worn for most of their reunion, but the gentle, softer look he'd revealed upon seeing she was injured.

That was her Jaren.

He was still in there.

And that, more than anything else, allowed her to hope.

Chapter Thirteen

Galdric was waiting for them in the command center, sitting comfortably at the head of the rectangular table. His bruises had faded slightly, his hair was clean and tied back in a leather band, his beard was trimmed short and neat, and he'd been given a fresh set of clothes, making him look like an entirely new person.

The moment Kiva entered the room beside Ashlyn, Galdric's brown eyes locked on her — as did everyone else's.

Just like last night, Jaren, Caldon, and Eidran were all there, but to her surprise, so were Torell and Cresta, both unbound and, like Galdric, much cleaner and wearing new clothes — in black, like Jaren and Caldon and the rest of the outpost soldiers. When Kiva looked at Ashlyn in question, she just shrugged and said, “We have bigger problems to deal with right now. We can decide their fates later.”

Kiva offered a grateful nod and moved directly toward her brother. No longer fettered by ropes, he drew her into a tight embrace, but released her immediately when she sucked in a pained breath.

“What's wrong?” Torell asked, looking her over.

“Nothing,” Kiva said, ignoring her aggravated shoulder. “Just stiff from sleep.” She turned to Caldon before Tor could call her on her lie and asked, “Where's Tipp?”

“He's with Naari,” Caldon answered, causing renewed guilt to churn within Kiva. “He, uh, got up early and didn't want to wake you.”

Now Caldon was the one who was lying, but Kiva repressed what she was feeling and focused on why they had all gathered, returning her attention to Galdric.

He was still watching her closely, so she walked toward him and took a seat at the table, with everyone else doing the same around her.

Before she could decide how to begin her questioning, Galdric spoke first.

“Whatever you think you know, you're wrong.”

The words echoed around the room, causing Kiva to frown, and she wasn't alone.

"Perhaps you'd like to expand on that," Caldor said, seated next to Kiva and giving her hand a quick, reassuring squeeze under the table. "I suggest you start at the beginning."

Galdric turned his soulful eyes to Torell. "Your mother never wanted to hurt anyone. You know that."

Tor clenched his jaw and said nothing.

"Everything you think she did, that was never her," Galdric said, his voice begging them all to believe him. "The first time she channeled Torvin's dark magic, she instantly knew it was a mistake, and she swore never to do it again. But then Zuleeka learned that she could use it too, and she *liked* how that power made her feel. She enjoyed hurting people, *killing* people. Tilda saw it happening, and she didn't know what to do, so she covered for Zuleeka and took the blame, making everyone think it was her. But every horror story you've heard about the Rebel Queen — it was always Zuleeka."

"You expect us to believe that?" Ashlyn asked, resting her elbows on the table.

"It's the truth," Galdric said. "It's the reason Tilda was so desperate to free Kiva from Zalindov. She risked everything by going to Navok for help." He turned to Kiva and said, "She never meant for you to marry him — she was going to renege on the deal as soon as you were out. I swear, that was the plan."

Like Torell, Kiva said nothing, but her heart was pounding with uncertainty.

"You're the only one who can save your sister," Galdric declared.

"Save her?" Ashlyn repeated, her silvery gaze narrowed.

Galdric nodded. "From herself," he said. "Kiva's magic can heal the darkness out of her, destroying her power entirely."

Navok had implied something similar, but still . . . Kiva remained unconvinced.

"Tilda couldn't do it herself," Galdric went on, "since once a Coarentine uses death magic, their healing ability becomes significantly less powerful. Kiva was — *is* — the only chance Zuleeka has. The only chance we *all* have, should Zuleeka decide to test the limits of her magic. If you knew what she could do . . ." He shuddered visibly.

“I think we have a pretty good idea by now,” Jaren said, his expression dark.

“Forgive me, Your Highness, but I doubt that,” Galdric argued. “Zuleeka is still coming into her power. Whatever you’ve seen is nothing compared to what she’ll be able to do with more time and practice. If left unchecked, she’ll be able to bring the world to its knees — and I mean that literally.”

Kiva recalled the feeling of being trapped by Zuleeka’s power, her own body refusing to listen to her. If Galdric was telling the truth and Zuleeka’s magic *was* still growing . . .

Everworld help them.

“So, according to you, Tilda went to Navok for help getting Kiva out of Zalindov, all to stop — sorry, *save* — Zuleeka,” Ashlyn summarized, tapping her fingernails on the table. “Why go to so much trouble? This one” — she jabbed her thumb toward Torell — “got that one” — another thumb jab toward Cresta — “out without breaking a sweat. And while that only happened because there are so many new guards after the riot that no one noticed anything awry, it still proves that there are other jailbreak options that *don’t* require making deals with foreign kings.”

Galdric’s face fell as he said, “Tilda wasn’t thinking clearly. The death magic wanted to be released, and she kept repressing it. But it was like holding back the tide, and when she refused to let the power leave her, it filled her up on the inside, making her sick, slowly killing her.”

Kiva’s eyes met Torell’s. The blood illness — the one that had caused their mother’s ailing health and blindness. Nanna Delora had said it was the death magic that had caused it, but Kiva had assumed that meant Tilda had been *practicing* the magic, not resisting it. She wanted to believe Galdric, to not despise the mother she’d once loved, but there was still so much that didn’t add up.

“You’re saying she went to Mirraven because she wasn’t thinking straight?” Jaren asked, his skepticism clear. “If that’s the case, why didn’t you stop her?”

“I tried,” Galdric said, laying his hands out before him. “I followed her, told her we had other options. But she was so far out of her mind with worry, consumed by the single thought of getting to Navok, that she attacked me. She nearly killed me.”

The bloodied cloak the rebels had found — that *had* been caused by Tilda, Kiva realized.

“She didn’t mean to,” Galdric said quieter. “She felt awful afterward, and she healed me as best as she could, but her healing magic wasn’t what it once was. Even so, I refused to leave her, and she refused to give up her plan, so we continued to Zадria, with me trying to talk sense into her the whole way. By the time we arrived, my wounds had become infected, and I —” He shut his eyes and admitted, “There was nothing I could do to stop her. I was unconscious when she made her deal with Navok — I only learned the extent of it when she was already on her way to Zalindov. And then I was locked in Navok’s dungeon as collateral to ensure she would return with her promised daughter.” He looked at Kiva again and shared, “Navok couldn’t go and get you himself — not then. He couldn’t risk drawing attention to what he was planning. But after everything with the Trial by Ordeal and you ending up at the River Palace and then Zuleeka’s takeover, well . . .” Galdric shrugged. “When you returned to Zalindov, he didn’t care so much about hiding his intentions.”

Silence fell as they processed his words, but then Caldon said, his tone just as skeptical as Jaren’s had been, “You sure know a lot for a man who’s been locked in a dungeon for six months.”

“Navok liked to visit me,” Galdric answered, staring at his hands. “He wanted to hear about the rebels, about Zuleeka’s magic, about a lot of things. But mostly, he wanted to talk. To *gloat*. It was clear he never planned on releasing me, so he felt safe telling me things I’m guessing he’s now regretting.”

Ashlyn leaned forward. “What kinds of things?”

Before Galdric could answer, a loud snort caused all eyes to turn to Cresta.

“Don’t tell me we’re believing this guy?” she asked, sounding amused. She pointed a finger at Galdric and said, “I think you’re a clever man who has had plenty of time to come up with a version of events that makes you feel better. And from what you’ve said, you now expect us to throw Kiva at her psychotic sister, all so she can, what? Save the world?” Cresta snorted again. “She can barely keep herself alive, let alone the rest of us.” She waved a dismissive hand. “And besides, her magic isn’t working. So if you want to stop Zuleeka — *save* her, whatever — then you’re going to need another plan.”

Galdric's gaze fastened on Kiva, his concern palpable. "What's wrong with your magic?"

Kiva shifted in her seat and didn't answer.

"How much training have you had?" Galdric pressed. Seeing her face, he added, "You *have* been training, haven't you?"

"Considering she spent the last ten years hiding who she was from, oh, *everyone*," Cresta said dryly, "I think it's safe to assume the answer to that is a big fat no." She chuckled darkly and added, "Can you imagine her swanning around the River Palace throwing her healing magic everywhere? I'd have paid to see that."

Kiva scowled at Cresta. "I don't *swan*. I don't even know what that means."

"Of everything I just said, *that's* what you —"

"Ladies, please," Caldon cut Cresta off, though Kiva saw his lips twitching, and she shifted her scowl to him.

"You need to start training immediately," Galdric said, reclaiming everyone's attention. "Magic is like a muscle; you need to exercise it to strengthen it. And you need to be strong if you're to survive against —"

"This has nothing to do with strengthening it," Kiva interrupted, feeling sick at the thought of facing her sister again. "I can't even *access* it at the moment. Something about it — about *me* — is broken."

It was difficult to admit the truth, but if what happened with Naari last night was any indication, her problem was only getting worse.

"When was the last time you used it without issue?" Galdric asked.

Kiva wished they could have this conversation in private. "Ten weeks ago." She didn't mention the masquerade, only said, "I . . . used a lot of magic that day."

"She healed me from a fatal wound," Torell shared.

"She also healed Jaren from one a few hours later," Caldon said, making Kiva fight to keep her eyes from drifting toward the crown prince. "And just before that, she destroyed Zuleeka's hold on us. The entire room lit up from the power of her magic."

"Did she just overdo it?" Ashlyn asked, frowning slightly. "Ten weeks is a long time. She should have recovered by now."

Kiva fiddled with one of the many buckles on her outfit, uncomfortable with their collective focus being on her.

“No, that’s not it,” Galdric said, his tone thoughtful enough that Kiva looked up to find him watching her closely.

Too closely.

“You’re afraid, aren’t you.”

The ex-rebel leader’s words were soft, a statement rather than a question.

Kiva stiffened.

“Now that you know what your magic can do, how it can be used for both good or evil, you’re terrified,” Galdric said quietly. “You’re so scared of your own power that you’re sabotaging yourself. That’s why your magic isn’t working — because you’re stopping *yourself*.”

A quick denial rose on Kiva’s lips. “I’m not —”

“They had to choose, you know,” Galdric said over her. “Tilda, Zuleeka — they had to actively *decide* to use their magic for evil. Your mother instantly regretted her decision, as I told you before. But it wasn’t something that happened *to* them. They *made* it happen.” He leaned forward and held her eyes. “You are who you decide to be, Kiva. Good or bad, it’s *your* decision. Your magic is a tool — *you* wield *it*, not the other way around. It can’t turn you into someone you don’t want to be. That’s not how it works.” His tone softened as he finished, “You don’t have to fear your magic. But you do need to nurture it, embrace it, strengthen it. And when you do . . . Kiva, you could change the world. *Heal* the world.”

Kiva was breathing too fast, painfully aware of everyone looking at her. “I don’t want to change the world,” she said hoarsely. “I just want everyone I care about to be safe.”

The intensity didn’t leave Galdric. “They won’t be, as long as your sister stands unchallenged. But you already know that, don’t you?”

Kiva swallowed and looked down, unable to respond.

A strained pause settled upon them all, until Caldon said, his tone purposefully light, “Well, that’s something we can add to the to-do list. Magical training for Kiva. Check.”

She didn’t have it in her to send him a grateful look, nor could she give one to Ashlyn when the princess changed the subject by saying to Galdric, “You mentioned Navok shared things with you. Did he ever talk about the anomalies he’s been collecting? And why?”

Galdric’s gaze moved from Ashlyn to Caldon to Jaren, until he seemed to come to a decision and said, “I’ve dedicated my life to seeing your

family removed from power.”

All three Vallentis royals turned rigid.

“From birth, I was raised believing a Corentine should sit on Evalon’s throne,” Galdric stated. “I never wavered, not even after I learned about Torvin’s magic turning dark. It wasn’t until I started seeing the damage for myself that I began to understand. Zuleeka’s power —” He shook his head woefully. “I was wrong. Even *Tilda* was wrong. We should have left well enough alone.” He looked at Torell, who was sitting frozen and pale. “You were right, that night you came to me and said we weren’t making anything better. *We* were the problem, you said.” Galdric’s voice dropped to a whisper. “I wish I’d listened to you.”

Kiva wasn’t sure if Torell was even breathing, but she did see Ashlyn and Jaren staring at her brother, unable to hide their surprise. Caldon just looked smug, as if silently saying *I told you so* to his family.

In a stronger voice, Galdric continued, speaking again to the Vallentis royals. “Something changed in me when Tilda and I went to Zadria. Once I was away from the rebel camp, I gained enough perspective to see the cost of our rebellion, the pain we were causing the people of Evalon, and I realized the price wasn’t worth it. That’s why I’m going to answer your questions about Navok — because I think we made a mistake. *I* made a mistake. And I want to help rectify that, if you’ll let me.”

He didn’t wait for their response, just inhaled deeply and revealed, “The anomalies — Navok has been hunting them for months, ever since he became king. They’re not as rare as people think, with their magic often being inherited from generation to generation. But they don’t like to draw attention to their numbers for fear of how they’ll be treated — or used — so they live in hiding, spread out across all of the kingdoms. Most live in secret magical communities, and when Navok became aware of those, he sent out expert trackers to locate them. He mentioned three communities to me — one in Jirva, one in Hadris, and one in Valorn.” Galdric paused. “I don’t know how he convinces them to travel to Mirraven, whether he pays them or threatens them. But I do know he has a few hundred at his command now, all of whom have recently begun training their powers for combat. They’re his own budding magical army — and assuming they remain devoted to him, it won’t be long before he puts them into action.”

“A magical *army*?” Torell breathed in horror, right as Ashlyn gasped out, “A few *hundred*?”

The princess had estimated dozens last night, but by the sounds of it, Navok had collected significantly more than that.

Galdric's expression was solemn. "At least."

The number was nothing compared to the size of Evalon's armies, but there was an immeasurable difference between a soldier armed with a sword and one armed with magic. Even Cresta looked unsettled by the news, and very little fazed her.

"Can any of them do that wind thing that brought you three here so quickly yesterday?" Caldor asked, his body tense. "We've been monitoring the borders closely, but if they don't have to physically walk through them . . . Should we be preparing for an imminent attack?"

Dread churned in Kiva's stomach, until Galdric shook his head and said, "No, windfunneling is a closely guarded family secret. I'm the only anomaly in my bloodline for generations, but my distant ancestors were air elementals, and they made sure the technique wouldn't be forgotten. As far as I know, there's no one else alive with the knowledge of how to do it."

"Can it be taught?" Ashlyn asked. "This windfunneling?"

"It'll take Navok's anomalies a long time to figure it out, without someone instructing them. Years. Decades, even," Galdric answered.

"Not them," Ashlyn said. "Can it be taught — to *me*."

Galdric sat back in his seat, taking a moment to decide whether his allegiances truly had shifted enough to reveal something so secretive to his once-enemy. But finally he said, "I've never tried to teach anyone, but we can give it a go." He then warned, "It won't be easy."

"I'm not afraid of a challenge," the princess said coolly.

Galdric opened his mouth to reply, but Jaren got in first. If he was upset that his cousin was about to learn a rare magical skill, he hid it well, but Kiva's heart ached for him all over again.

"There's something I still don't understand," he said, his golden brows scrunched. "Why did Navok agree to Tilda's deal?" To Ashlyn, Jaren added, "You were right last night — it has to be more than just allying with the rebels, especially if he has these anomalies. Why would he agree to marry a Corentine? And why Kiva specifically, rather than Zuleeka?" His gaze narrowed as he watched Galdric, who was now squirming in his seat. "What aren't you telling us?"

As they all stared at the ex-rebel leader, he grew visibly distressed, until he finally lost his composure and covered his bruised face with his hands.

“I didn’t want to tell him. I swear I didn’t.” Galdric’s words were muffled by his fingers. “But he figured out I was hiding something, so he hurt me, and I —” He made a sound that was full of regret.

“Tell him *what?*” Ashlyn’s voice was as hard as her expression.

Galdric removed his fingers, his weathered features wretched as he answered, “About the Hand of the Gods.”

He seemed to be bracing for their reactions, but Kiva looked around the table to find puzzled faces mirroring hers.

Noting this, Galdric explained, “You know about the Eye of the Gods, how it was gifted to Sarana and had the power to take away Torvin’s magic?”

“We’re aware of it, yes,” Jaren said shortly, causing Kiva to wince and sink deeper in her chair.

“Well,” Galdric said, “the ancient gods bestowed another gift, long ago, back when Torvin was still using his magic for good. It was given to both him and Sarana when they were ruling the kingdom together.” He took a deep breath and revealed, “The Eye of the Gods destroys magic. But the Hand of the Gods *creates* it.”

Kiva turned as still as a statue, her eyes instantly flicking to Jaren.

“What does that mean?” Caldon demanded.

“You’ve never wondered where magic came from? How the early anomalies received their powers?” Galdric asked. “The Hand of the Gods gifted magic to people. Elemental magic, that is. I’ve never heard of anyone outside of the Corentine line having healing magic. Or death magic, for that matter. In all my research, I’ve yet to understand why that —”

“Focus,” Cresta said sharply. “Why did Navok want to know about the Hand of the Gods?”

“I’m assuming you’ve realized by now that he wants to conquer not just Evalon, but all the kingdoms in Wenderall?” Galdric asked, to which he received stiff nods in response. “That’s his goal, but there’s one thing he’s always wanted *more* than that. It’s another reason why he’s been gathering the anomalies — Navok is obsessed with magic. When he heard a rumor years ago that it might be possible for him to obtain his own powers, he became fixated on finding out how.” Galdric swallowed. “I told you he kept me in Zadria to ensure Tilda would return with Kiva, but that wasn’t the whole truth. He’d also learned that I come from a long line of Torvin sympathizers, with forgotten ancient knowledge having been protected and

passed on through my family. I tried — I couldn't — He —” Galdric pulled himself together and quietly said, “He was going to kill me if I didn't tell him what I know.”

“What *do* you know?” Caldon asked, sitting rigidly beside Kiva. “What did you tell him?”

“Everything,” Galdric said miserably. “That's why he wants Kiva so badly. Because without her, the Hand won't work. But with her, he has the potential to gain his own magic.”

“*Explain* that,” Jaren said, his eyes aflame. “A proper explanation this time. Everything Navok knows, we need to know.”

Galdric didn't hesitate. “The Hand of the Gods was intended to be used by both Torvin and Sarana together, since it was a symbol of their peaceful union and the prosperity they wished not just for their kingdom, but the entirety of Wenderall. As such, it can only work by combining Vallentis magic and Corentine magic — healing magic, that is, not death magic.” His eyes locked with Kiva's startled ones. “You're the last remaining Corentine with healing magic. Navok *needs* you. He also needs Vallentis magic, but” — he waved toward the royals — “there are a few who he could use, including Princess Mirryn — sorry, Queen Mirryn — who is already working with him. But you, Kiva . . .” Galdric's expression turned remorseful. “Navok heard from your mother that you were powerful, so initially he wanted you for that alone, especially when he learned what Zuleeka could do. But once I told him about the Hand, he wasn't going to stop until you were his. He still won't.”

Kiva's heart was roaring in her chest. “What *is* the Hand?” Her voice tightened with dread as she added, “Does Navok already have it?”

“No, thank the gods,” Galdric said, causing everyone to relax — slightly. “It's four rings, each representing an element, and it only works when Vallentis magic is pushed into them — one for earth, one for air, one for fire, and one for water.”

Kiva thought about the amulet she wore beneath her clothes, and how, when it was imbued with magic, it could protect her from the elements. The four rings sounded as if they had similar power-absorbing abilities, with the added benefit of *gifting* magic, not just protecting from it.

“Once Sarana's magic was in the rings,” Galdric said, “Torvin wore them all at once, coaxing his own healing magic through them, focusing his power to merge with Sarana's. That was all it took to, essentially, *fuse* the

elemental magic into another person.” His voice lowered. “When Torvin started using death magic, the Hand stopped working. But Sarana was concerned about him having children one day who might inherit his healing power, since she knew if they came for the rings, he’d be able to build his own magical army —”

Much like what Navok was already doing without the Hand, Kiva thought, her anxiety growing.

“— so she separated them and had her closest allies from Jirva, Hadris, Valorn, and Arden hide them in their own kingdoms. Navok doesn’t know where they are — I told him she buried them deep in the Uninhabited North, but he sent a team to search for them, and he’ll soon discover the truth. He’s smart, and he has the resources to learn who she really gave them to, especially now that he knows what questions to ask.” He made a helpless, apologetic gesture, before finishing, “He can’t do anything until he has all four rings, each imbued with magic, and then Kiva to wield them, but still . . . it’s not an ideal situation.”

Caldon glared at him. “You *think*?”

“You said he needs Vallentis magic,” Ashlyn pointed out. “Mirryn can give him air and fire, but that’s all. So he doesn’t just need Kiva, he also needs us, and we won’t —”

“Oriel and Aunt Ariana.” Caldon swore. “They’re still at the River Palace. They can give him earth and water.”

Jaren clenched his jaw at the reminder that his mother and brother remained hostages in Vallenia. Kiva knew it had to be eating him up inside, but feared any comfort she might offer would only make things worse.

“It’s also possible that Sarana’s power is still in the rings,” Galdric told them. “They could be ready to go without needing any extra Vallentis magic.”

Caldon swore again.

“So all Navok needs is to find the rings,” Torell summarized, having stayed silent for most of Galdric’s speech, “and then coerce Kiva into helping him, and he’ll be able to —”

“I’m afraid so,” Galdric confirmed.

This time it was Jaren who cursed, before rubbing his temples and frowning down at the table. “We need to get to them first,” he said. “We can’t risk Navok having that kind of threat looming over us. He’s already powerful. With magic, he could be unstoppable.”

Before anyone could agree — or argue — Cresta started chuckling.

“I’m impressed,” she said, smirking at Jaren. “My first thought was that if we took Kiva out of the equation” — she sliced a finger across her own throat — “then there’d be no threat. But well done to you for not going there.”

“Cresta,” Torell snapped, while Kiva just shot her a disapproving look.

“What?” Cresta said. “I can’t be the only one thinking it.” To Kiva, she added, “I don’t want you dead. But you have to admit, you’re causing all kinds of problems.”

“Has no one else thought about the obvious yet?” Kiva asked, ignoring the redhead, and voicing what she’d realized the moment Galdric had mentioned what the Hand could do. “If we get the rings, then Jaren can get his magic back.”

Everyone around her stilled enough to indicate they *hadn’t* thought about it. The openly stunned look on Jaren’s face had Kiva’s cheeks heating, and she quickly added, “And we could also create our own magical army to defend against Navok’s. So keeping the Hand from him won’t just stop him from gaining his own power, but it’ll mean we can stop him from taking over Evalon — and Wenderall.”

There was a pause while her companions processed her words, and then Ashlyn said, “That’s a solid argument, but if we go after the Hand, it could take us weeks. Months. We’d have to travel across the continent, and then figure out where the rings are. That whole time, Zuleeka —”

“Pardon me,” Galdric interrupted, “but the rings were given to the ruling families of the kingdoms I mentioned before. Only for safekeeping, though — you merely have to ask for them back.”

“We’d still have to travel —”

“I can use my windfunneling,” Galdric offered. “We’ll need to ride part of the distance on horseback, but once we’re within a few hundred miles of each city, I can magic us the rest of the way.” He eyed Ashlyn. “If you’re a quick learner, you can, too.”

“Bold of you to assume you’re coming,” Caldon said to the ex-rebel leader.

“If you don’t want to lose weeks traveling all while Zuleeka wreaks havoc on Evalon and Navok prepares to invade with his magical army, then you need me,” Galdric stated evenly. “And I can offer guidance with Kiva’s

training, too. Don't forget, when Navok is no longer a threat, she'll still need to face her sister."

The queasy feeling returned to Kiva's stomach.

"I don't like this," Ashlyn said, her lips pursed. "By going after the rings, we could be playing right into Navok's hands."

"We most likely will be," Jaren said, looking equally unhappy. "But would you be content doing nothing while he's actively searching for them? Wouldn't it be better to have them secure in our possession? If he tries to steal them from us, we'll be ready. We'll be *expecting* it. And like Kiva said, we can use them to create our own elemental army to combat his. That alone is reason enough to risk it."

That seemed to sway Ashlyn, but Jaren wasn't finished.

"I'm the last person to want to leave Evalon right now," he said in a low, pained voice. "Knowing that Zuleeka and Mirryn are on the throne, that Mother and Ori are their captives . . ." His throat bobbed. "I hate it, more than you can imagine. But I also recognize the danger Navok poses. We need to prioritize our enemies. Once we get the rings, we can deal with him, and then we can give our undivided attention to removing Zuleeka and Mirryn from power."

Ashlyn held his impassioned eyes, before finally nodding. "Let's do it," she said. "I'll send word to the other outposts and have some of our soldiers make for Vallenia while we're away, just in case any of Navok's anomalies manage to slip through the border unnoticed. Eidran, can you see to that?"

Kiva jolted, having again forgotten that the stealthy man had been in the room the whole time.

"I think I'll be more useful accompanying you," he countered in a soothing rumble. "We still have questions about the anomalies. Galdric said he knows of magical communities in three of the kingdoms you're traveling to — while you're collecting the rings, I can seek them out and try to uncover some answers."

"Smart," Jaren said quietly.

"Good point," Ashlyn agreed, before rising to her feet. "Windfunneling or not, we don't have any time to waste. Take the rest of the day to prepare, and then first thing tomorrow, we'll set out."

"We, who?" Cresta asked, cocking an eyebrow. "I'm a free woman now. I have things to do, places to see, people to —"

“You’re coming with us,” Ashlyn said. Her eyes speared toward Torell. “You too. Neither of you are going anywhere until all this is over and I can figure out what to do with you.”

“I wouldn’t leave Kiva anyway,” Tor said.

“I would,” Cresta grumbled, but Kiva could see the lie written on her face. Despite herself, Cresta was intrigued, maybe even excited to be included in their plans.

The group dispersed shortly after that, with Ashlyn heading off to send word to her military leaders, but only after ordering Tor, Cresta, and Galdric to help Eidran gather supplies for their journey — not so subtly indicating that she wanted them to remain under the guard’s watchful eyes.

Once they were gone, Jaren departed as well, leaving Kiva alone with Caldon. She stared longingly at his retreating back as he exited the command center, disappointed that he hadn’t thawed toward her even after learning that the Hand could return his magic. Nevertheless, the concern she’d seen from him earlier that morning remained with her, continuing to give her hope.

Everything will be all right, Kiva told herself as she agreed to help Caldon pack and followed him out into the summer sunshine. We’ll find the rings, Jaren will get his magic back, we’ll stop Navok, and then Zuleeka and I will —

Kiva’s thoughts came to a screeching halt when she caught sight of Tipp standing just outside the command center doorway, talking with Jaren. Their heads were bent together, Tipp was wearing a gap-toothed smile, and Jaren was grinning back at him, his expression lighter than anything she’d seen since they’d been reunited, causing her heart to skip a beat. Jaren used to grin at her like that all the time, but now . . .

Gods, she missed him.

But she focused on Tipp, who had just noticed her, the smile falling from his face.

“Maybe you shouldn’t —” Caldon murmured under his breath, but Kiva moved forward before he could finish.

She barely made it two steps before Tipp spun on his heel and stalked away.

Kiva froze, wanting to call out but fearing he would ignore her. *Certain* he would ignore her.

“Tipp,” she whispered, staring after him, her eyes welling.

A slight movement made her look from his shrinking figure back to Jaren, who was still standing there, watching her closely. For a second, she thought she saw a flash of pity in his blue-gold gaze, before it was gone again in an instant.

And then so was he, taking off after Tipp and not looking back.

Chapter Fourteen

That night, Kiva found herself in the infirmary again.

It was after midnight, but she couldn't sleep — partly because she was anxious about the journey they were about to undertake, but mostly because she couldn't stop thinking about her encounter with Tipp earlier that day. He'd avoided her completely in the hours since then, had even relocated to Jaren's room that evening because he knew she wouldn't venture there. He was doing everything he could to stay away from her, and while she understood, it still hurt. If only he would allow her to speak with him, to *explain* . . .

Kiva sighed and pulled back the curtain to Naari's bed, finding the guard looking exactly as she had the previous night.

For a long moment, Kiva did nothing, just stared down at her friend and the dark shadows swirling around her. But then she reached out and linked their fingers together.

"Galdric's right," Kiva said quietly. "I *am* scared of my magic. I'm scared of *myself*." She exhaled and admitted, "But I'm more scared of losing anyone else who I care about." She squeezed the guard's hand. "I need you back, Naari. *We* need you back."

Her words didn't pull Naari from her unnatural slumber, but she hadn't come to the infirmary just to talk to her friend.

You are who you decide to be, Kiva, Galdric had told her that morning. Good or bad, it's your decision.

As anxious as she was about what her magic could do and who she might become, right now, Kiva knew herself. She'd been through hell to get to where she was, suffered more in ten years — even in ten *weeks* — than many people did in an entire lifetime. There was no part of her that was tempted to even *consider* using her power for evil.

Kiva had made mistakes. Terrible, awful, life-ruining mistakes. But for better or worse, she'd always done what she thought was right. Her magic didn't define who she was, nor did it have the power to decide her fate.

Tilda had chosen to embrace death magic, however briefly. Zuleeka had chosen the same dark path. But that wasn't Kiva's choice — and it never would be.

You're different from them, her grandmother had said, just before she'd died. *The light to their darkness*.

Standing there, looking down at Naari, Kiva felt something settle within her. Her magic was a gift, not a weapon. She had no reason to fear it; it was a part of her, as real and as life-giving as the very blood in her veins. *She* decided what to do with it, no one else.

And she was determined to use it for good.

Past, present, and future — she would *always* use it for good.

Starting right now.

Inhaling deeply, Kiva tightened her grip on Naari and closed her eyes, calling to the magic in her blood. She didn't allow her mind to wander down the path of fear, refusing to give power to the darkness of possibility.

Whispering to herself, Kiva chanted, "I am good. I am in control. And I am not afraid."

She'd thought it would be difficult, that she would have to fight for it and wrestle it into submission, but it was as if her magic had been waiting for her to finally summon it, to embrace it, to *accept* it. Almost immediately, her fingers began to tingle and warmth flooded her veins, right before golden light seared through her closed eyelids as her power flowed out in gentle, healing waves.

Kiva nearly wept at the feeling coursing through her, the purity of her magic, the *goodness* of it. It wasn't evil — *she* wasn't evil.

A half sob, half laugh left her as she willed her power to destroy Zuleeka's shadows and release their hold on Naari.

The guard's fingers twitched.

Kiva jumped and opened her eyes just in time to see her healing light fade — taking with it any trace of the death magic.

Zuleeka's shadows were gone.

Kiva had done it. It hadn't even been *hard*. She'd just had to believe in herself — to not be *afraid* of herself.

"Naari?" Kiva whispered, swaying slightly, having forgotten how exhausted she always felt after using her magic. "Naari, it's Kiva. Can you —"

Amber eyes shot open.

In an impossibly fast move, Naari launched herself out of bed and tackled Kiva, the two of them tumbling to the ground, the sheets tangling around their legs, the curtains tearing and falling down on top of them.

“*What are you —*” Kiva gasped out, but that was all she managed before the guard’s fingers wrapped around her throat.

Kiva had a single moment to panic before Naari’s weight was suddenly gone, her hands ripped from Kiva’s neck as she was hauled upward and away.

“Naari, stop!”

If Kiva hadn’t already been incapacitated by fear, she would have frozen at the sound of Jaren’s commanding voice. Through the darkened infirmary, she could see him wrestling with Naari, trying to contain her.

“*Let me go!*” Naari snarled. “Her sister is the Viper! She’s a Corentine! She —”

“*Stop!*” Jaren repeated, more firmly. “I know. *We* know. Just stop, and I’ll explain.”

At his words, the fight left Naari, even if her body remained locked with tension, her eyes wild. But then she came back to herself enough to glance around, confusion shifting across her features.

“Are we at Silverthorn?” she asked, taking in the rows of empty infirmary beds.

Kiva, still on the ground, looked at Jaren and demanded, “Did you follow me here?”

“Of course I did,” he said instantly. “Do you really think I trust you to wander around the base alone at night?”

“Base?” Naari asked. “What base?”

But Kiva didn’t hear Jaren’s reply over her sudden hurt. It was irrational to be so upset by his words, given everything. But the pain she felt couldn’t be denied.

“What the hell is going on in here?” came Caldon’s voice from the entrance to the infirmary. He squinted through the dark and strode quickly toward them. “The racket you’re making is waking half the —”

He broke off when he was close enough to see them more clearly, Jaren still restraining the no longer comatose Naari, Kiva tangled in fabric on the floor.

“Ah,” he said. “Never mind.” He moved straight to Kiva and pulled her up to her feet, before turning to the guard, relief clear on his face.

“Welcome back, Naari.”

“Back?” Her tone was threatening as she growled, “Someone had better start talking, or I’ll —”

Jaren said something to her then, too low for Kiva to hear, before he released his hold and began to lead her from the infirmary.

Unlike earlier that day with Tipp, this time he did look back, his eyes meeting Kiva’s.

“Thank you,” he said, his gratitude quiet but sincere.

Despite still feeling stung by his unyielding resentment, those two words — and the way he said them — meant everything to Kiva.

“Nice work, Sunshine,” Caldon murmured as Jaren and Naari disappeared out the door. He wrapped his arm around her and pulled her into a side hug. “I know this is hard. But it’ll get better. I promise.”

The next morning, it became clear that Caldon’s promise wouldn’t be coming true anytime soon.

As planned, their group rose early to set out for Jirva, ten of them in total: Jaren, Caldon, Naari, Tipp, Cresta, Torell, Galdric, and Ashlyn, along with the eerily quiet Eidran, and then Kiva herself. Ashlyn had frowned when she’d arrived to see them all mounted on Stoneforge horses, declaring that if they wanted to avoid attention, they needed to cull the group. But Tipp refused to leave Jaren and Caldon, and Ashlyn herself still refused to let Torell and Cresta out of her sight. Naari, now aware of everything that had happened since the masquerade, was glued to Jaren’s side, Galdric was needed to speed up their travel time, and Kiva was the only one who could use the Hand once they had all four rings. After wasting precious minutes arguing about it, Ashlyn had compromised by saying the group would split up at each destination — half going for the rings, and half going with Eidran to the anomaly communities.

She didn’t say who would be in each group, but everyone agreed, and they finally began their journey.

With Jirva’s capital city, Yirin, sitting at the northwest tip of Wenderall, the plan was to cross into Mirraven before cutting directly into Caramor, aiming to make it before the injured Prince Voshell sent word to close the borders. When they were near enough to their destination, Galdric would windfunnel them the rest of the way, but it would still require a week on horseback before they reached that point. Kiva wasn’t thrilled by that, and

not just because her dappled gray mount, Zephyr, seemed to like her about as much as Jaren, Naari, and Tipp did.

“They have a reason to hate me,” she muttered to the gelding as he angled his neck and tried to take a chunk out of her leg. “I gave you an apple, you miserable beast.”

Aside from her nipping horse, the first few hours of riding weren’t awful. The temperature was mild, the sky was clear, and there was a general feeling of anticipation in the air. Tipp was bouncing around on the pony Eidran had found him in the military stables, deliriously excited about their adventure — at least until Kiva tried to approach him, at which point he shut down all emotion. He still hadn’t said anything to her, and every time she moved Zephyr close, he kicked his pony forward and acted like she didn’t exist.

Like Tipp, Jaren and Naari were also giving Kiva the cold shoulder, which, while expected, still made for an uncomfortable ride. Caldon tried to keep her spirits high, but he was dealing with his own demons, being so close to his sister, and once they crossed into Mirraven, he rode ahead with Cresta to scout for patrolling Gray Guards.

“Three years later, and he still can’t stand to be near me,” Ashlyn said morosely, riding at Kiva’s side. “It’s not like *I* killed our parents.”

Kiva wanted to comfort the princess, but the only advice she had was what everyone kept telling her: “Just give him time.”

The hours continued to pass, with their group maintaining a good travel speed. After a quick break for lunch, Kiva found herself riding beside Torell, and while she was aware that their privacy was limited, she was worried enough about how quiet and introspective he’d been all day that she asked, “Everything all right?”

His gaze flicked to her and away again, before he gave a terse nod.

It was obvious he didn’t want to talk, but Kiva was alarmed by the serious set of his features, and the dull, pained look in his emerald eyes.

“I’m really glad you’re here,” she tried, stopping Zephyr from snapping his teeth at Tor’s horse. “I know you didn’t have a choice, but —”

“I’m glad I’m here, too,” Tor said, his face softening as he glanced at her again, but his eyes remained haunted.

She nudged her mount closer and lowered her voice to say, “You can talk to me, Tor. I know something is upsetting you.” She took a risk and guessed, “If it’s about Zuleeka —”

“I don’t want to talk about Zuleeka.”

The words were sharp. And bitter.

Carefully, Kiva said, “I think maybe you should. I can’t imagine what you’re feeling, but —”

“You’re right, you can’t,” he said, his knuckles tensing around his reins.

Kiva refused to leave it at that. They might have been separated for ten years, but before that, Torell had always been there for her — not just as her brother, but as her friend. Even after they’d been reunited, he’d repeatedly put her welfare above his own, to the point that he’d almost lost his life protecting her.

But she didn’t need protection from *him*. And she wasn’t willing to let him bottle up everything he was feeling until it festered, just so he could keep her from being burdened by his own heartache.

“She stabbed you, Tor,” Kiva said quietly. “And she was going to attack you with her death magic — which you never even knew about. I know that has to be weighing on you.”

“Kiva, I said I don’t want to —”

“I don’t care what you said,” she told him firmly. “You can ignore me all you want, but we’re stuck together for the foreseeable future, and one way or another, we’re going to have this conversation. My preference is now, but if you —”

“She nearly *killed* me, Kiva,” Tor burst out, turning to her with a ravaged expression. “Our sister — our own flesh and blood. For years, she’s been *murdering* people, and I had no idea. She lied to me for over a decade — how do you think that makes me feel? How ashamed I am? How *guilty* I am? Their blood might as well be on my hands.”

“Tor,” Kiva whispered.

“Don’t,” he said hoarsely. “Don’t tell me it’s not my fault. I should have known — I should have *stopped* her. If I had, none of this would have happened. And maybe Mother —” He broke off, but not quickly enough to hide his agony.

Kiva knew what he’d been about to say: *Maybe Mother would still be alive*.

“Listen to me,” she said fiercely, moving as close as Zephyr would allow. “Zuleeka kept her power hidden for a reason — she didn’t *want* you to know. So while I understand wanting to blame yourself” — that was an understatement, given her own torturous feelings — “you’re not responsible

for *anything* she did. And as for Mother . . .” Kiva made sure she had Tor’s full attention before she went on, “The moment she used death magic for the first time, that was the beginning of the end for her. There’s nothing you could have done.”

“But I —”

“No buts,” Kiva said. “What you’re feeling is valid, but it’s also *wrong*.” Her voice gentled as she said, “You’re a good person, Tor. And if you don’t believe me, answer this: if you could have kept Zuleeka from hurting anyone, would you have?”

Tor looked incredulous. “Of course! I already said I —”

“Then instead of feeling guilt and shame,” Kiva spoke over him, “hold on to that. Because more than anything else, that reveals your integrity — and your heart.”

Torell opened his mouth, but then closed it again, his expression thoughtful as he considered Kiva’s words. Finally, he admitted, “Maybe you were right.”

“I often am,” Kiva said. “But about what, specifically?”

“I needed to talk about this,” Tor said. “Even if I didn’t want to.”

“Hard conversations are never easy,” Kiva said.

Tor snorted. “That’s a terrible sentence.”

Kiva was relieved to see his humor, weak as it was.

But then Tor sobered and said, “It’s going to take time to reconcile how I feel, but I promise I’ll try. And I don’t know what it says about me, but it helps knowing Zuleeka’s going to pay for what she’s done. She might be our sister, but actions have consequences, and one day soon she’s going to learn that.”

His voice was so hard toward the end that Kiva shivered, remembering that there was a reason he was the rebel general, and it wasn’t because of his friendly demeanor.

Thinking it best to change the topic, Kiva said, “Is anything else on your mind?” She then added, “I haven’t had the chance to ask how you feel about Galdric being, well, *alive*.”

Tor’s gaze shifted to the man in question, who was riding far enough ahead to be out of hearing range. “Honestly? I’m not sure what to feel.”

“You were close, once, weren’t you?”

“I thought so,” Tor answered. “But since he was also lying to me that whole time, he’s not my favorite person right now. If he’d told me about

Zuleeka's magic years ago, then —" He cut himself off, shaking his head. "I can't change the past. But I can still be annoyed by it."

"That's a life motto right there," Kiva said dryly.

Tor's lips tipped up. But then he asked, "How are *you* feeling about everything? Zalindov? Navok? Zuleeka?" Tentatively, he added, "Jaren?"

Kiva froze, not having expected him to turn the questioning on her. "I'm —"

She was saved from answering — and lying — by the return of Caldon and Cresta, who warned about a nearby patrol and suggested they take a break until the Gray Guards moved on.

When it was safe to continue, Kiva quickly positioned Zephyr until she was beside Eidran, praying her brother would forget that she'd never responded to his questions. When Ashlyn engaged Torell in conversation and rode forward with him, Kiva loosed a relieved breath. Eidran looked at her strangely, but said nothing — and continued saying nothing as the hours passed, his presence calming and steadfast, his companionable silence leaving her feeling more content than she'd been in a long time. It didn't matter that her backside started to ache and her muscles were stiffening up — she almost began to enjoy the scenery from her peaceful place beside him.

But then the landscape began to change as they traveled deeper into the craggy gray wasteland of southern Mirraven, making Kiva shudder as she remembered her recent journey north. They wouldn't be venturing anywhere near Zадria this time, but still, when she closed her eyes, she could see Navok's handsome face . . . and she could feel his fist slamming into her cheek. It barely hurt anymore, the Serpent's Kiss lingering in her system enough to continue accelerating her healing. Even her shoulder only smarted a little toward the end of the day's ride, which was significantly better than Kiva had feared.

The first night sleeping out in the open was unpleasant, the ground hard, the Mirraven air chilly despite the fire Caldon kept ablaze with his magic. The canvas shelters they'd brought remained in their packs, with Ashlyn deciding they wouldn't waste time setting up a full camp unless the weather required it. That left them all attempting to find a place around the fire where the rocky earth didn't dig painfully into their travel-sore bodies.

Riding all day had left Kiva exhausted, but after a quick meal of bread, cheese, and dried meats, she wasn't able to fall sleep as swiftly as those

around her. It wasn't just that every pebble beneath her felt like a boulder, or that Galdric snored loud enough to wake the dead. It was that Jaren was barely five feet away. The last time they'd slept so close — *closer*, even — had been the night she'd fallen asleep in his arms after Queen Ariana's magical attack. That felt like a lifetime ago now.

Unable to quiet her mind, when Kiva finally managed to drift off, she was plagued by nightmares. She was back at Zalindov. Navok was ordering Xuru to attack her. Zuleeka's shadows were choking her. The dreams continued all night, disturbing her sleep and causing her to jolt violently awake when someone shook her shoulder.

"It's dawn," Caldon said, tugging her blanket away.

"S time t'go?" she slurred, squinting blearily up at him.

"Not yet," Caldon answered over the snores still echoing around them. "It's training time, Sunshine."

Kiva groaned and tried to reclaim her blanket, but he tossed it out of reach.

"Up," he ordered, throwing some fresh clothes at her. "You've got five minutes."

Kiva didn't want to hate one of the few people who could still stand being around her, but Caldon made it difficult for her not to wish all kinds of unpleasantness upon him. She called him every foul name she could think of under her breath as she stumbled down to the stream they'd camped near, and it was only after she'd splashed frigid water on her face and changed into another of Ashlyn's leathery outfits that she finally felt human enough to remember *why* she needed to train.

Heading back to camp, it took her a moment to spot Caldon standing beyond the makeshift corral they'd set up to contain their mounts overnight. As she rounded the pen and the horses dozing within, she noticed he wasn't alone: Jaren, Naari, and Eidran were already sparring together, and, to Kiva's surprise, Torell was also there, facing off against Ashlyn.

It was easy for her to forget she was traveling with a group of veritable warriors. Royals, guards, generals, spies — her companions had spent years honing their bodies into weapons. Watching them practice unarmed combat was just as awe-inspiring as it was to witness them crossing blades. Even her brother had been given a sword, with it glinting in the weak early light as he and Ashlyn sparred at an alarming pace.

“I suppose it’s too much to assume you kept up with your exercises while you were in Zalindov?” Caldon asked, his arms crossed as he looked from the fighters to Kiva.

“She did,” came Cresta’s yawning voice as she approached. “And I joined her. So I’ll be joining you today, too.”

“I thought I was training my magic?” Kiva asked before Caldon could protest Cresta’s declaration.

“You’re doing both,” he said. “Magic requires strength, and strength requires endurance. Being physically fit will give you more energy and make you more powerful.” He shrugged, then admitted, “That’s how it works for elemental magic. I’m winging it with healing magic.”

Kiva glanced back at the camp, where Galdric and Tipp still slept. “Maybe we should wait until —”

“Start stretching, Sweet Cheeks,” Caldon said, before eyeing Cresta. “You too.”

“What, no degrading nickname for me?” Cresta asked, batting her eyelashes.

“I don’t think you want to hear my name for you,” Caldon replied, turning and striding toward Jaren, Naari, and Eidran.

A flare of interest hit Cresta’s hazel eyes, and Kiva groaned inwardly, but the redhead locked it down as Caldon returned with the sweaty Eidran.

“Have you had any combat training?” the spy asked Cresta, studying her solid build with a critical eye.

“Some,” she answered.

Kiva snorted, thinking of the fights the ex-quarrier had caused at Zalindov and doubting they counted.

But Cresta shocked the humor right out of Kiva when Caldon threw an assessing punch at her. Instead of ending up with a bruised sternum, Cresta darted to the side and grabbed his outstretched hand, yanking him forward while angling her boot behind his knee. It took some quick footwork on his part to escape her hold without toppling to the ground, after which he sent her an impressed grin and said, “Nice,” before jerking his chin at Eidran.

“Let’s go see what else you can do,” the spy told her, leading the way toward an open area beyond the sparring pairs.

“Five years, and someone can still find ways to surprise you,” Kiva mused, watching them walk off.

“She moves like a fighter,” Caldon said. “Haven’t you noticed?”

Kiva tried to remember everything Cresta had shared about her life before Zalindov, but she'd said nothing about having had any physical training. Although . . . she and her mother had traveled alone after losing their family, surviving day by day, so it made sense that she would have learned some self-defense moves.

"I don't see you stretching," Caldon said pointedly.

Kiva quickly began to loosen her muscles, after which he tested her fitness levels. By the time she was sweating and cursing at him, he acknowledged that she'd made at least some improvement from when they'd first started training at the River Palace.

"Small steps are still steps," he said sagely.

But when it came to strengthening her magic, they hit a rock wall.

"I don't understand why you're struggling with this," Caldon said after nearly half an hour of Kiva trying to summon her power. "I thought you said you're not afraid of yourself anymore?"

"I'm not," Kiva said. Everyone else had finished sparring, and while Eidran and Torell had gone to help pack up the camp, Jaren, Naari, Ashlyn, and Cresta were still cooling down and drinking water from leather skins, watching her fail over and over again. "Or — I don't know. I probably always *will* be, in the back of my mind, but that's not what's stopping me now."

"Then what is?" Caldon asked.

"You just told me to wave my hand and 'do the shiny thing.' That's not how it works," Kiva said, exasperated. "It's not like your fire magic where you can throw it around or whatever you do."

"Then what *is* it like?" Caldon pressed. "How *does* it work?"

Kiva threw out her arms. "If I knew that, I wouldn't need training, would I?"

Caldon scowled at her, and she scowled right back.

"I'm sorry to add to the pressure," said Galdric, who had joined them mid-training as soon as he'd awoken. He'd just begun explaining the basics of windfunneling to Ashlyn before Kiva's lack of progress had caught all their attention. "But Prince Caldon is right — you *should* be able to throw your power in a similar manner to elemental magic. That's what Tilda learned to do with her healing magic. And that's what Zuleeka can do with her death magic, as you've seen for yourself. There's no reason why the same isn't true for you."

Kiva transferred her scowl to him. “Telling me what I should be able to do and telling me *how* to do it are two very different things. So far, I’m hearing a lot of the former, and none of the latter.” Her glare shifted back to Caldon. “From *everyone*.”

The prince’s lips twitched. “You’re delightful when you’re cranky.”

“I’m not cranky,” Kiva said, barely keeping from stomping her foot. “I just have no idea what I’m doing, and you’re not helping to change that.”

“I —”

“For everworld’s sake,” Cresta cut Caldon off, causing everyone to look toward where she sat on a boulder beside Jaren. Before they could blink, she picked up the sword she’d been sparring with —

And stabbed it straight into Jaren’s thigh.

He roared with pain, and then three things happened at once:

The first was that Naari and Ashlyn both tackled Cresta, while Cresta yelled at Caldon, “Hold her back!”

The second was that Caldon wrapped his arms around Kiva like steel bands, stopping her from rushing to Jaren’s side.

The third was that, seeing the blood gushing from Jaren’s leg, seeing his pain, *feeling* his pain, Kiva didn’t think, she just acted. Magic erupted out of her and shot toward him, like a blinding comet streaking through the distance between them. Caldon hissed a shocked expletive into her ear, and even Naari, Ashlyn, and Cresta paused their scuffle to watch.

It was over in seconds, the light fading as quickly as it had come, the wound gone as if it had never existed, leaving behind wet bloodstains on black leather and a stunned but otherwise perfectly healthy Jaren.

“See?” Cresta said cockily, despite being on the ground with both Naari and Ashlyn holding her down. “She just needed the right motivation.”

Kiva turned furious eyes on the redhead. “*What the hell was that?*”

“You’re welcome,” was Cresta’s only reply, her eyes lit with humor.

“There’s something very wrong with you,” Kiva snapped. She then turned to Caldon, just as furious. “And *you* — why did you hold me back?”

“Because I figured out what she was doing,” he said, shameless. “And she was right. You needed motivation.”

Kiva’s blood was boiling. She got right in Caldon’s face and demanded, “Is that how this is going to work? You’ll use how I feel about Jaren against me and hurt him every time you want me to use magic? Hasn’t he suffered *enough* because of me?”

She was breathing heavily, emotion coursing through her veins, and that was why it took her a moment to realize what she'd just said — and who had heard.

Unable to meet his eyes, Kiva turned woodenly toward Jaren and, staring at his bloodied leg, choked out, “Are you all right?”

He didn't answer for so long that she was forced to look up at his face, only to find an unreadable emotion in his eyes.

“I'm fine,” he eventually said.

Hearing that, Kiva felt relief, along with enough mortification and residual anger that she nodded tersely and strode away.

She didn't talk to anyone for the rest of the day.

Chapter Fifteen

The following days continued much like the first, with the only change being the scenery shifting from Mirraven's craggy landscape to Caramor's barren, windswept plains. News of the broken alliance hadn't yet spread, so they had no trouble crossing the border, and Kiva quickly found that where Navok's kingdom was largely gray and desolate, Caramor was brown and yellow and equally bleak. It was said that the northern part of the kingdom was much more habitable, especially toward the seaside capital, Terith, but their travel party wasn't venturing that far, instead skirting the edge of the expansive Wicker Woods and cutting straight across toward Hadris.

As the days passed, Kiva's body ached relentlessly from being in the saddle for hours on end, only to toss and turn on the hard ground each night. If the others felt the same discomfort, none of them complained, not even Tipp, who continued to ignore all of Kiva's attempts to speak with him. Jaren and Naari also treated her no differently — though Kiva did wonder if, during her morning training, Jaren's eyes often came to her. But whenever she turned, he was always looking elsewhere, making her think she was only imagining what she *wanted* to see.

Caldon himself was much more cautious with Kiva ever since her post-stabbing outburst, but while that meant no one else was wounded — namely, Jaren — for the sake of her training, she also had little success with summoning her magic on command, and none at all without first placing her hands on someone. She was increasingly aware of the uneasy concern from her traveling companions, all of whom knew how much was at stake if she couldn't learn to control her power.

A week after leaving Stoneforge, they finally neared the border into Hadris, and Galdric revealed they were now close enough to Jiirva for him to windfunnel them over the Forsaken Lands and all the way to Yirin. Despite Ashlyn having been working with the ex-rebel leader every morning, she still hadn't managed to transport herself more than a few feet, so they would be relying solely on Galdric's magic. Unlike last time, he was confident he wouldn't pass out once they reached their destination, claiming

that had never happened to him before, and that the high pressure of fleeing Navok's dungeons coupled with exhaustion and hunger — and having been beaten by the guards — must have left him weaker than he'd realized.

"Why d-didn't you just use your m-m-magic to escape when you were f-first locked up?" Tipp had asked him one night around the campfire, with Galdric answering that windfunneling only worked when outside and exposed to the full force of the elements. And besides, his magic couldn't move him *through* objects — or walls — only over them.

His response had satisfied everyone except Cresta, who had drawled, "You didn't answer the kid's question. Why didn't you break out of your cell earlier, like how Ashlyn used her power to get you out? You only needed to get outside before, *whoosh*" — she circled her fingers — "freedom."

"On my own?" Galdric had returned, one eyebrow raised. "We barely made it out when there were three of us and General Ashlyn was at full strength. I stood no chance against the Gray Guards without help. Wisdom told me to wait and bide my time."

"Wisdom speaks to me, too," Cresta had replied, tossing a stick into the flames. "She's particularly chatty when it comes to you."

Galdric had been unfazed by her pointed remark, and since he'd given no reason for anyone to doubt his motivations, nothing else was said on the matter. But Kiva had lingered on Cresta's attitude toward him, wondering how much of it came from the redhead's years at Zalindov — where trust was a commodity that almost always ended in death — versus how much was just Cresta's naturally prickly personality trying to stir up dissent among them all.

Kiva still didn't have an answer after a week of them being in close proximity, so she put it to the back of her mind and instead gave a mental cheer that it was finally time for them to windfunnel to Yirin.

"Everyone, gather near," Galdric called, waving their group toward him.

Kiva nudged Zephyr closer, ignoring his pinned ears. Despite her best efforts, he still detested her. She wouldn't be surprised to discover that he and Jaren were soul-bonded. But he'd carried her across two kingdoms, and even if it was one-sided, she'd grown attached to the hateful beast.

"I'll win you over," she murmured, petting his neck to try and settle him as he pranced agitatedly beneath her.

"Kiva, are you listening?"

She looked up at Galdric's question to find everyone watching her. Flushing, she asked, "Sorry?"

"I was saying, this should be smoother than last time since the air currents over the Forsaken Lands aren't as turbulent as those gusting between Mirraven's craggy hills, but it's still going to be unsettling for the horses. Prepare yourself."

Kiva was about to suggest they dismount before, essentially, *flying* their horses across hundreds of miles at speed, but before she could, Galdric raised his hands, and a rush of wind rammed into them like a solid wall of air.

Zephyr snorted, his muscles bunching as if ready to bolt, but Galdric's magic was faster, thrusting them up into the air. Kiva barely stayed in the saddle as the browns and yellows of Caramor blurred into the reds and oranges of northern Hadris, and then into the golden sands of Jirva's sun-drenched lands.

Like last time, Kiva had no sense of how long the journey took, just that it was disconcerting and, despite Galdric's claim that it would be smoother, still unpleasant. When their group finally touched down on the duned outskirts of a large sandstone city, her head was spinning enough that she stood no chance of keeping her seat when Zephyr reared up and threw her from his back.

Kiva hit the ground so hard that the wind was knocked out of her. She tried to suck in air, to *move*, but she couldn't do either, not even when Zephyr reared up again, twisting on his hindquarters — until he was directly above her.

Still recovering from her fall, all Kiva could manage was to raise her arms and protect her head, hearing multiple panicked voices yell her name, the loudest of which was Jaren's. He was struggling to settle his own spooked mount, his eyes wide and his hand outstretched as if to magic her to safety — but without his power, nothing happened.

And then Zephyr's hooves began to come down, a thousand pounds of horseflesh falling to the earth, ready to crush Kiva.

She slammed her eyes shut and braced for impact, but then a gust of wind wrapped around her torso, like a giant hand clutching her and sliding her across the hot sand to safety.

Kiva opened her eyes again and stared in amazement at Jaren, but his fingers were now fisted around his reins, and he was looking away from her

— straight at Ashlyn.

Her heart fell at the expression he couldn't hide fast enough, the disappointment, the self-loathing. It was as if, for a moment, he'd forgotten what the Eye of the Gods had taken from him and was now forced to remember all over again.

Kiva ached deep inside at seeing such a look on his face before he blinked it away. But at the same time, a small, hope-starved part of her rejoiced that his first instinct was still to save her. She hadn't imagined that, not this time.

"Are you all right?" Ashlyn called, using her wind magic to lift Kiva up to her feet. "Sorry I didn't act quicker — Spirit nearly threw me, so I didn't see what happened to you until I heard everyone yelling."

Kiva dusted sand from her leathers and, now able to breathe again, answered, "I'm fine." She took a step, winced, and rubbed her hip. "A little bruised, but I'll survive. Thanks, Ashlyn."

"Are you sure?" Torell asked, dismounting from his skittish horse and looking her over carefully. "You landed hard."

Her brother wasn't the only person staring at her in concern, but the worried face that snared Kiva's attention the most belonged to Tipp. As soon as he realized she'd noticed his alarm, he quickly glanced away. Even so, just like with Jaren's instinctive reaction, Kiva's heart felt fuller than it had in a long time.

"I'm fine," she repeated to her brother, before repeating it for a third time when Caldon asked as well.

"This horse has it in for you," Cresta said, leading Zephyr over by the reins.

Kiva hobbled forward and remounted before she could yield to fear. "He's just not used to windfunneling," she said, unsure why she was defending the creature who could have killed her moments ago.

"I'm so sorry," Galdric said, looking distraught. "I've never used my magic on anything but people before, so I didn't anticipate that being so —"

"Just give me a chance to dismount first next time," Kiva cut him off, growing more embarrassed by the second. She waved toward the city rising up before them. "I take it that's Yirin?"

"It is," Naari confirmed.

Kiva looked at her, surprised she'd been the one to answer. But as Kiva took in the guard's dark features lined with tension, she belatedly

remembered that this wasn't Naari's first visit to Jirva.

I spent most of my life in a kingdom oppressed by corrupt rulers and full of desolate and hateful citizens, the guard had told Kiva back at the River Palace.

Even Captain Veris had shared a tale about Naari's journey to Evalon, mentioning how she'd escaped a Jirvan arena and crossed the Forsaken Lands with nothing but the swords on her back.

Kiva wanted to ask how Naari was handling being back in the kingdom that she'd risked her life to flee from, but the guard shot her a hard look, so she swallowed the words before they could slip out.

Turning her eyes to the city, Kiva looked beyond the impressive outer wall to the sandstone buildings within. The architecture was unlike anything she'd encountered before, with golden towers interspersed between behemoth yellow stone statues of armored men and women throwing spears, raising swords, and drawing bows. Jirvans were known to the rest of Wenderall as being warriors, but Kiva hadn't realized their capital would epitomize that in its appearance. Even with the scorching sun overhead, a shiver traveled down her spine at the fierceness emanating from the city. Her trepidation only intensified when she noticed an elevated area inside the wall, right at the center of Yirin, upon which sat a palace — and beside it, what was unmistakably one of Jirva's famous arenas.

Kiva glanced at Naari again, concerned, but the guard revealed no hint of what she was feeling.

"What's the plan?" Caldon asked, shielding his eyes from the glare as he took in the city. "Sarana may have been friendly with Jirva's ancient rulers, but Ryuu and Thembi aren't known for their hospitality. Are we really just expecting them to hand the ring over?"

King Ryuu and King Thembi were Jirva's brother-kings, Kiva had learned on their journey. They weren't as close with Evalon as their ancestors had once been, but they also weren't enemies. What that meant for the outcome of their mission, no one knew.

All eyes turned to Galdric, and he said, "As I've already told you, the rings were only given away for safekeeping. Since you're Sarana's heirs, they have no reason not to return what is rightfully yours."

He sounded confident, but when Kiva looked around, she could see she wasn't the only one with doubts.

“How far away is the Jirvan anomaly settlement?” Eidran asked Galdric, perhaps the first words he’d uttered in days.

“From what Navok told me, a few hours’ ride, give or take,” Galdric answered.

Eidran nodded, then said to the group, “I’ll meet you at the palace later.” To Galdric, he added, “You’re with me.”

The ex-rebel leader looked like he wanted to argue, but Ashlyn said, “You’re the only one who knows how to find the anomalies. Go with Eidran. That’s an order.”

Galdric’s face fell, but he murmured his agreement.

Ashlyn turned to Torell and Cresta. “You go with them, too.”

Cresta’s eyes slitted. “You just want us out of the way.”

The princess didn’t deny it, and Cresta harrumphed in response. But Torell didn’t seem to mind being given a task. Or perhaps it was because the task had been given by Ashlyn. Kiva had watched the two generals interact over the last week, and despite Ashlyn’s initial distrust of her brother, something had shifted as Tor had continued to prove respectful and courteous. They sparred together every morning; they even rode beside each other for most of the day, every day, sometimes talking and laughing quietly, sometimes enjoying the silence of each other’s company. Kiva wasn’t sure if she was reading into something that wasn’t there, or whether it was even her business if it was there. Nor did she know if she should warn her brother away from Ashlyn — or warn Ashlyn away from her brother. Despite Caldon’s one-sided lust for Tor, Kiva had assumed her brother and Rhessinda had been on a path for something more than friendship . . . but given the way she sometimes caught Tor looking at Ashlyn, she wasn’t certain about anything anymore.

Since Kiva couldn’t even handle her own romantic life — or lack thereof — she knew better than to get involved in anyone else’s. Right now, she was just grateful that whatever was going on between Torell and Ashlyn meant he followed Eidran without debate as the spy nudged his horse away, with Cresta and Galdric trailing much more reluctantly behind them.

Once they were small figures disappearing beyond the sand dunes, Kiva and her remaining companions rode straight for the colossal arched entrance into Yirin, where beige-armored guards demanded that they halt and state their business. Upon learning who they were — and that three

Evalonian royals were with them — an escort was provided, leading them all the way up to the palace.

By the time they reached their destination, Kiva's eyes stung from how bright it was inside the city, with the sun bouncing off everything from the roads to the walls to the rooftops, turning it all gold and yellow and cream. Even the people were dressed in light-colored clothes, though most of them quickly scampered away when they caught sight of the guards.

The palace itself was awe-inspiring from up close, a twisted gathering of conical spires bordered by the largest statue-warriors Kiva had yet seen, their weapons raised as if in battle. Goose bumps pebbled on her flesh thanks to the nearest one, whose hateful eyes gave the illusion of following her.

"Cheery place," Cresta murmured from Kiva's side after they'd all dismounted and the royal servants had led their horses away.

"You're from Mirraven," Kiva murmured back. "You should be used to this kind of cheery."

Cresta's gaze turned inward, sweat glistening on her snake tattoo as she said, "It wasn't always so terrible there."

Kiva barely processed her reply, because while it had taken a few seconds, she blinked and realized —

"What are you doing here?" Ashlyn demanded, stealing the words from Kiva. "Why aren't you with Eidran?"

Cresta shrugged. "I snuck away to follow you. This will be much more interesting." She blew an obnoxious kiss at Ashlyn, who was now scowling at her, then winked at Caldon when he couldn't hide his snort.

"You might want to reconsider antagonizing the people who can send you back to Zalindov when this is all over," Kiva said dryly.

Cresta's eyes lit with humor. "They wouldn't dare."

Before Kiva could reply with another warning, a group of servants dressed in pristine white tunics ushered them into the palace. Kiva felt filthy in comparison, her skin damp from the heat, her hair a straggly mess, and her outfit, once as white as theirs, now covered with travel dust. But she followed the example of her royal companions and held her head high as they walked past giant pillars and through shining arches until they reached a lavish, airy room. The ceiling was high above them, and where normally a wall would have stood, the space led out to a large balcony overlooking the yellow city, straight to the cliffside ocean in the distance.

Unnerved by the opulence, Kiva followed her friends up the gilded carpet runner, at the end of which was a pair of thrones shaped like scorpions, their stingers curled over and ready to strike. Reclining in the daunting seats were two men with sun-kissed skin who, like their servants, were wearing white, but their outfits glittered with richly detailed embroidery. Their faces were streaked with gold paint, and both had long black hair pulled back behind crowns made of —

Kiva swallowed as her group halted before the thrones, instinctively knowing the answer.

Bones — the crowns were made of *bones*.

From the corner of her eye, she saw Naari nudge Tipp and Cresta, the three of them dropping into bows — Cresta's so shallow that it was borderline offensive — and Kiva quickly followed suit. Jaren, Ashlyn, and Caldor remained upright, with Jaren stepping forward to address the kings.

“Thembi, Ryuu, thank you for welcoming us into your city on such short notice,” he said with a respectful nod to the brothers — twins, Kiva now realized, seeing that they were identical, though one had a beard and the other was clean-shaven. “It's been far too long since we last saw each other.”

“Indeed it has, Deverick,” the bearded twin said, his accent thick, like honey trickling over sand. It was difficult for Kiva to determine their ages, but she guessed they were in their early forties, their eyes cunning and physiques muscled, indicating they didn't just train warriors, but they *were* warriors. “We have to admit, your visit is a surprise, given the rumors that a new queen now rules your kingdom.”

Jaren didn't so much as blink. “You should know better than to listen to rumors,” he said smoothly. “My father recently passed into the everworld, but my mother remains at the River Palace, with my sister merely assisting with her queenly duties during this time of mourning.”

Nothing he said was a lie, and yet, Kiva marveled at his ability to spin the truth — though his jaw did clench slightly when he mentioned Mirryn. Royal politics were beyond Kiva, but even she recognized the danger of giving the Jirvan kings confirmation of the volatile situation in Evalon.

“That is a relief,” the clean-shaven king — Thembi — said. His voice quieted as he added, “Though Ryuu and I are very sorry to hear about Stellan. He was a good man.”

Jaren concealed the depth of his grief, and only said, “He was.”

Kiva hadn't heard him speak about his father at all since Caldon had told her the news. She desperately wanted to reach for his hand, but even if they hadn't been standing before foreign warrior-kings, she knew he wouldn't be receptive to her compassion. Or to her touch.

"Please forgive our intrusion," Ashlyn said, stepping up beside Jaren. "We would have sent a messenger, but since we were already en route and don't intend to stay long, it was quicker to arrive unannounced."

Ryuu brushed aside her words. "Jiirva has always been a friend to Evalon. What brings you to our golden city?" His gaze flicked beyond the Vallentis royals to where Naari, Cresta, Tipp, and Kiva stood. "And who are your friends?"

Ashlyn offered vague introductions, with Tipp giving a merry wave when his name was shared, and Naari ducking her head and keeping her eyes firmly on the carpet. Kiva doubted the kings had cared about one escaped teenager back when Naari had fled, but she understood the guard's desire to avoid their notice.

When Ashlyn was done, Jaren took over again, explaining how Sarana had entrusted a ring to the brother-kings' ancestors. He didn't say how important it was or what it did when combined with the others, just that he desired to have it returned to his family's possession. Kiva watched the kings carefully to see if they already knew the true value of the ring, but their expressions might as well have been carved from granite.

Once Jaren was finished, the twins shared a quick glance, and then Thembi snapped his fingers at the nearest group of waiting servants and spoke to them in rapid Jiirvan. Kiva side-eyed Naari for a translation, but Thembi explained in the common tongue, "Refreshments are on the way."

"That's very kind," Jaren said, "but as Ashlyn mentioned, we don't intend to linger. I'm sure you can appreciate I'd rather not be apart from my mother for longer than necessary during this difficult time, so we need return to Evalon as quickly as possible."

Now Jaren was lying, but Kiva schooled her features, praying the others — especially Tipp and Cresta — were doing the same.

"You must at least have something to drink," Ryuu said, signaling to a pair of promptly returned servants who hurried over on command. In their hands were trays bearing gold chalices, which they quickly gave to Kiva and her companions. "You're surely parched from your travels."

Kiva waited until Jaren, Ashlyn, and Caldon sipped their own drinks before she tasted hers. The fruity offering was unfamiliar, but it was cool and refreshing, and brought almost instant relief from the heat.

“Yijapilly,” Thembi said, catching Kiva sniffing the pink-colored liquid. “It’s a stone fruit native to our kingdom. One that flourishes in the desert, even during summer, when so many others wither and die.”

He seemed to be waiting for a response — *from her* — so after receiving a barely discernible nod from Ashlyn, she said, “It’s delicious. Thank you, Your Majesty.”

Seemingly satisfied, the Jirvan king looked at his brother before they both turned their attention back to the Vallentis royals.

“We know of Sarana’s ring,” Ryuu said without preamble, and Kiva felt relief wash over her, so powerful that it left her dizzy. Galdric had been confident it was here, but he could have been mistaken, or the ring could have been lost in the hundreds of years since the ancient Vallentis queen had bestowed it upon her Jirvan friends.

“You are correct in your assertion that it *does* belong to you,” Ryuu went on, “and that it has been passed down from our ancestors with the understanding that one day someone from your bloodline would come to retrieve it.”

“Wonderful,” Caldon said, stepping forward. “If you’ll just hand it over —”

He stumbled.

It was only a small trip of his feet, but Caldon *never* stumbled. He managed to keep his legs under him, but he still looked down in confusion, shaking his head as if to clear it.

“What you don’t seem to be aware of,” Thembi said, straightening his bone crown, “is that instructions were handed down with the ring.”

“Instructions?” Jaren repeated, his eyes narrowing.

There was something wrong with his voice, Kiva thought. She rubbed her ears, unsure if it was her hearing or if he really had slurred the word.

“We can’t just *give* it to you.” Ryuu’s lips curled into a smirk. “You first have to prove yourselves worthy of it. You have to *earn* it.”

“What does that mean?” Ashlyn demanded, pressing a hand to her head and swaying slightly.

Naari, however, had become as still as a statue, her face turning ashen.

Before Kiva could ask what was wrong, movement caught her eye, prompting her to gasp at the impossible sight of the scorpion thrones coming to life, their stingers shifting in the air as if preparing to attack.

She jerked backwards, her heart slamming against her rib cage. No one else seemed to notice, so she opened her mouth to shout a warning, but then she blinked, and the thrones were lifeless once more.

Realization crashed over Kiva, ice flooding her as she peered into her golden chalice.

Caldon's stumble. Jaren's slurring. Ashlyn's swaying. Her own hallucinating.

Ignoring royal etiquette, Kiva speared her now blurry gaze toward the kings and rasped out, "You drugged us."

As soon as she said the words, Tipp crumpled to the ground, unconscious.

Kiva lunged for him, but her own knees gave out, and she collapsed beside him. She was suddenly so tired that she had trouble keeping her eyes open, barely able to watch as Ashlyn, Jaren, Caldor, and Cresta all toppled, one after the other. Naari, the only one of them who hadn't drunk anything, drew her blades, but beige-clad guards poured into the throne room before she could make a single move.

"Fear not," Ryu said pleasantly, his words sounding far away. "It'll wear off in time for your Arzavaar. We'll even make sure you . . ."

He continued speaking, but Kiva's body fully surrendered to the drug, and she heard no more.

Chapter Sixteen

“*Wake up, gods dammit!*”

At the sudden pain in her cheek, Kiva’s eyes shot open to find Cresta crouching beside her, the redhead’s arm raised as if preparing to slap her again.

Kiva touched her stinging face and demanded, “What —”

A roaring sound cut her off, and she squinted past Cresta through the painfully bright glare, dread filling her at what she saw.

“Get up, *get up!*” Cresta urged, hauling Kiva to her feet.

But Kiva didn’t need the encouragement; she was already scrambling upright.

She pushed past her dizziness, her mind desperately trying to make sense of where she was — and more alarmingly, *why*.

Because she was standing in the middle of an arena.

The roar she heard was the crowd — thousands of people crammed together on raised platforms around the edge of the open-air, bowl-shaped space, with ferocious warrior statues rising high to watch over everything, their backs straight and arms crossed as if in judgment.

Nerves prickled Kiva’s skin at the daunting sight, but then her attention moved to the center of the arena — *where she stood* — and her trepidation only grew. The ground was divided into three parts: an inner ring that was filled with water, the middle ring where she’d awoken having sand underfoot, and —

Kiva gasped as flames arose from the earth, filling the outer ring like a fiery barrier, preventing any escape.

She was trapped.

They were trapped.

Because it wasn’t just her and Cresta in the arena — Ashlyn and Naari were there as well, both having just regained consciousness and were now hurrying over, their faces tight.

Naari’s especially.

“What the hell is this?” Cresta demanded once the princess and the guard had reached them.

The amplified voice of King Thembi spoke before anyone could answer, echoing around the arena and quieting the crowd.

“Gersot, gersot! Ka tannem vu sentis rayi takaak zeg Arzavaar!”

The Jirvan words meant nothing to Kiva, but she searched for the speaker, finding him on a private elevated dais halfway up one side of the crammed arena. He was seated beside his brother, both on new scorpion thrones glinting in the sunlight, and at their sides were —

Kiva took an automatic step forward at the sight of Jaren, Caldon, and Tipp all tied to solid vertical posts, their arms bound over their heads, their feet barely touching the ground. They were too far away for her to make out their expressions, but she had no trouble imagining their distress. Before she could move any further, Naari’s fingers curled around her elbow, halting her progress. There was a warning look on the guard’s face — warning, and *fear*.

Thembi kept speaking in his native tongue, so Kiva asked, “What’s he saying?”

It was Ashlyn who answered, “He’s welcoming the audience. Telling them we’re visitors who wish to prove our worth by undertaking the Arzavaar.”

We can’t just give it to you, King Ryuu had said about Sarana’s ring. *You have to earn it*.

A sick feeling began to bubble in Kiva’s stomach. “What’s the Arzavaar?”

“He’s also saying our companions will be put to death if we fail,” Cresta said. She cocked an eyebrow at Ashlyn. “You left that part out.”

The princess’s jaw ticked. “I saw no reason to panic her. And since when do you speak Jirvan?”

Cresta shrugged. “There are plenty of Jirvans in Zalindov. You can learn a lot in five years. I also know some Hadrisan, and all the swears in Odonese, plus some —”

“Excuse me,” Kiva hissed, not caring how Cresta had become multilingual, “but can you go back to the part about them *killing* —”

“It’s an empty threat intended to excite the crowd,” Ashlyn quickly assured Kiva. “They wouldn’t dare hurt —”

“They would.”

The two words, said low and serious, came from Naari. She then looked straight at Kiva and said, “Whatever happens next, you absolutely must not use your power in here. The kings covet magic, especially in their warriors, but like most people, they believe anomalies are rare — and they’ve certainly never seen healing magic before. If they learn what you can do, they’ll never allow you to leave Yirin. Do you understand?”

Kiva swallowed and swiftly nodded. She didn’t question why, after a week of Naari ignoring her, the guard was now worried about what might happen to her. Instead, she repeated, her voice hoarse with dread, “What’s the Arzavaar?”

Thembi stopped speaking, but then Ryu started, his words prompting the crowd to shout and clap and stomp their feet.

Hurriedly, Naari shared, “Women in Jirva are considered special kinds of warriors, often more lethal than the men. At ten years of age, every girl across the kingdom is presented to the Rakavan — the Elite Guard — and those who show promise are invited to attend their nearest arena for training. Almost all of them accept, since it’s a great honor to be selected — the greatest a Jirvan family can claim. The girls with the most potential are then brought here, to the capital. Once they turn fifteen, their training ends, and they’re made to fight each other, for glory and riches — and for the crowd’s entertainment.” Her amber eyes scanned from the water ring all the way across to the fire barrier, then up to the screaming audience, before she finally revealed, “Arzavaar translates to ‘Warrior Trial.’ It’s what those women must undergo if they wish to advance beyond arena battles and become full-fledged Rakavan. It’s how they prove their worth — and it’s apparently how we’ll be proving ours.”

A choked sound left Kiva. “*Warrior Trial?* But we’re not —”

Something King Ryu said caused both Naari and Ashlyn to reach for their weapons. The princess handed one of her swords to Cresta, and Naari pulled a long dagger from her belt and shoved it toward Kiva.

She didn’t take it.

Naari moved closer. “Our opponents will be desperate; they’re one battle away from everything they’ve spent years working toward — and once they nominate themselves for the Trial, they only get one chance to claim victory.” Her features were hard as she declared, “The Arzavaar is a fight to the death, Kiva. Kill or be killed — those are our only options.” Kiva’s mouth dropped open, but Naari wasn’t finished. “If you want to save

Jaren, Caldon, and Tipp, if you want *any* of us to leave this place, then you need to survive. *We* need to survive.”

This time, when Naari held out the dagger, Kiva closed her numb fingers around the hilt.

“I can’t use this,” she breathed, staring at the deadly blade. “Not just because I don’t know *how*, but I’m a healer. I can’t hurt —”

“Just stay close to us,” Ashlyn said, shifting nearer. “We won’t let anyone get to you.”

Neither Naari nor Cresta showed the same level of confidence, their faces grim.

“Remember what I said about your magic,” Naari warned again. “No matter what, you can’t —”

“Friends from Evalon!” King Ryuu’s voice interrupted her, echoing loudly down to them in the common tongue. “In order to claim what you seek, you must first be proclaimed victors of the Arzavaar. Behold, your opponents!”

A near-deafening roar came from the crowd when the flaming barrier parted, revealing six women who stepped into the middle ring, the fire returning once they were through. They each had different skin tones — two tanned, two pale, two dark — but all were dressed in supple red body armor, their leather skirts and breastplates glinting with silver plating, their shins protected by shining greaves, their wrists strapped with metallic braces.

Six against four, Kiva realized, the dagger trembling in her hand.

“Your male companions have been warned not to interfere using their magic, or you’ll be instantly disqualified,” King Ryuu went on, and Kiva had a feeling he didn’t just mean they wouldn’t be given Sarana’s ring, the words *fight to the death* still ringing in her ears. “However, no such restrictions are upon you — or your opponents.”

One of the warrior-women grinned widely, revealing a mouth full of jagged teeth. At the flick of her pale finger, wind slammed into Kiva, Cresta, Ashlyn, and Naari. Not even Ashlyn could react in time to stop the magic from sending them flying.

“Now, now,” Ryuu tsked as the audience went wild, “we haven’t started playing yet.”

Kiva clambered back to her feet, amazed that none of her friends had stabbed themselves when they’d landed hard on the ground.

“She’s mine,” Ashlyn growled, her eyes slitted toward the still-grinning warrior.

Kiva repressed a hysterical laugh, since *obviously* Ashlyn should face the anomaly, being the only one of them with elemental magic.

But then a woman with flaming ginger hair smirked and summoned fire into her palm, revealing there to be *two* anomalies among them. Cresta had warned that the kings valued magical warriors, but this . . .

“Damn it,” Ashlyn hissed. “I’ll have to take her, too.”

Kiva’s heart had been pounding before, but now it was like a hammer in her chest. “If either of you have been hiding magic,” she said to Cresta and Naari, “now’s the time to say so.”

The look on Naari’s face said that only one person among them had been keeping such a secret — and that person was Kiva herself.

Cresta, too, rolled her eyes and stated, “You think I would have stayed so long at Zalindov if I could have magicked my way out of there? Only your prince was stupid enough to do something like that.”

Before Kiva could reply, King Thembi took over for his twin and said, “The rules of the Arzavaar are simple: there are none!” The crowd roared again, louder than ever, and then he declared, “May the best warriors win! *Gantaark!*”

Kiva didn’t need to know Jirvan to realize that he’d just yelled the equivalent of “*Attack!*” because the six warriors sprinted toward them, their swords and spears and shields raised. The air anomaly thrust out her hand as she ran, attempting another attack, but Ashlyn was ready this time, and countered the move with a slash of her arm, causing the sand between them to erupt in an eye-stinging flurry. The ginger-haired woman similarly tried to send a burst of fire their way, but Ashlyn choked the air from the flames, snuffing them out before they could cause any damage.

For a moment, Kiva felt a glimmer of hope. The Jirvan anomalies had never battled a Vallentis princess before — a Vallentis *general*. It might be two against one, but Ashlyn had a bloodline’s worth of experience — and power — in her favor. Plus, she alone wielded two elements, which she quickly put to use, cracking open the earth and forcing the six warriors to change their trajectory by leaping to the side, giving Kiva and her friends an extra moment to prepare.

But then the two anomalies glanced at each other, sharing an invisible signal before launching simultaneous attacks directly toward Ashlyn alone,

stealing her focus and allowing the four other warrior-women the chance to approach.

Naari and Cresta didn't hesitate, rushing forward to meet their opponents with weapons raised, while Ashlyn sent darts of wind and twisting vines toward her two magical foes, only to have them blocked and burned.

Do something! screamed Kiva's inner voice. *Help them!*

But she was frozen in place, fearing she would only get in the way and cause one of her friends to become hurt.

Frantic, her gaze swung from Ashlyn and her elemental battle, to Cresta and Naari as they met the four warriors strike for strike, the crash of steel ringing around the arena. It wasn't just swords they were defending against — a broad-shouldered woman fought with a fearsome spear that was a cross between a sickle and a scythe, while her freckled companion had a metal chain in one hand and a spiked mace in the other. Only the final two women — one of whom had gold threaded into her armor, and the other wore a horned helmet — used weapons more evenly matched against Kiva's friends, but they fought with enough ferocity that even Naari, who had undergone the same warrior training as them, was struggling to maintain her defense. And Cresta —

As Kiva watched, Cresta lost patience with the broad-shouldered, spear-wielding woman and gave a war cry before bending at the waist and ramming straight into her midsection, tackling her to the ground. Their weapons dropped in the fall, leaving the two of them to wrestle unarmed, neither gaining a foothold. But Kiva wasn't worried about the scrappy ex-quarrier — she was concerned because it now meant Naari had three warriors all focused on her.

For too long, people had been saving Kiva. She'd only survived the Trial by Ordeal because Jaren had protected her. More recently at Zalindov, Cresta had looked out for her. Even at Blackmount Castle, Ashlyn had helped free her. Naari, Caldon, Torell — all of them had saved her from one danger or another. She'd always had to rely on them — but no more. She might have no fighting experience and limited physical training, but right now, her friends needed her.

Naari needed her.

Terrified but determined, Kiva tightened her grip on her dagger and sprinted forward to where Naari was battling the three women. As she ran,

she saw the helmeted warrior fumble her footing, opening up her vulnerable side. Naari took immediate advantage, thrusting her blade in a quick jabbing motion, once, twice, three times, and the woman went down with a pained scream, which quickly tapered off into silence as she stilled on the ground.

Kiva's heart clenched as the warrior's eyes closed, Naari's words repeating in her mind once more: *Kill or be killed. Those are our only options.*

Later, Kiva would have time to process the senseless violence happening in the arena. For now, she had to remain alive long enough to do so — and make sure her friends did, too. Because Cresta still wrestled with the broad-shouldered woman, grunting and groaning as they each landed hits, while Ashlyn continued to defend against fire and wind in her elemental battle, and Naari still faced both the mace-and-chain-wielding woman and the one with the gold-threaded armor.

It was the latter whom Kiva targeted, racing to block the golden warrior from striking out at Naari's unprotected back. Fueled purely by desperation, she leapt the remaining distance just as the woman pivoted, her crystal blue eyes gleeful as she raised her sword to meet Kiva. In turn, Kiva stretched her dagger out as she soared through the air, ready to meet the woman's blade.

But then, suddenly, Kiva wasn't leaping toward the golden warrior anymore, because a gust of wind caught her mid-flight and flung her away — right into the inner water circle.

Kiva plunged beneath the surface, stunned. At first, she thought Ashlyn must have been trying to keep her safe, but that notion soon vanished when she kicked her way upward only for another gust of wind to shove her straight back down again.

Fear coursed through her as she broke through the surface again and again, barely able to inhale enough air each time before she was pushed under once more. During one of her attempts, the briefest of glances across the sand revealed Ashlyn was oblivious to her plight, fully distracted by the ginger-haired anomaly, who had transformed the fiery outer ring into a giant flaming python. It was taking all of Ashlyn's focus to keep from being burned alive, with her using both wind and earth magic to try and smother the serpentine inferno. All the while, the air anomaly was grinning her

jagged-tooth smile in Kiva's direction, keeping her in her underwater prison.

But then it became clear that the elemental warrior had been toying with her, and now she was done, because when Kiva was next forced under, a solid air barrier kept her from resurfacing.

At all.

Within seconds, Kiva's lungs began to burn, prompting memories of the water Ordeal and when Queen Ariana had attacked her at the River Palace. She'd nearly drowned in both instances — just as she was drowning now.

Not like this, Kiva begged as she punched her hands into the invisible barrier. Somehow, she still had the dagger gripped between her fingers, but it did no good against the anomaly's magic.

Pain spread down her throat and across her chest, her heart galloping as her restricted airways convulsed. She needed air. *She needed air*. But she was surrounded by water, with no escape.

Jaren's face came to her then — Jaren, who had dived deep into the quarry and breathed life back into her. Jaren, who had fought off his own mother to protect her and then held her all night afterward.

This time, Jaren couldn't help her.

Kiva didn't even know whether he *would* if given the choice.

But — no. That wasn't true. Because despite all the heartache she'd caused him, it wasn't in his nature to let anyone suffer, including her. Maybe even *especially* her. He would always save her — she knew that like she knew her own name. And the thought of never seeing him again, of surrendering her life to this miserable Jirvan arena and dying before she had a chance to make things right between them, was too much for her to bear.

Her lungs were screaming for oxygen now, her vision blackening at the edges, but Kiva mustered the last of her strength and propelled her body upward, smashing her daggered hand into the air barrier — only to find it was no longer there.

She broke through the surface, coughing and gagging, meeting no resistance as she swam laboriously to the edge and hauled herself onto the sand. There, she spat out water and sucked in painful, choked breaths, acutely aware that her friends were still fighting for their lives. Because of that, she only allowed herself five seconds to recover before standing shakily to her feet.

A quick glance revealed Cresta had overcome the broad-shouldered warrior, who was now lifeless on the ground, leaving the ex-quarrier to partner with Ashlyn against the fire and air anomalies, explaining why Kiva had suddenly become free. Cresta had no magic, but she was fearlessly using her blades against the warriors — even throwing some wicked star-shaped knives she must have pilfered from her fallen opponent. Together, she and Ashlyn were taking ground, even with the python having been transformed into a flaming whirlwind, fueled by both anomalies combining their magic.

Naari, however, was beginning to struggle against the freckled chain-wielding woman and the golden warrior, both of whom were relentlessly brutal in their attacks, their weapons like blurs. The guard was bleeding from multiple wounds, some alarmingly deep, and it was clear that her strength was failing.

For the second time, Kiva set aside her fear and lunged forward, water and sand flying off her as she sprinted toward her friend. But no matter how fast she ran, she was still a few strides away when the freckled warrior managed to wrap her chain around Naari's boot, giving it a vicious tug, while at the same time, her mace came down in an overhead swing.

Kiva's heart stopped as Naari stumbled and barely managed to raise her arm in time, her prosthetic hand taking the brunt of the spiked weapon's attack. Another tug of the chain and, unbalanced, she was forced down to her knees, leaving her in a dangerous position — one that, while her sole focus was on protecting herself from the freckled woman's follow-up blow, meant she was wide open for the golden warrior to slash her sword straight toward her unguarded back.

It was a lethal strike.

But it never made contact, because Kiva arrived just in time to intercept the attack, blocking the woman's blade. Acting on instinct, she thrust her dagger upward, intending to force the warrior back in order to give Naari a chance to regain her feet and take over again.

But the golden warrior misinterpreted Kiva's move and dashed forward rather than away, twisting to the wrong side —

And causing the upward trajectory of Kiva's dagger to plunge straight into her chest.

The warrior's crystal blue eyes widened with shock, mirroring Kiva's own horrified gaze, the two of them looking slowly down together to see

the blade protruding from her torso.

Time stopped, and then the woman was falling, her blood spilling onto the sand to pool beneath where her body came to rest.

A choked sound left Kiva as she gaped down at the golden warrior, her now-blank eyes staring into nothing.

Kiva was no stranger to death. Whether from illness, injury, or undue violence, she'd witnessed far more than her share of people fading into the everworld, especially during her time at Zalindov. But *causing* someone's death?

Kiva had never killed anyone before.

Slick, warm blood covered her hands. They weren't trembling now — they were frozen. *She* was frozen.

Peripherally, she was aware of the roaring crowd, of Naari still fighting the freckled woman, of Ashlyn and Cresta pushing forward in their magical battle, with the wind anomaly downed and only the ginger-haired anomaly and her flames remaining. But try as she might, Kiva couldn't take her eyes off the blood-soaked sand and the warrior with a dagger buried in her chest — *Kiva's* dagger.

Everything that happened next was a blur. Naari finally dispatched her opponent and hurried over with dread in her eyes, before she patted Kiva down and realized the blood didn't belong to her.

Shock, Kiva realized — she was in shock.

Naari soon figured out the same and gave Kiva a rough shake that did little good.

But then Cresta was there, with her and Ashlyn having succeeded against the fire anomaly, their final opponent. The ex-quarrier didn't hesitate to repeat her action from earlier and slap Kiva across the face.

"Snap out of it," she ordered. "You've seen worse than this, a thousand times over."

Kiva had.

But she'd never been responsible for it.

"Cresta," Ashlyn barked when the ex-quarrier raised her hand to slap Kiva again. "Leave her."

Naari was standing close enough that Kiva could hear her labored breaths. She was also swaying slightly, and that was what finally pulled Kiva's gaze away from the golden warrior. Seeing all the wounds Naari had

sustained, Kiva unconsciously reached out to heal her, but the guard saw what she intended and scrambled backwards.

For one second, Kiva was blinded by hurt. She'd just *killed someone* to save Naari, and still the guard hated her enough to reject her touch. But then Kiva pushed through the haze of her shock and remembered Naari's warning — that if the kings witnessed her magic, they'd never allow her to leave.

Quickly, Kiva fisted her hands, burying the power she'd instinctively begun to summon. Naari would have to wait to be healed — as would Ashlyn and Cresta, both of whom were covered in burns and minor lacerations, along with raw grazes from wind-whipped sand.

They were hurt, but alive.

All of them.

Kiva didn't let her eyes drop to the ground, where the six warrior-women lay.

Kill or be killed, Naari had said.

They'd done what was needed to survive.

But even so, Kiva couldn't ignore the guilt she felt — nor could she forget the stunned look of horror on the golden warrior's face as the life had drained from her.

Bile burned the back of Kiva's throat, but she swallowed it down, knowing she couldn't reveal what she was feeling — not here, with thousands of people watching. She had to remain strong, just for a few more minutes.

And then, when she was alone, she could let the floodgates open.

On the dais, the kings stood from their thrones and raised their hands in the air, quieting the screaming crowd.

“Dukkar, dukkar!” Thembi declared in his native language. “Tuk ekaan Arzavaar du ventek unt Evalon!”

Another roar from the audience, before the king spoke in the common tongue directly to Kiva, Ashlyn, Cresta, and Naari: “Congratulations to our Evalonian friends for triumphing over the Arzavaar! You have proved your worth as warriors — now come and receive your reward!”

At his words, the fire ring — no longer a flaming python — extinguished, leaving behind scorched earth and a clear pathway out of the arena. Two groups of beige-armored guards appeared, one set heading

toward Kiva and her friends, the rest bearing canvas stretchers to carry away the fallen.

Kiva didn't watch the second group, especially the pair of guards who approached the golden warrior. She just kept her eyes on her feet and followed her friends as they were led from the arena.

Given Thembi's invitation, Kiva had assumed they would be delivered straight to the raised dais, but the guards didn't head into the stands. The screams of the crowd faded as they stepped through a narrow, shaded walkway dissecting the arena walls, and then exited out into the blistering sunshine once more. After that, it was only a short stroll across to the palace, where they were taken to what was apparently to be their guest quarters for the rest of their stay.

Kiva's gaze had remained lowered for the duration of their walk, the change of location passing in a blur. A numb feeling had enveloped her somewhere between the arena and the palace, as she'd tried and failed to justify what had happened — what she'd *done*. But then all the guards except one backed out the door, and Kiva finally looked up, her dazed vision noting that she stood in a bright, circular room with large white cushions dotting the floor in front of a fireplace, along with a balcony looking not out at the arena — thankfully — but toward the opposite side of the city.

“Their Majesties have declared that there will be a feast tonight in your honor,” the remaining guard said, lingering in the doorway. His accent was so thick that it took Kiva a moment to comprehend his words, and once she did, she looked desperately toward Ashlyn.

The princess's frustrated expression told Kiva that they wouldn't just be able to take the ring and be on their way. They would have to play the courteous political game first.

“Bathe and rest, and an escort shall return to deliver you to the banquet hall,” the guard continued. “You'll find evening attire in your rooms.” He pointed to the closed doors that Kiva had missed in her quick perusal of the suite. Only one was ajar, revealing the edge of a ginormous bathtub in the corner.

With nothing else to say, the guard stepped back through the door and paused on the other side, holding it open.

Kiva wondered if he planned to stand sentry until the feast, but then she heard quick footsteps just before Jaren, Caldon, and Tipp appeared. Only

after they were through the door did the guard close it, leaving them to their privacy.

For a moment, no one said anything as they all stared at each other. Kiva was more aware than ever of her still-damp hair and clothes, but especially of the now-dried blood staining her hands.

Jaren, Caldon, and Tipp had seen everything.

They'd watched six women die.

They'd witnessed Kiva slaying one of those women herself.

She couldn't bear to look at them, her shame and guilt causing her stomach to roil and her eyes to burn.

But then she heard a sob, and she glanced up to see Tipp running toward her, tears streaking his cheeks.

Kiva's mind blanked when his small body collided with hers, the force of it sending her backwards a step. She stood there, stunned, as he wrapped his arms around her and burrowed his face into her chest.

"Y-Y-You nearly died!" he wailed, his voice muffled by her leathery armor. "Y-You nearly left m-me!"

"Tipp," Kiva whispered, emotion clogging her throat. She returned his embrace hesitantly, fearing he would suddenly remember that he wasn't speaking to her and push her away. But he didn't — if anything, his grip tightened.

"I'm s-sorry!" he cried, tilting his tearstained face back to look at her through watery blue eyes. "I'm s-s-so sorry! J-Jaren said I should f-forgive you, that you d-didn't have a choice and you o-only lied to protect me, but I was j-just so mad! And you n-nearly drowned thinking I h-hate you! I d-don't! I don't hate you, K-Kiva! I couldn't n-never hate you! I l-love you! Please b-believe me!"

He burrowed his face again as his sobbing intensified. As much as his declaration made Kiva want to cry right along with him, and as much as she wanted to comfort him, she was too shocked by what he'd just revealed. Her disbelieving gaze shot toward Jaren, only to find him staring hard into the empty fireplace.

Caldon, however, was striding toward his sister, his face pale, but his expression determined. As Kiva watched, he opened his mouth, closed it, opened it again, and then shook his head at himself, before reaching out and pulling Ashlyn into his arms.

The stoic princess turned as still as a statue.

And then promptly burst into tears.

“I’m so sorry, Ashy,” Caldon said quietly. “It was always too painful, the thought of seeing you. It always made me think of them, and it was so much easier to act like they — and you — never existed. But watching you today, realizing I could have lost you, too . . . I made a mistake in staying away. It was selfish, and I know I hurt you. Can you forgive me?”

Ashlyn only cried harder, but she nodded into her brother’s chest. “Of course I can, you big, stupid oaf,” she blubbered, before leaning back and punching him in the shoulder. Hard.

Caldon grunted and rubbed his arm, glaring at her. “What was that for?”

“You deserved it,” Ashlyn stated, her silvery eyes still wet with tears, her cheeks red and puffy. But there was a lightness to her expression that hadn’t been there before, a weight now lifted from her shoulders. Despite her words, the princess smiled brightly at her brother and finished, “You actually deserve a lot more, but I’m feeling generous.”

Caldon’s glare deepened. “I’m going to regret apologizing to you, aren’t I?”

“Too late now,” Ashlyn said, wiping her face and grinning wider. In this moment, even wearing her bloodied armor, she didn’t look anything like a fierce general; she was nothing more than an older sister teasing her younger brother.

“As adorable as this is,” Cresta interjected, not even trying to hide her disgusted expression, “would someone like to explain what happened after we left the arena? Did the kings hand over the ring?”

“They’re presenting it to us at the feast,” Caldon answered, wrinkling his nose as he saw the battle mess his sister had transferred onto his own darker clothes.

Cresta’s eyebrows arched upward. “You believe them?”

“They’re honor-bound by Jirvan law to reward us for completing the Arzavaar,” Naari said, pressing a hand to her side — where fresh blood was still flowing. “They have to give —”

She didn’t finish before her knees gave out, a pained sound leaving her as she collapsed onto a white cushion.

Kiva and Jaren both lunged forward and reached her at the same time, with him watching anxiously as Kiva examined the worst of Naari’s wounds. Her hands trembled at the sight of dried blood on her own flesh,

but she took a deep breath and repressed everything she was feeling until they stilled again.

Jaren's proximity made it hard for Kiva to concentrate, when all she wanted was to lean into him and ask why he'd encouraged Tipp to forgive her. But she made herself focus, especially when she realized how deep Naari's injury was.

"Gods," Jaren muttered, seeing the same.

"Is that *bone*?" Cresta asked, peering over their shoulders. "Ew."

Caldon swiftly wrapped an arm around her torso and dragged her to the far side of the room.

"Is she g-going to be all r-right?" Tipp asked, kneeling on Kiva's other side. He looked at her and said, "You can h-heal her, can't y-you?"

The numbness she'd felt since leaving the arena evaporated, replaced by warmth that only grew as the young boy continued looking at her with such trust, such hope. Seeing that, Kiva's magic rose to the surface effortlessly. It felt as natural as breathing, with it flowing out of her in a glorious golden light, stitching together not just Naari's largest wound, but all those she'd sustained in the battle.

And not only her — a gasp came from Ashlyn and a surprised oath from Cresta as the glow of Kiva's magic spread outward from Naari, flooding the room. She glanced up to see both of them staring at their previously burned and grazed flesh in wonder.

"Did you mean to do that? Heal everyone at once?"

The quiet question came from Jaren, and Kiva turned to him, finding him close enough to take her breath away.

"No," she answered, hoping he didn't notice how husky her voice was. "But it was easier than it's ever been. I didn't even have to think about it. It just . . . *happened*."

A knock on the door kept him — and anyone else — from responding, and they all jumped quickly to their feet. Kiva's pulse sped up at the thought of someone having seen the unnatural flare of light, but with the bright sunshine outside, even a brief burst from the balcony should have gone unnoticed.

Her shoulders slumped with relief when two white-clad servants entered the room bearing a tray of fruits and cheeses, and an urn full of liquid. They spoke rapidly in their native tongue before bowing and leaving again.

"Refreshments to tide us over until dinner," Jaren translated.

They all eyed the offering warily, given what had happened the last time they'd accepted the so-called Jirvan hospitality.

"Pass," Cresta said, glaring at the food.

Naari, however, walked straight over to the urn and poured herself a drink. Since she was the only one who had refused the yijapilly juice earlier, everyone looked at her with surprise.

"They only drugged us to get us into the arena," she said after downing half the liquid. "We've already earned what we came for. They have no reason to cause us further harm — and their own laws forbid it." She tipped back the rest of her drink and then refilled it. "It's safe. All of it."

That was all Tipp needed to hear before he bounded over and began stuffing his mouth, while the others followed more slowly.

Watching them, a wave of exhaustion hit Kiva, a delayed response to the magic she'd just used — or from everything else she'd endured that day. Rather than join her friends, she slipped through the nearest door and entered the bedroom beyond. Like the common room, it was bright and luxurious, with afternoon sunshine streaming in through curtains, which she quickly closed, plunging the space into darkness. Only then did she sink onto the heavily cushioned bed and curl into a ball, wishing she could remember the feeling of Tipp's arms around her, but instead only recalling the life leaving the golden warrior's eyes.

Chapter Seventeen

Kiva had no idea how she made it through the feast that night.

The hours passed in a blur of bright colors and upbeat music, of spicy foods and boisterous laughter. The kings were in their element, hosting hundreds of their peers in the palace's massive banquet hall, which was lined with food-laden tables and decorated with strings of luminium lights overhead, like a starry expanse twinkling across the high ceiling.

As the guests of honor, Kiva and her friends were seated with the twins and their Royal Council at the head table. They'd all managed to bathe before their guard escort had arrived, with no traces of travel grime or arena blood left to be seen — even if Kiva still *felt* as if it stained her hands. The outfits they'd been given were spotless, with Ashlyn, Cresta, Naari, and Kiva all wearing billowing long skirts and floaty off-the-shoulder tops, while Jaren, Caldon, and Tipp wore trousers and open-collared shirts made of a thin flaxen material. Tipp's clothes were bright orange, which clashed terribly with his hair, but Caldon's were an attractive forest green, and Jaren's were a deep navy, which had effectively stolen Kiva's breath when she'd first seen him. She herself was dressed in an attention-grabbing turquoise, but every time she felt self-conscious, she only had to look at Cresta scowling in her bright pink outfit to realize she could have been allocated something much worse.

When finally — *finally* — the kings stood and quieted their guests, Kiva nearly wept, because without further ado, they handed a small leather pouch to Jaren. Thembi raised his chalice and gave a congratulatory speech, but Kiva didn't hear him, her focus solely on Jaren as he opened the pouch to reveal a gold ring topped with an obnoxiously large ruby.

The fire ring.

One down, three to go, Kiva thought, overwhelmed by all that was still ahead. But she reminded herself of why they were doing this: to stop Navok from possessing the Hand of the Gods and growing his magical army. And more selfishly — at least to Kiva — to get Jaren back his elemental powers.

Because maybe then he would be able to forgive her.

The rest of the feast sped by, but Kiva was on edge now that they had the ring, eager to leave and seek out the other three. She knew her friends felt the same, with Jaren, Ashlyn, and Caldon having even more reason to want to keep moving, given that their entire kingdom — and family — was currently in the hands of a psychopath. But there was nothing they could do about Zuleeka from Yirin — or Navok, for that matter — and wisdom warned that only fools would begin a journey through the harsh Jiirvan desert at night. Their departure would have to wait until morning, even if their patience was wearing thin.

When the kings finally declared the feast over, Kiva was relieved to be quickly escorted back to their quarters — and even more relieved to find Torell, Eidran, and Galdric seated on the cushions and waiting for them.

“About time you showed up,” Caldon said, dropping beside them and stretching his long legs out. “How did it go with the anomalies?”

Eidran kicked Caldon’s feet away. “It didn’t.”

The spy wasn’t known for being verbose, so Kiva looked to her brother for more information.

“We found the village,” Torell shared, “but no one would speak with us. They wouldn’t even come near us. It was like we had the plague.”

“We didn’t see any magic, either,” Galdric said, looking dispirited. “If there were any anomalies left, they were careful to hide their powers.”

“They were terrified of us,” Eidran said, running his fingers through his short dark hair. “We’d hoped to learn how Navok had convinced them to join him, but given our reception . . . the evidence is pointing to them being coerced in some way.”

Galdric looked from the spy to the Vallentis royals and said, “There are still two more settlements that I know of, in Hadris and Valorn. Maybe we’ll have more luck with those.”

Kiva hoped so. Knowing Navok’s plans and what was motivating his magical followers would go a long way in helping them strategize their next steps to protect Evalon — and Wenderall.

“What about you? Did you get the ring?” Torell asked, eyeing their well-dressed group.

In answer, Jaren stepped forward and reopened the leather pouch. He didn’t mention *how* they’d earned it, and Kiva was grateful. If her brother learned what they’d done in the arena — what *she’d* done — he would recognize the turmoil brewing within her. As it was, she’d barely been able

to touch her dinner, her stomach queasy from the golden warrior's face repeatedly coming to her mind. She'd thought taking some time away from everyone that afternoon would help her process and move on, but if anything, she only felt more guilty.

A woman was dead. Six women were dead. How was she supposed to act as if that hadn't happened? Ashlyn, Cresta, and Naari seemed unaffected, but Kiva . . . She still didn't know how to reconcile all she was feeling.

"That's some rock," Torell said, leaning in from his reclined position for a closer look.

As Galdric and Eidran did the same, Kiva took a seat beside Caldon, with Tipp coming to sit with her. He was near enough that Tor sent her a surprised look, but then his expression warmed as he realized the young boy was no longer ignoring her. That warmth quickly turned to curiosity, but Kiva shook her head, not wanting to get into it. For so many reasons.

Seconds after joining her, Tipp rested his head on Kiva's shoulder and fiddled sleepily with the beading on her turquoise outfit, the events of the day — and their long travel hours — leaving him barely able to keep his eyes open.

She was just about to suggest they all head to bed, when Cresta approached Jaren and asked, "How do we know if Sarana's magic is already in it?"

All eyes turned to the ruby as if it would yield an answer. Kiva thought about the amulet she still wore and how the gemstones had glowed when Jaren sent his magic into them, before they'd faded back to normal. She was tempted to pull the crest from beneath her top and see how it compared to the ring, but she stilled her hand at the last moment. There had been so many times on their journey that she'd considered returning it to Jaren, but cowardice had stopped her, fearing what he might say — and what he might remember. The amulet had protected her, but it had also protected Zuleeka, keeping her safe from Jaren's magic and ultimately leading to his ruin. Because of that, Kiva had tried to keep it out of sight for his sake, but there had been a few moments during her vigorous morning exercises when it had bounced free of her clothes. During those times, she'd seen Jaren look at it, before clenching his jaw and turning away, proving she was right in trying to keep it hidden.

Now that she was thinking about it, Kiva almost felt as if the amulet was burning against her chest, but she resisted the urge to draw attention to it. She did, however, wonder if perhaps the ring was similar in that it would glow only when magic was pushed into it, not the rest of the time.

Seeming to be of the same mind as Kiva, Jaren finally answered, “There’s no way to know for sure.” He handed the pouch to Caldon. “Better safe than sorry.”

Caldon looked from the ring to his cousin and back again. “Shouldn’t we wait until we have all four?”

It was Galdric who answered, “If something happens and we’re separated, it’s smarter to have it ready for use, especially if Sarana’s power *isn’t* already imbued in it. Between you” — he nodded toward Caldon — “and the princess” — a nod toward Ashlyn this time — “you command three of the four elements. If you send your fire magic into it now, it leaves less room for chance when the time comes for Kiva to wield the full Hand.”

Butterflies fluttered in Kiva’s middle at the pressure of what she alone would have to do, but her attention was diverted when Caldon accepted Galdric’s reasoning and fished the ring out of the pouch. He touched his finger to the red gemstone, a rare look of concentration on his face. Instantly, the ruby began to glow, pulling Kiva back to the night when Jaren had gifted her the amulet, right after his mother’s attack. As the glow faded from the ring, she wondered if he was also remembering that tender moment between them. There was a stiffness in his frame that made her think he might have been, particularly since he seemed determined to avoid her eyes.

Once the ruby was no longer alight, Caldon placed the ring back in the pouch and returned it to Jaren, who tucked it away for safekeeping.

“That was anticlimactic,” Cresta said.

“After today, do you really need more excitement?” Caldon asked, incredulous.

“That depends on the kind of excitement,” Cresta shot back, along with a suggestive wink that prompted a surprised but undeniably wicked grin from him.

Kiva groaned and was tempted to tell them to keep ten feet apart, but before she could, Torell spoke.

“What happened today?” he asked, sitting up straighter, his brow furrowing in concern.

“Nothing,” Kiva answered quickly, avoiding everyone’s eyes. “Thembi and Ryu are just drama queens. Drama kings, even.” She attempted a laugh, but it was forced and panicked. Thank the gods for Tipp who, at that exact moment, revealed he’d fallen asleep on her shoulder by uttering a loud snuffle-snore.

“It’s been a long day, for all of us,” Ashlyn said, quiet enough not wake him. “Given how much the kings imbibed tonight, we should be able to sneak away before they awaken. But we should also aim to leave early, just in case.”

They set a plan, agreeing to meet in the common room at dawn to begin their journey to Hadris. Kiva was just about to ask someone to help her move Tipp to a bed, but Jaren was already striding toward her and reaching down for the boy. His hand grazed Kiva’s waist as he sought to get a secure grip, their eyes meeting for a split second. Even knowing his touch was accidental, she felt the world stop as they stared at each other, but then he glanced away, a muscle bunching in his cheek. He then lifted Tipp with ease and carried him away, not looking back.

Kiva’s heart was racing and her face was warm. Aware of everyone looking at her, she quickly cleared her throat before bidding them a good night, almost running to the safety of her bedroom.

But as soon as she was alone, her thoughts invaded. Even after changing into a Jirvan nightgown and crawling into bed, she couldn’t settle her mind enough to sleep, despite knowing she needed to rest before their early departure.

Tossing and turning, Kiva finally gave up and headed over to her window, drawing back the curtains to look out at the luminium-lit city. The giant statues caught her eyes, their fighting poses reminding her all too much of the women in the arena, the golden warrior’s face now permanently embedded into her thoughts.

A quiet knock had Kiva turning toward the door. For one heart-stopping moment, she wondered if it was Jaren, before remembering that the days of him coming to comfort her were long gone.

Instead, the person who opened the door surprised Kiva almost as much — because it was Naari.

The guard said nothing after letting herself into the room, but she walked straight to Kiva’s side, the two of them staring silently out at the

city. Kiva didn't know what to think, her pulse skittering as the minutes trickled by. But then Naari spoke.

"The first time I killed someone, I vomited for hours afterward."

Kiva turned woodenly to the guard.

"I was chosen by the Rakavan when I was ten years old," Naari continued. "It meant so much to my family, and at that age, all I wanted was to please them, so I accepted the invitation to begin training. I showed enough promise that I was brought here, to Yirin. At fifteen, during my first arena battle, I killed two girls, both friends who I'd trained beside for years."

Kiva's heart clenched. She balled her hands to keep from reaching out and offering comfort, still unsure where she and the guard stood.

"Kill or be killed — that's what I told you today," Naari said quietly. "That's how I lived, day after day, every time I entered that arena and had to face someone I cared about, seeing the same resolution in their eyes as they tried to strike me down first, all for riches and glory and — and *honor*."

The word came out broken. Naari hugged her elbows, lost in memory. "It was destroying me — I could feel it. I couldn't stomach the thought of nominating for the Arzavaar, not after everything they'd taken from me. Everything I'd *given* them. But I also knew I wouldn't survive much longer. I was strong. I was fast. I was *good* at killing people. But . . . seeing the life leave their eyes, it never got easier. It never does." She inhaled deeply. "So I fled. I was a capable warrior, but I was still young, and my name wasn't widely known, so I was confident I could disappear without notice, saving my family from dishonor — and I was right. It took weeks of running and looking over my shoulder, but no one came after me, and I finally made my way back to the village where I grew up. But then my family —"

She closed her eyes slowly, her voice hoarse when she shared, "They couldn't abide having what they considered a coward for a daughter. They turned their backs on me, and their abandonment forced me into a different kind of survival." She paused to collect herself, then said, "You know what happened next — I found my way to Ersa and snuck onto Captain Veris's ship, sailing with him to Vallenia and eventually ending up in the Royal Guard. But those other details, everything I just told you . . . no one knows. Not even Jaren."

Kiva's throat was so dry that she couldn't speak, but Naari turned and saw the question in her eyes, the desperation to know why she'd shared

such a personal story.

Holding Kiva's gaze, Naari said, her voice low and full of emotion, "I know what happened today was hard on you. I know you killed that woman to save me, and I know it's eating at you."

Kiva tensed as the golden warrior flashed before her eyes once more.

"As mad as I am at you for all the lies and the betrayals," Naari went on, causing Kiva to brace, "I also know that the only reason I'm standing here is because of you."

Before Kiva could say anything, Naari pulled her into a rough but heartfelt embrace.

"Thank you," the guard said into her ear. She kept her hands on Kiva's shoulders and drew back enough to meet her eyes again, her own amber gaze serious. "The fact that you're feeling guilt is a credit to you. It means you're human. It means you're *Kiva*. But you acted in selfdefense, and in doing so, you saved my life. So instead of dwelling on what was lost, try to remember that as important as it is to mourn the dead, it's just as important to celebrate the living."

Naari gave Kiva's shoulders a gentle squeeze and whispered, "I will grieve for the six warriors we killed, but I will not regret what we did. Because if they had succeeded, then we would all be dead." She gave one final squeeze before releasing Kiva. "Those women would be the first to applaud the courage you showed today. They undertook the *Arzavaar* knowing what they risked, and they died with honor, just as they would have wanted. They are at peace — now and forever. So when the nightmares come, think about that. And if you can't . . ." Naari's lips tipped up in the slightest of smiles, that expression more than anything else telling Kiva that the guard had forgiven her. "Come and wake me. I'll battle your demons for you."

On that profound note, Naari turned and left the room.

Long minutes passed as Kiva stared at the closed door, mentally replaying their conversation. Tears welled in her eyes, but she wasn't sure if they were from grief or joy.

Tipp had forgiven her, and now Naari, too.

Kiva let that sink deep before wiping her face and leaving the window, curling up in bed once more. This time, sleep came swiftly.

So did the nightmares.

But every time she woke, she remembered Naari's words, how those women — including the golden warrior — had known the risks and were now at peace.

Holding on to that, Kiva soon felt her nightmares fading, their power dissolving as perspective allowed her to accept what had happened, and her role in it.

Only then did she drift off one final time, her mind finally at rest.

Chapter Eighteen

The next few days passed in a haze of blistering sun and windswept sand as their group set out across the desert. They stayed close to the coastline to take advantage of the ocean breeze, only moving inland when the cliffside path became too hazardous for the horses.

Every morning, Kiva continued to work with Caldon, first on her physical strength and then on her magic. He was methodical in making her relive *every single moment* of the arena battle, showing her a range of self-defense moves she could have used in a multiple-opponent scenario, ignoring her claims that she'd never be in that situation again. Or she *hoped* not. She might have come to terms with what had happened, thanks to Naari's intervention, but the golden warrior remained in her thoughts. Kiva doubted she would ever fully disappear — that was the consequence of taking a life, a burden to live with forever.

On the magical side of things, Kiva was becoming increasingly jealous of Ashlyn, who was seeing vast improvements in her windfunneling. She was now able to transport herself to any point she could see in the distance, even if she'd yet to manage anywhere outside of view. But Galdric was impressed by how quickly she was learning. Conversely, Kiva's attempts to throw her own power outward continued to fizzle into nothing.

Despite how effortless it had been for her to heal Naari after the Arzavaar — and to extend that healing to Ashlyn and Cresta without having to touch them — Kiva had seen little success since then. Her magic was temperamental at best, and causing her no small amount of frustration.

On the third day after they'd left Yirin, the pressure finally got to her enough that, mid-training, she threw her hands in the air and cried, "It's useless! I'm never going to be able to do what Zuleeka does!"

"That's actually the opposite of what we want," Caldon said dryly. "Death magic, bad. Remember?"

Kiva scowled and kicked at the sand. "Don't try to be funny when I'm upset."

Straight-faced, he said, “There’s nothing funny about death magic. That’s some dark humor you’re into, Sunshine.” He then cracked a smile and nudged her in the ribs, saying, “Lighten up, Sweet Cheeks. No one expects you to learn everything in a day.”

Maybe not, but they clearly wished she’d learn faster than her current speed. She might as well not have magic, for all the progress she was making.

Sighing, Kiva stared across the seemingly endless sand dunes, the early morning sun hinting that the day would be another scorcher. They’d found a small oasis to camp beside overnight, the watering hole narrow but bordered by enough shrubbery that they’d each been able to wash the sweat and dirt off their bodies with a modicum of privacy. Kiva had felt nearly human for the first time in four days when she’d awoken that morning, but now her growing irritation was sabotaging her mood.

In a miserable voice, she said, “I just don’t know how to do it. It’s so instinctive to release my magic when I’m touching someone who’s hurt. But the rest of the time?” She shook her head and looked down at the sand. “Galdric says my mother thought I was strong, but I don’t feel strong. All I feel is scared.”

Gently, Caldon repeated, “Scared?”

“That I’m going to fail you all,” Kiva admitted softly. “I know you’re all relying on me being able to stop Zuleeka, but what if I can’t? What if all the training in the world won’t prepare me for her? I’m already struggling so much just to *summon* my magic, so what if —”

“Close your eyes.”

Kiva jolted at Jaren’s quiet order and spun to see him walking toward her, his hair damp and his skin flushed from his workout. Naari had been sparring with him, but she’d now joined Eidran and Cresta in a three-way match, while Ashlyn, having finished with Galdric for the day, was wrestling with Torell.

For the briefest of moments, Kiva watched her brother, seeing the wide grin on his face as Ashlyn tackled him, the two of them tumbling to the ground in a mess of limbs, laughing freely. Kiva hadn’t had a chance to ask him yet, but there was definitely a spark between them — even Caldon had noticed, grumbling about how his sister always stole the good ones. But Kiva had a feeling Caldon had already turned his affections elsewhere, to a certain redheaded ex-quarrier, even if they spent as much time ignoring

each other as they did flirting. The tension between them was growing uncomfortable for the rest of the group — but Kiva could hardly talk, given the tension she herself felt toward a certain crown prince.

The same crown prince who was now standing before her, waiting for her to obey his command.

“Pardon?” Kiva asked, her chest suddenly tight.

She expected to see impatience, even anger, but his gaze was steady as he repeated, “Close your eyes, Kiva.”

The way he said her name made her feel as if gentle fingers were trailing down her spine, causing her to shiver. “Close my . . . eyes?” she asked, somewhat breathily and definitely dazed. He was so close — closer than he’d willfully been to her in the time since they’d been reunited.

“You said you’re struggling to summon your power,” he stated, apparently having heard her outburst to Caldon. That was mortifying, and she fought the blush wanting to stain her cheeks. “You also said we’re relying on you — and you’re right, we are.”

Kiva winced at hearing confirmation from the one person who needed her to succeed perhaps more than anyone else.

“I might not have magic anymore,” he said, and she quickly looked away, afraid of what she would see in his expression, even if there continued to be no trace of anger in his voice, “but I still know how it works. So please, close your eyes and trust me.”

Kiva hardly dared to breathe with him so near, especially since he seemed to have momentarily set aside his hatred of her. She had no trouble trusting him — she’d *never* had trouble trusting him, even when she should have. For her, it was as easy as breathing, so she had no problem following his quiet command.

“When you use your magic, what do you feel?” Jaren asked, his voice soft, and close enough that she shivered again. “Hot? Cold? Happy? Sad? What do you experience?”

Kiva’s stomach flipped in response to his proximity, but she kept her eyes tightly closed as she answered, “It’s like my blood heats up, and I get a tingling feeling in my fingers before it just sort of . . . erupts out of me.”

“Is it uncomfortable?”

“No, never. It feels . . . not happy, but pure. Clean. It feels like —” She took a moment to consider her words. “It feels like *life*.”

“And what about when you healed Naari and the others in Yirin?” he pressed. “You said afterward that it had come easier to you than ever before, that it just *happened*. Go back to that moment — what was different about it?”

Kiva cast her mind back. There was nothing she could recall that might have made it less challenging to summon her magic, aside from —

“Tipp had just forgiven me,” Kiva answered quietly, almost embarrassingly. “The way he was looking at me, believing without a doubt that I’d be able to heal Naari . . . I — I —” She paused to gather herself. “I was feeling a lot, knowing that he accepted what I could do, and therefore who I *was*. His confidence in me, his *love* . . .” She had to clear the emotion from her voice before she could finish, “My magic came effortlessly. I barely even had to think about it.”

There was a weighty silence that lasted long enough for Kiva to wonder if Jaren had walked away. She was just about to crack open her eyelids and check when he spoke, his voice still quiet, still *close*.

“Elemental magic is prompted by conscious thought,” he shared. “In the same way your brain sends a message to your hands or feet if you want to move your fingers or wiggle your toes, a similar kind of mindful conditioning is what creates a magical response. Summon a flame. Grow a tree. Make it rain. Create a breeze. All it takes is a mental command, regardless of whether it’s deliberate or reactive.” He paused. “But your magic sounds as if it acts more on an emotional level. Ignoring what happened in Yirin, all the times you’ve healed people in the past, what was your dominant feeling?”

Kiva thought about healing Tipp in Zalindov, her brother at Vallenia’s docks, Jaren at the River Palace. In all three instances, they were mere moments from death. The answer came to her easily: “Desperation.”

A quiet puff of air left Jaren, and she wondered if he too was remembering the night he’d been stabbed. He’d been unconscious when she’d healed him, so he had no idea how terrified she’d been that she wouldn’t be able to save him. But Caldon had witnessed every traumatic second of it, and likely shared the entire encounter afterward.

“That makes sense,” Jaren said, after clearing his throat. “It’s also likely why you’re having so much trouble calling your power when no one’s in trouble — because you’ve become used to channeling your magic only in dire circumstances.”

“So what does that mean?” asked Caldon, and Kiva jumped, having forgotten she’d been training with *him* before Jaren had arrived.

“It means she needs to retrain her mind,” Jaren said. “If her power is linked to her emotions, then she needs to feed it the right feelings, ones that aren’t driven by fear, but by hope, and joy, and —” He stopped himself.

But Caldon finished for him, having heard what Kiva had said about Tipp. “Love. She needs to focus on love.”

Kiva was glad her eyes were still closed, if only to avoid seeing whatever look passed between the two princes.

“Right,” Jaren said, his voice rougher than before. But then it returned to normal as he addressed Kiva again. “I want you to think of a memory — a good one. Something that made you feel all the things we just talked about. Maybe think about when Tipp forgave you. Or perhaps a moment from your childhood, something that’s strong and clear in your mind and makes you feel lighter just thinking about it.”

“A memory filled with love,” Caldon added, apparently agreeing with his cousin’s new training technique.

Kiva’s mind sped over a thousand possibilities, with Tipp’s face coming to her, then Torell’s, her father’s, even Caldon’s. Each of them was attached to more than one memory that made her feel light, but she had trouble holding them in her thoughts, the images vanishing quickly. Only one memory was able to stay in the forefront of her mind, making her knees weak and her stomach flip all over again.

The night of the masquerade — before everything had gone wrong.

The night when she and Jaren had first kissed.

I know you’re scared, he’d whispered, right before his lips had touched hers. *But I promise you don’t have to be. You’re safe with me, Kiva. You’ll always be safe with me.*

Kiva hadn’t let herself think about that part of the night in all the time since then, fearing what it might do to her poor, grieving heart. But there was no denying that it fit everything she was being asked to feel. A good memory — filled with love.

“Do you have one?” Jaren asked softly.

“Yes,” Kiva whispered, hoping her cheeks weren’t as red as they felt.

If he had any idea that *he* was starring in her thoughts, he didn’t let on, and instead said, “Good. Now hold your hands out, like you’re cupping water in your palms.”

Kiva did so, her arms trembling from the emotion now coursing through her.

“Keep replaying that memory,” Jaren said, his voice now coming from behind her. He was close enough that she could feel his heat along her back, his breath against her ear. “Everything you felt at the time, keep it central in your thoughts. And then use it to dive deep within yourself, as if tapping a well full of your magic, carrying it back up to the surface. It’s light, not heavy. Full of hope, full of joy, full of — of love.”

He stumbled over the word, but Kiva barely heard him, all too aware of the tingles overtaking her body, of the warmth that had nothing to do with him standing behind her.

Open your eyes, sweetheart.

The words didn’t come from Jaren now; they were part of her memory from that night — when Jaren had uttered them so impossibly softly, and she’d obeyed, only to see everything he’d felt for her revealed in his expression.

“Open your eyes, Kiva,” the real Jaren whispered, causing her pulse to skip a beat.

But this time when she did so, he wasn’t waiting before her, looking at her with his heart on his sleeve. Instead, she glanced down to find her hands glowing, a steady, bright light sitting between her palms, waiting for direction.

It was as if something clicked within her then, an instinct she’d been unaware of, or perhaps suppressing. She separated her hands until they were stretched out at her sides, the glow remaining with them both, until she fisted one set of fingers to snuff it out. She then tossed the remaining ball of light into the air, catching it with her free hand, before making a waving gesture that caused an arc of golden light to spread outward from where she stood, like a gilded rainbow stretching three feet, five feet, ten feet long before she called it back into herself. Only then did she release her hold on her power, the tingles and the warmth fading as the glow finally disappeared.

For a moment, Kiva stood there, stunned.

But then she heard a *whoop* sound right before Caldon lifted her off the ground, spinning her in a circle.

“I knew you could do it!” he said, dropping her back onto the sand and beaming widely. “Now we just have to work on building your endurance

and refining your technique. How do you feel? Tired? Drained?”

Kiva felt neither, or at least not to the level she normally did after using her magic. It was as if, in not having to fight for it, to *beg* for it, she hadn't wasted as much energy as she normally would. Her magic *wanted* to be summoned. It *wanted* to feel the joy that she'd just fed it, the love that she'd used to coax it out.

For the first time since she'd learned about having to counter her sister's power, Kiva felt a stirring of hope, enough that she couldn't keep the grin from her lips when she answered, “I feel good. Really, really good.”

Slowly, she turned to see what Jaren had to say, longing to see the approval on his face, perhaps even a smile — something that she missed more than anything.

But when she looked around, all she saw was his strong back as he strode away.

“Never mind him,” Caldon said, seeing her face fall and clapping her heartily on the shoulder. “We're not done training. Summon your magic again, and this time I want you to try for fifteen feet. A straight line, too, like you're aiming for a target.”

When she didn't immediately jump to action, he tapped his boot on the ground and said, “What are you waiting for? *Now*, Sunshine.”

And so, Kiva turned away from the sight of Jaren unsheathing his sword and returning to his sparring, acting, once again, as if she didn't exist.

Chapter Nineteen

That night, Kiva sat alone in front of the fire, a soft glow emanating not just from the flames, but also from the magic she held between her palms. She stared at it, amazed anew by what she could now do.

All day as they'd ridden through the searing desert, Caldon had remained by her side, making her call her power on command, and even send it toward their traveling companions, easing their riding pains from a distance. It had been so easy, so *natural*, that Kiva had wanted to laugh. She'd still needed frequent breaks when her energy waned enough to risk tumbling off Zephyr's back — not that the beast would have minded — but she hadn't suffered from the all-consuming exhaustion her previous life-or-death healings had prompted. Even now, there was merely a weariness in her body, similar to how she felt after a hard physical workout.

Caldon had said she needed to build endurance, and Kiva was determined to do so, knowing how vital it was for her to be in top condition by the time they returned to Vallenia.

"You're really getting the hang of that," Torell said, coming to sit beside her. None of the others were in sight, each having jobs to do as part of their nightly routine. Kiva had been allocated dinner duty that evening, and was carefully monitoring the stew boiling on the fire.

"I still have a lot to learn," she said, banishing her magic before summoning it again. It was a basic strengthening exercise, one of the many Caldon had taught her that day. "Are the others back yet?"

Like every evening when they made camp, two of their companions had ridden out to scout the area, making sure there were no nasty surprises — or unwanted company — near enough to threaten them while they slept. Tonight, Caldon and Ashlyn had offered to go together, making Kiva's heart warm for the siblings, who were slowly catching up on everything they'd missed in the last three years.

"Not yet," Tor answered, feeding some twigs into the fire.

They'd been fortunate enough to find another oasis, this one considerably larger than the last and with more foliage — including a good

amount of desert grass that the horses had begun devouring upon arrival. Tipp and Galdric were currently checking all the mounts and rubbing them down, and despite how far away they were, Kiva could still hear the young boy talking nonstop to the ex-rebel leader. She couldn't make out the words, but his bubbly, happy tone made her sigh with contentment.

"Everything all right?" Tor asked, hearing the sound and looking at her with concern, his emerald eyes and dark hair both reflecting the light of the fire.

"Better than it's been for a long time," Kiva answered, thinking about the journey her life had taken over the last few weeks, a nightmare slowly becoming less so. She still had moments of darkness, her mind often plagued by memories of Zalindov or Navok or the arena battle, along with fears of what might be happening in Vallenia with Zuleeka and Mirryn. But right now, that all felt distant.

Carefully, Tor hedged, "Things seemed to go well with Jaren this morning."

It was a leading statement, and Kiva looked around quickly, aware that Jaren had gone to refill their water skins and could return at any moment. "I don't want to get my hopes up," she said quietly. "But he seems to not hate me as much. Maybe. I'm unsure."

"Have you talked to him?"

Kiva tossed her magic slowly from palm to palm. "Talked to him?"

Tor's lips twitched. "Yeah, Mouse. You know, that thing where your mouth moves and words come out?"

Kiva pulled a face, causing him to chuckle.

"Seriously," he said. "It's been, what? Twelve days since you were reunited —"

"Thirteen," Kiva mumbled.

"— and you still haven't tried to explain everything that happened? Even *I've* spoken with him, sharing my side of things."

Kiva's eyes widened. "You have?"

"I doubt we'll ever be best friends," Tor said wryly, "but I'm not worried about him stabbing me in my sleep anymore. We've even been training together — haven't you noticed?" He didn't wait for her answer before he added, "Don't get me wrong, it was one of the most uncomfortable conversations of my life. Owning up to your mistakes is never easy. It's not *meant* to be easy. But it's always worth it. I understand

why you're hesitant, but, well . . ." He frowned. "Actually, no, I don't. Why *haven't* you talked with him yet?"

Kiva rolled the tension from her neck, shocked that she'd been oblivious to Tor working on his relationship with Jaren. But even so, their situations were different. Tor wasn't in love with Jaren — and he hadn't betrayed him.

"It's complicated," Kiva finally said.

Torell snorted. "That's an understatement. But it's never going to become *uncomplicated* if you keep being afraid of confronting him."

"I'm not afraid."

The lie was so obvious that Torell burst out laughing.

"No, you're terrified," he said around his mirth. He nudged her shoulder, before gently asking, "What's the worst that could happen? He'll hate you even more?"

Kiva bit her lip and glanced toward where Jaren had disappeared earlier, striding through the fading twilight down to the watering hole. For one mad second, she considered going after him, but then her courage fled and she swiftly turned the interrogation around on her brother. "Forget about Jaren. What's going on with you and Ashlyn?"

Torell started. "What do you mean?"

This time it was Kiva who snorted. "Don't play dumb. Even Caldon has noticed." As an aside, she added, "He's quite put out, you know."

Tor's forehead bunched. "I didn't realize he was so protective of her."

Kiva rolled her eyes. "I think he's more upset that she's managed to steal your attention, rather than him."

"Rather than . . ." Torell blinked. "Oh." He scratched his jaw, embarrassed. "I always wondered why I kept turning around to find him staring longingly at me. I was beginning to think I was imagining it."

Kiva choked. "You — You didn't know?" She chortled. "But he's so *obvious*."

Torell fed more sticks into the fire, his cheeks flushing. "I thought he and Cresta —"

"He wishes," Cresta said, appearing out of nowhere and making Kiva jump. She sat opposite them and unsheathed her sword — gifted by Eidran — along with a whetstone, and began sharpening the blade.

Despite the glimmer of humor in Cresta's features, Kiva also noticed the anticipation there. She shook her head, failing to understand the cat-and-

mouse game her two friends were playing.

She still hadn't figured out who was the cat and who was the mouse.

Turning back to her brother, Kiva said, "If you'd realized about Caldon sooner, would you have . . . returned his affections?" She stumbled over the words, feeling strange having this conversation after so many years apart. "And what about Rhessinda? I assumed you two were . . . you know . . ." She trailed off, uncomfortable now.

An amused sound left Torell. "Rhess and me? No. *Definitely* no. She's like a sister." He shuddered comically. "I mean, I love her, and I'd do anything for her, and I know that's reciprocated. But there's nothing romantic there. And besides," he added, "she doesn't feel that way about men. Or women. She loves fiercely, and the people she cares about mean everything to her, but she's the first to say she'd rather have chocabuns warm her bed than another person." He smiled in memory. "That's a direct quote, straight from her lips."

Kiva was amazed by how wrong she'd been about the two of them.

. . . Though she couldn't fault Rhess for her taste in pastries.

"And Caldon?" Kiva pressed.

This time, Torell took longer to respond, peering thoughtfully into the fire before he said, "I'll admit, I'm flattered. Cal is — well, he's obviously nice to look at, and once you get past the arrogance, I can see why you care so much about him. But there's no spark there, at least not for me. Attraction has to be more than skin-deep."

Kiva mulled over his response, unsurprised given what she'd seen of their interactions. "So, back to my question about Ashlyn . . . ?"

Torell's gaze became unfocused, a rare, goofy smile touching his lips. "She's special."

"Ugh, gag," Cresta muttered, pressing harder on her whetstone, as if hoping the sound would drown out what she was hearing.

"No one asked you to join us," Kiva told her.

"I'm here for the food," Cresta said. "I didn't think I'd have to endure whatever this is."

"You're just jealous that Tor's not afraid to admit to his feelings," Kiva said. "Unlike whatever the hell you and Caldon are doing."

"There's no fun in that," Cresta returned, grinning. "Tor's choice leads to long, sunset walks and chaste cheek-kisses. Mine leads to pent-up frustration and hot, steamy —"

“Gods, do *not* finish that sentence,” Ashlyn groaned, appearing out of the darkness with Caldon at her side. He was chuckling and sent a wink toward Cresta, which she dutifully ignored, continuing to play their game.

Torell had stiffened beside Kiva, clearly anxious about how much the Vallentis siblings had heard. But when Ashlyn sat next to him and asked about one of the rebel attacks he’d secretly sabotaged, he relaxed again, answering her questions without hesitation.

Kiva marveled at them: two generals from opposing bloodlines who had managed to set aside their differences and develop feelings for each other. Because it wasn’t just Torell who was emotionally invested — the way Ashlyn was looking at him made it seem like he was the only person in the world. Or at least, in *her* world.

“I hate them,” Caldon muttered as he dropped down on Kiva’s free side. She didn’t even try to hide her smile. “You do not.”

He sighed. “Fine. I don’t. But do they have to be so mushy about it?”

“There’s a good ten inches of space between them,” Kiva said dryly, leaning forward to check the stew. “And they’re discussing fighting strategies. I’d hardly consider that mushy.”

“You forget, my sister has wind magic,” Caldon retorted. “All it would take is a flick of her hand and — *whoosh* — off come his clothes. You think I want to witness that? No, thank you.” He cocked his head and amended, “Well, actually, I *do*, but only if —”

“We can hear you, asshole,” Ashlyn said, turning to scowl at him.

Cresta choked on a laugh, and Kiva was tempted to join her, if not for the unpleasant image Caldon had just inserted into her mind.

“Please don’t say something like that to me again,” Kiva begged.

“Or to *anyone*,” Ashlyn stated, still frowning at him. Her face then cleared, a mischievous look coming over her as she added, “But since you’re so curious, my magic doesn’t *quite* work like that. Clothes are tricky, with all those buckles and belts. I much prefer to use my hands so I can touch —”

“*La-la-la*,” Caldon interrupted, plugging his ears immaturely. “Not thinking about my sister and —”

“What in the everworld is going on over here?” Naari asked, joining them, with Eidran following close behind.

With a devilish grin toward Caldon, Cresta said, “We were just discussing the preferred method of —”

“Using magic,” Caldon interrupted firmly. “But now Kiva is going to tell us if the food is ready, and we’re going to eat. In *silence*.”

Kiva patted his knee, biting back a laugh at his uncharacteristic show of discomfort. “The stew’s done,” she confirmed, standing. “I’ll go tell the others.”

As she walked away, she could have sworn she heard Caldon pleading, “Don’t leave me with these reprobates,” which only made her snicker into the darkness.

Carefully, she picked her way through the shrubs and date palms toward where they’d set up the temporary pen for the horses. Halfway there, she summoned her magic, delighted to discover that the glow illuminated her path enough to avoid tripping. Soon, however, it wasn’t needed, since Tipp and Galdric were using handheld luminium lanterns as they saw to Ashlyn’s and Caldon’s newly returned mounts. Spirit was already settled and happily munching on tufts of grass, while Caldon’s mare, Fury, was impatiently waiting for Galdric to complete her rubdown.

Looking toward Tipp, Kiva saw that he’d just finished cleaning their gear and was sorting everything into neat, efficient piles. Pride welled in her as she watched him meticulously check everything over before giving a nod of satisfaction. Only then did he turn and see her, his face brightening instantly.

“K-Kiva!” he greeted her, with a gap-toothed smile. “You were r-right about that p-poultice — Whistlefoot’s swelling is a-almost completely g-g-gone!”

She returned his smile, not sharing that she’d had *no idea* if a treatment intended for humans would work on his beloved pony, but pleased for him nonetheless.

“Dinner’s ready,” she said. “I added extra collis bulbs, just for you.”

No one else could stand the chalky-tasting desert tuber, but Tipp was a growing boy with a stomach that would find dirt palatable as long as it filled him up.

His grin widened and he bounced over to give her a quick hug, before skipping off in the direction of the fire, calling over his shoulder, “I h-hope they left m-me some!”

Kiva was willing to bet that every single bulb would be waiting at the bottom of the pot for him, untouched by the others. She chuckled and shook her head, before looking toward the palms leading down to the watering

hole, debating whether she should go and find Jaren or let him return on his own.

She still hadn't decided when Galdric cleared his throat, drawing her eyes.

"We haven't had much of a chance to talk," he said, shifting from foot to foot. Fury stomped with agitation, picking up on his nerves, and he ran a soothing hand along her back.

Before Kiva could ask what Galdric wanted to discuss, a puff of air on her neck had her whipping around to find Zephyr had snuck up behind her. She eyed him warily, but instead of trying to bite her, he only nudged her with his muzzle.

"Ha," she declared quietly, stroking his silky gray cheek. "I knew I'd grow on you."

"That one's a menace to groom," Galdric stated. "I don't think he likes anyone."

"He's just picky," Kiva said, moving her hand quickly when Zephyr had enough of her affection and attempted to nip her. Clearly, there was still room for improvement in their relationship, but as Caldon had once told her, small steps were still steps.

Bored of her now, Zephyr ambled away, leaving Kiva's full attention on Galdric.

"I know it's not my place," he said, "and I don't even know if you want to hear it, but your mother —" He broke off, tugging on his beard. "She was — Your mother was —" He tried again, his voice thick. "Tilda was very dear to me. We grew close, after your father passed." Panicked, he said, "Not like that. She loved Faran too much to give her heart to anyone else. But I —" He kept his gaze firmly on Fury as he admitted, "I couldn't help developing those feelings for her, even knowing she'd never reciprocate them."

Kiva stood there awkwardly, unsure what to say. Since knowing Galdric, the mother she'd thought she'd had, then lost, then realized she'd never known at all, had returned to being someone she remembered from her childhood. And yet, she still felt distance whenever she thought of Tilda. Not just from the years they'd been apart, but from all the lies and half-truths and the choices her mother had made — choices that had left Kiva alone in Zalindov for a decade.

“Did she ever tell you why she didn’t come and get me?” Kiva asked, having recently learned that she could have been freed any time before her twelfth birthday. Zuleeka had offered a flimsy excuse about how Kiva’s magic could have endangered the rebel movement, but Kiva knew there had to be more to it than that, since both Tilda *and* Zuleeka had been using their power that whole time.

“Ah,” Galdric said, fidgeting. “I’m afraid that might have been my fault.”

Kiva narrowed her eyes at the guilt on his face.

“You see,” he said, “I — well — I’m sorry, there’s no easy way to say this, but I told Tilda that the law allowing the release of minors didn’t apply to those accused of being rebel sympathizers. She trusted me, and I took advantage of that.” Seeing Kiva’s stricken look, he quickly added, “I thought I was protecting her. Faran was still alive then, and if she’d gone to claim you, she never would have left, knowing he was still imprisoned — she would have ended up locked in there with him. But when news of his death came a year later, I was too ashamed to admit that I’d lied. I’d already fallen in love with her, and I was so afraid that she’d —” His voice broke, his remorseful gaze meeting Kiva’s. “I’m so sorry. I won’t ask you to forgive me. But I’d hate if you went on thinking your mother to be the villain, when all she ever wanted was to love you, to protect you, to be with you. And she would have, if not for me.”

Kiva was having trouble breathing. Somehow, she managed to say, “But Zuleeka knew. She said Mother thought it was best if I stayed in —”

“Zuleeka overheard me speaking to one of the other rebel leaders about it, telling them my plans to keep Tilda safe,” Galdric explained. If anything, he only looked more ashamed. “She was so terrified of losing your mother that she readily agreed to stay quiet.”

Kiva had been seven when she’d been sent to Zalindov. Zuleeka had been eleven. They’d never been as close as Kiva had felt toward Torell, even toward her younger brother, Kerrin, but still. For Zuleeka to have cared so little about Kiva that she’d hidden how easy it would have been to free her, even — and *especially* — after their father had passed, made Kiva feel as if something very heavy was sitting on her chest.

“I’m sorry,” Galdric said again, whispering now. “I debated not telling you. I’ve been fighting with myself about it since long before we met. But I think — if I were you, I’d want to know. And I can’t in good conscience let

you believe your mother abandoned you. She loved you, so very much. And she asked — many times — if we could stage a rescue, but I always told her it was too dangerous. And every time, I saw her heart break a little more, until the day I could no longer say no.”

“That’s when you went with her to Navok,” Kiva realized, her voice hoarse.

“Yes. But by then, she was so sick that —” Galdric stopped himself, then quietly said, “I knew our chances were slim, but I’d hoped she would at least get to see you, before . . .”

“She was blind when she arrived at Zalindov,” Kiva said, feeling numb now. “Did you know that? She didn’t get to see me, not once. And she was so delirious with fever, I don’t think she even knew who I was most of the time.”

A pained moan left Galdric. “We waited too long. I should have helped her sooner. I should have *listened*. Instead, it was Zuleeka’s downward spiral that finally made me agree that something needed to be done — that we needed *you*.” His voice was full of regret as he whispered, “I’m so sorry.”

Kiva held his gaze, a silent war raging within her. Hearing that her mother had been lied to . . . She didn’t know how to process that, or the heartache that came with knowing Tilda had never truly abandoned her — not willfully, at least. In the same way that Torell hadn’t known he could free Kiva, Tilda had been equally ignorant.

Because of Galdric.

And Zuleeka.

Perhaps it was too forgiving of Kiva, but she could understand Galdric’s motivations. He hadn’t known her personally back then, and he’d wanted to protect the woman he’d loved. While there was surely more he wasn’t admitting to — like his desire to keep Tilda out of prison so she could continue spearheading the rebel campaign — for the most part, his reasons had been pure, even if they’d led to Kiva’s misfortune.

But Zuleeka?

She was Kiva’s *sister*. Even if she’d been worried about their mother, she still should have cared enough about Kiva to *want* her free. Unless —

“When did Zuleeka realize she had magic?” Kiva asked.

Galdric hesitated, before answering, “Soon after your family joined us. But she kept it hidden, only telling Tilda, who of course told me.”

“And when did she start using death magic?”

This time, Galdric’s hesitation was longer. “I can’t know for sure, but I think she understood what she could do almost straightaway. She only trained her healing magic with your mother, though, which is why she hasn’t yet succumbed to the blood illness like Tilda did — that, and because she’s not repressing it like Tilda was, plus she’s younger, so her body is able to restore itself faster. It took a few years before she began to actively use her death magic, and that’s when your mother chose to cover for her.”

Kiva looked out into the now fully dark oasis, the moonlight kissing the leaves of the date palms and shading them silver. “So, if Zuleeka knew what she could do, and what *I* could do, then she could probably have guessed what my power might do against hers.”

“She was young,” Galdric said softly. “But if I had to speculate, then yes, I assume that may have given her another reason for wanting to keep you away. That, and . . .”

“And what?”

Galdric sighed. “Zuleeka has always struggled with jealousy. I saw it time and again in the rebel camps, especially when your brother grew into himself and began to excel in his training. She never liked when someone else received more attention or praise than she did. And I think, because of that, she considered you a threat for your mother’s affections. Tilda was always saying how powerful you were, even before you’d had a chance to properly use your magic. I think Zuleeka feared that if you were released from Zalindov, she might be pushed to the side.”

That heavy feeling on Kiva’s chest was still there, now worse than before. She looked into the darkness once more, automatically turning in the direction of the watering hole. She would have given anything to talk to Jaren about what Galdric had just shared, knowing that, once upon a time, he would have held her until the pain eased.

She missed that — she missed *him*.

Maybe Torell was right. Maybe it *was* time she talked to Jaren. Tipp had forgiven her, as had Naari. And Caldon hadn’t maintained his anger long enough to *need* to forgive her. After nearly two weeks of being back together, of Jaren witnessing her heal Naari — *twice* — and watching her battle alongside their friends in the arena, all for a ring that would return his magic and prevent the loss of his kingdom, *surely* he would be willing to hear her out?

Kiva wasn't confident, but she felt hope flutter in her heart, especially when she remembered how he'd helped her that morning, how he'd been within touching distance of her — by choice.

She knew better than to expect his comfort for what she'd just learned, but maybe they could start working to get back to that place, if only she could find the courage to face him and begin mending what was between them.

Small steps are still steps.

Caldon's wisdom came to her again, solidifying her decision.

"Thank you for telling me all of that," Kiva said to Galdric, wanting to seek out Jaren before she lost her nerve. "And thank you for caring about my mother — and trying to protect her. I don't agree with your actions, but I can appreciate that you were in a difficult position, and you did what you thought was best."

Galdric seemed stunned by her acceptance, his hand frozen on Fury's back.

"If you'll excuse me," Kiva went on, "there's something I need to do."

She turned and headed toward the waterhole, her heart pounding as she navigated the desert shrubbery until she saw a glimpse of the surface rippling beneath the moonlight.

I can do this, she told herself, even if she was shaking on the inside.

This was Jaren — she knew him.

He would listen to her.

He *had* to.

But when Kiva finally reached the shore, he was nowhere in sight.

The courage bled out of her as she realized he must have already returned to the fire.

For a minute, she considered pulling him away for a private talk, but that would only result in unwanted attention — from everyone.

No, Kiva would have to wait for another opportunity.

Tomorrow — she would find a chance to talk to him tomorrow.

Nodding to herself, she stared at the water, allowing it to calm the turbulence she felt after her conversation with Galdric. Only when she was at peace again did she rejoin her friends, accepting the stew Tipp had saved for her and doing everything she could to not look at Jaren for the rest of the night, lest he see the longing on her face.

Chapter Twenty

When Kiva woke the next morning, she was determined to follow through with her plan to speak to Jaren. But since he'd made an art out of avoiding her, the only times she saw him were when he was with other people.

For the entirety of her training session with Caldon, she kept one eye on where Jaren sparred with Naari in the large, clear space at the outer edge of the oasis, partly because it was impossible *not* to appreciate the way his body moved, how his muscles bunched and shifted with a fluidity that was downright criminal. But she also watched so she could see when he finished, wanting to catch him alone before they departed for the next leg of their journey.

“Daydreaming much?”

Caldon's voice pulled Kiva's gaze back to find him smirking at her, prompting heat to touch her cheeks.

“I get it,” he said, jutting a thumb out toward his sweat-slicked cousin. “Trust me, I do.” His own eyes darted to where Torell was sparring with Ashlyn, before they settled on Cresta, who was paired with Eidran. They lingered on the redhead, before he shook away his dazed expression and frowned at Kiva. “But do it on your own time.”

She nodded guiltily, knowing she needed to concentrate. They'd already finished her physical training — which had included running laps around the oasis, leaving her a sweating, panting mess — and now they were working on her magic. She'd secretly hoped Jaren might join them again, had even considered acting as if she was still having trouble summoning her power, but she didn't want to manipulate his attention. That, plus she really *was* finding her magic to be so much easier now that she was feeding it through positive emotions and memories, and she knew they needed to continue moving her training along, which wouldn't happen if she faked having more difficulties.

“I was thinking last night about Zuleeka's magic,” Caldon said, “how she shot those shadows toward us in the River Room — do you remember?”

Kiva sent him a deadpan look. “No. Why would I remember that?”

Caldon snickered. “Gods, you’re so grumpy in the morning.” He then sobered and said, “Next time you face her, we need to make sure you can avoid her magic striking you at all, since there’s no way to know what command she’ll have behind it. She might just repeat that instant-paralysis she struck us with, but she could also do something more sinister, like stop your heart or create a brain bleed. Since you can’t heal yourself, you’ll be dead in seconds.”

A sick feeling twisted Kiva’s stomach. Would Zuleeka really do something like that? To her own *sister*? But then she thought about how Zuleeka had stabbed Torell, and how she’d murdered Nanna Delora. There really was no telling what extremes she might go to, especially if she felt threatened.

“So along with focusing on your magical strength and endurance,” Caldon went on, “I think we also need to work on your reaction speed.”

Kiva was unsure if she liked the eager look on his face. “How?”

“I had an idea,” Caldon said, appearing very much like Tipp as he bounced excitedly on his heels. “And before you panic, hear me out.”

That didn’t fill Kiva with confidence, but she still said, “I’m listening.”

“I’m going to throw my magic at you, and you’re going to summon yours to try and meet it midair before it can touch you.”

For a moment, Kiva just looked at him.

And then she laughed.

“Wow, you really had me going for a second there,” she said, still chuckling.

Caldon crossed his arms. “I’m serious, Sunshine. You need to get used to magical attacks. If you freeze up, or if you don’t react fast enough, all it will take is one hit from Zuleeka, and you could be dead.”

“I realize that,” Kiva said, her eyes flashing, her humor gone. “But in case you forgot, I have healing magic, and you *throw fire*. I might be able to nullify Zuleeka’s shadows — and that’s still a big question mark — but my power won’t do anything to stop yours. You’ll roast me like a chicken.”

“Oh, you of little faith,” Caldon said, rolling his eyes. “What’s that around your neck, Sweet Cheeks? Is it possibly a crest that can *protect you from magic*?”

Kiva’s hands automatically moved to the amulet beneath her clothes. She bit her lip, feeling foolish for having thought Caldon would risk

harming her, and sent him a sheepish, apologetic look.

“Come on, time’s a-wasting,” he said, waving to her hands. If anything, he seemed amused by her having doubted him, his cobalt eyes sparkling with mirth.

Quickly, Kiva dug the amulet out from her leathery armor. Caldon touched a finger to it, sending his power into the ruby gemstone of the quadrant depicting the fire element. Just like with the ring, the jewel glowed bright red before it faded back to normal.

“See? Now I can attack you anytime I want, and you’ll be fine,” he said, beaming.

A vision of being awakened in the middle of the night surrounded by flames came to Kiva, so she said, “I think we should lay down some ground rules.”

“No time for that,” he replied, striding away. “Are you ready?”

“I —”

Before Kiva could get her next word out, there was a ball of fire heading directly for her.

Suddenly, she was transported straight back to Navok’s throne room when Xuru had attacked her. Her veins filled with ice, her limbs tensed up, and she barely managed to raise her hands to protect her face in time for the blaze to strike her.

But this time, nothing happened, the amulet making the flames fizzle out to nothing.

“WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING?”

Kiva was shaking like a leaf, but at the sound of Jaren’s infuriated roar, she lowered her arms to find him racing over to them, his sword glinting in the early morning sunlight, his face drained of color. When he was only a few steps away, he slowed, his gaze shifting to the amulet, before touching on every other part of her, checking her for burns that didn’t exist. His cheeks flushed as realization hit him, and he avoided her eyes as he said to Caldon, his voice tight, “Make sure you keep replenishing the amulet. If it runs out —”

“I’d never let anything hurt her,” Caldon said, offended. Lower, he added, “Unlike some people, who are doing all the hurting.”

Jaren stiffened, and still without looking at Kiva, he turned and jogged back toward the sparring area.

“Hey — Jaren — *wait!*” Kiva called, shooting an angry look at Caldon before hurrying after the crown prince. She was still trembling from what had just happened, and with every step she took nearer to where Jaren had halted, she second-guessed her timing, but she also knew she had to speak to him before she lost her chance — and her courage.

Jaren continued to avoid her gaze, but he’d obeyed her call and was waiting for her to catch up, so she straightened her spine and approached, all while hearing the memory of his infuriated, panicked roar in her ears.

Hope rose to near bursting within Kiva, and she was desperate to ask about his reaction, but when she came to a stop in front of him, halfway between where Caldon stood and where the others were still sparring in the early morning light, all the words left her.

“Did you want something?” Jaren asked when she remained silent for too long, his fingers flexing around the hilt of his sword.

There was impatience in his tone, enough that Kiva winced inwardly and blurted out, “Galdric thinks we’ll have traveled far enough later today for him to windfunnel us the rest of the way to Ersa.”

Jaren said nothing, so Kiva toed the sand with her boot and continued rambling. “It’ll be good not to have to ride through the Forsaken Lands. Everything I’ve heard about them has been —”

“I need to get back to Naari,” Jaren interrupted, definitely impatient now. “Is that all?”

Kiva swallowed, her eyes flicking over to where Naari was busy sparring with the others, revealing Jaren’s lie. He just wanted to be anywhere that wasn’t with *her*.

But enough was enough.

Inhaling deeply, Kiva said, “No, that’s not all.”

Jaren sheathed his sword and crossed his arms, waiting.

Kiva, however, suddenly became aware of Caldon’s eyes on them, and also the sneaky but still obvious glances that the sparring partners were sending them, Torell, Ashlyn, Cresta, even Naari herself. Eidran alone seemed to be minding his business, fully absorbed in his training — or, more likely, choosing to give them privacy.

Coming to a decision, Kiva said, “Do you mind if we —” She reached for Jaren as she spoke, an instinctive move to guide him away from the curious eyes. But her words broke off when he physically jerked away from her.

Kiva's hand fell, his reaction like a punch to the stomach. But she rallied and said, "Can we talk? Just for a moment?"

"We're already talking."

He was offering her nothing now, his tone and face emotionless.

She wasn't sure how to proceed — or *if* to proceed. But she also knew she didn't want to keep going as they had, so she tipped up her chin and said, "Away from the others."

Not giving him the chance to reply, she left the open training area and headed deeper into the oasis, aiming for the secluded water's edge. She couldn't hear his footsteps behind her, but she also couldn't bring herself to check. It was only when she stopped in the shade of a date palm nestled right up against the water that she looked to see if he'd followed.

Relief left her in a quiet exhale, but then the breath became trapped in her lungs at the still-emotionless look on his face.

"What do you want, Kiva?" he asked, his tone bland. Bored, even.

There was so much Kiva wanted — but mostly, she just wanted *him*. Her resolve strengthened as she recalled the image of his face after he'd seen the burn wound on her shoulder, the way he'd thanked her with such meaning after she awakened Naari, his gentle guidance and instruction with her magic, and just minutes ago, the roar of him shouting at Caldon. Those were not the actions of someone who didn't care about her.

Setting aside her fear and doubt, she looked straight into his eyes and said, "I'd like to talk about what happened. With Zuleeka." Her heart was racing now. "I'd like to — to apologize for my part in that. I'd like to explain."

He cocked his head to the side. "Why?"

Kiva blinked. "Why?"

He crossed his arms again, causing her gaze to unconsciously follow where the muscles tensed and shifted, before she gave herself a mental slap and told herself to focus.

"Why would you like to talk about it?" he clarified.

Kiva brushed her hair behind her ear, stalling. She didn't feel comfortable sharing her true reasoning, her longing for his forgiveness and the return of his affection. Instead, she said, "I think it'll be good for us to clear the air."

A quiet huff of laughter left Jaren.

It wasn't an amused sound.

“To what end?” he asked.

Kiva’s courage began to trickle away. Perhaps she’d been wrong to start this conversation, thinking it was time without giving thought to whether *he* was ready. She quickly backpedaled, “Maybe we should —”

He spoke over her before she could make an excuse to delay their talk.

“Because the way I see it,” he said, his gaze locked with hers, “I really don’t care what you have to say.”

His statement was delivered in a calm, level voice, but Kiva felt as if she’d been struck, her entire body reeling backwards from the blow.

Noting her reaction, Jaren’s eyes flickered for the briefest of moments, but that didn’t stop him from continuing, “Caldon has already shared your side of the story. I don’t need to hear it again.”

Kiva’s throat was suddenly as dry as the desert around them. “I appreciate him advocating for me, but there are things he doesn’t know. Things I — I’d really like to explain.”

Jaren made an aggravated sound and ran a hand through his hair, frowning toward the water. He then seemed to come to a decision and turned back to her, his eyes no longer emotionless, but ablaze with feeling.

“If you really want to do this, then fine, let’s do this. But I’m going first.” His voice was thick with anger now, his fiery gaze trapping hers. “You lied to me. I won’t be a hypocrite and say I never did the same to you, because we both know I did. But the difference is, I came clean about it. I told you who I was, and from that point on, I told you *everything*. I invited you into my life, into my *home*. You not only hid who you were, you did it so well that I —” He cursed under his breath and glared down at the sand, before his gaze returned to snare hers. Unflinching now, he declared, “You made me fall in love with a lie. I don’t even know who you are — and frankly, I don’t want to.”

The words rang in Kiva’s ears, a damning, soul-crushing declaration. It was the first time he’d admitted to being in love with her — and it was said with such pain, such *anger*, that there was no ignoring how much he resented her for it. How much he resented *himself* for it. The back of her eyes burned fiercely, but she kept her head high, not wanting him to see how close she was to breaking.

“As far as I’m concerned,” he said, not yet finished shredding her apart, “you’re the person who is going to help me protect my people and save my kingdom. That’s it. I helped you with your magic yesterday because I need

you to be able to face your sister. Once that's done, you and I will never have to see each other again." He released a breath, as if relieved to finally have all that off his chest, and then asked, "Now, what did you want to tell me?"

Kiva's lips were numb. Her whole *body* was numb.

You and I will never have to see each other again.

Gods, that didn't just hurt. That *destroyed* her. Knowing that was what he wanted, knowing he was just using her for her magic, even knowing that she *deserved* it . . .

Something precious within Kiva withered and died, right there in the middle of the oasis.

She wanted to turn and run from him, to disappear into the date palms and hide from the world, to release the sobs building inside her until the agony eased.

But she didn't do any of that, because Jaren was waiting, ready to hear the explanation she'd been so determined to give him.

She knew now that there was no point.

He was never going to forgive her.

Because he wanted nothing to do with her.

You and I will never have to see each other again.

The feeling coursing through Kiva was too overpowering, a wound that all the magic in the world would never be able to heal. But somehow, she managed to push it down, repressing her emotions as easily as Jaren seemed able to. It was the only way she could find the will to reply, her voice sounding dead even to her own ears as she answered, "Nothing. You're right — Caldon probably told you everything you need to know."

Jaren flinched at her voice, but Kiva knew better than to read into it. He'd made his feelings perfectly clear.

"We should get back to the others," she said, still in the same tone, staring over his shoulder and so missing the look on his face. "They'll want to leave soon."

"Kiva —"

"I'll see you back at camp," she said, already turning away. She couldn't handle the gentling of his voice, knowing she'd only embarrass herself if she stayed. He didn't owe her his compassion, and the last thing she wanted was him feeling guilty into offering it. He'd told her in no

uncertain words what he wanted, and it was time she respected that. Time she quashed the hope she'd dared to believe in.

There was no future for them.

And she was a fool for ever thinking differently.

Chapter Twenty-One

Kiva had no idea what happened over the next few hours, her mind withdrawing into itself to protect her bleeding heart.

As they rode through the desert, she was aware of Tipp chattering at her side, heedless to her inner turmoil, but the others weren't so ignorant. They'd all watched her disappear into the oasis with Jaren, only to return alone. Whatever they'd seen on her face had told them everything they'd needed to know.

Caldon had tried to talk to her, his voice soothing and concerned, but she'd brushed him aside by asking to continue her magical training while on horseback. He'd seemed surprised, before eyeing her closely and seeing how desperately she needed the distraction. And so, as they'd ridden along, he'd intermittently thrown fireballs at her, careful to keep them small and nowhere near Zephyr. Her mount wasn't thrilled by the magical attacks, but he'd failed to unseat her — despite his best efforts — and he'd eventually grown used to the quick bursts of flames.

It took hours before Kiva was able to meet Caldon's fire midair, and when she did, Tipp let out a *whoop* so loud that everyone turned toward them, Jaren included.

Kiva didn't look at him.

She hadn't looked at him since she'd left him beside the oasis, taking a page out of his book and acting like he didn't exist.

It was easier this way, ignoring him, living in denial. It helped dull the pain, even if nothing could make it vanish entirely.

"I had a thought," Cresta said, nudging her roan mare closer to where Kiva, Tipp, and Caldon were riding together, shortly after Kiva had successfully met Caldon's attack.

"We're in the middle of something," Caldon told her.

"Kiva needs a break," Cresta shot back. "She's exhausted."

"She's not exhausted, she's —" Whatever Caldon had been about to say, he quickly changed his mind, seeing the flash of anguish that Kiva wasn't able to hide fast enough.

“I’m p-pretty tired m-myself,” Tipp said, standing in his stirrups to stretch his legs. “I’m h-hungry, too. D-Do you think we’re n-nearly close enough to w-windfunnel?”

Kiva could have kissed him for taking the focus off her.

“Soon, kiddo,” Caldon said, before turning back to Cresta. “What thought did you have?”

For that, Kiva could have kissed him, too.

Acting like their brief, uncomfortable moment had never occurred, Cresta said, “I’ve been considering what happened in the arena with those two anomaly warriors, and also how we think Navok is building a magical army.”

She had Caldon’s full attention now. But not just his — everyone else had ridden closer to listen. “And?” he asked.

“I think you and Ash” — she nodded to the princess — “should start using your magic on us during our morning training. If the time comes when we have to face elemental opponents, it’d be good to have more experience defending against them.”

Caldon tilted his head to the side. “It sounds suspiciously like you’re willing to fight with us once we’re done with all this Hand business.”

His tone was light, almost joking, but Cresta stiffened in her saddle and looked away, clearly embarrassed by having revealed that she was beginning to care about what happened to their group — and to Evalon itself. As someone who had been locked away for over five years, it would have been easy for her not to give the first damn about the Vallentis royals and the fate of their kingdom. It wasn’t even her native land, just a place she’d fled to as a child. The fact that she was even thinking ahead to ways she might help them reclaim what they’d lost . . .

Kiva realized then that Cresta had come a long way since they’d first met, and she couldn’t be prouder of her now-friend, even if it was painfully evident that the redhead loathed the attention she was receiving.

Noting as much, Caldon didn’t make her answer. “It’s a good idea,” he said, “but it’ll just have to be Ash. We only have one amulet, so unless we keep passing it around, anyone I attack is going to get burned.”

This time, it was Cresta who tilted her head to the side. “Do you think Navok’s anomalies are going to care about hurting us?”

Caldon had no response to that.

“And besides,” Cresta went on, jerking her chin toward Kiva, “we have our very own magical healer. You keep harping on about how she needs to practice — so give her something to practice on.”

“It’s a clever thought,” Jaren said, causing Kiva to tense. She stared down at Zephyr’s silky mane to keep her gaze from wandering his way. “I could certainly use the training, especially since I’m likely to respond to an elemental attack by reaching for my magic.”

Magic that wasn’t there.

He didn’t need to say it for Kiva to still hear the words.

Her grip tightened around her reins, the leather digging into her palms.

“C-Can I learn, too?” Tipp asked eagerly.

Jaren’s voice was indulging, even teasing as he answered, “That would require you waking up at a time *before* we have to drag you out of bed and onto your pony.”

Hearing the affection in his tone made it almost impossible for Kiva to keep her eyes down. She needed this conversation to be over so he could ride ahead again, needed him to *leave*.

“Well, m-maybe if dawn was later in the d-day . . .” Tipp said, clearly put out.

“I say we try it,” Ashlyn declared. “Good thinking, Cresta. We’ll begin tomorrow morning.”

Cresta pressed her lips together, fighting her outward response to the praise. She gave a terse nod and rode forward, prompting their group to return to their previous positions, and Kiva’s grip on her reins to relax.

The remainder of their passage through the harsh Jiirvan desert was spent with Kiva continuing to repress her feelings and simply focus on meeting Caldon’s attacks over and over, until Cresta’s earlier assumption came true and she *did* become exhausted. But at least her fatigue made it easier to quiet her mind and ignore her grieving heart. And when Galdric finally announced that they were near enough to Hadris’s capital for him to windfunnel them the rest of the way, Kiva was too tired to experience anything other than relief that they were nearing the end of their journey.

She did, however, retain her wits enough to dismount before Galdric swept them up in his wind magic again.

Of course, this time Zephyr couldn’t have cared less, acting as calm as a lamb when they touched down on the outskirts of a different kind of desert, the sand an eerie gray, almost black color. Kiva prodded it with her boot,

marveling over the unusual shade, before turning her gaze to the city before them.

Unlike Zadria and Yirin, there were no fortified walls around Ersa, so the inky sand dunes crept right up to the outer edges of the nearest buildings. But it was those buildings themselves that caught Kiva's attention, because they, too, were a near-black shade, as if forged out of ebony sandstone. Their flat rooftops allowed multiple structures to be stacked on top of each other, rising skyward, and between them were colorful scarves and strings of lanterns stretching through the empty air in a haphazard manner.

"I forgot how dark this city is," Cresta murmured, eyeing the streets that, even from a distance, appeared gloomy and disordered.

Kiva looked at her, surprised. "You've been here before?"

Cresta hesitated, as if debating whether or not to reveal more of her life, before finally sharing, "Once, when I was very young. My mother had friends here, so she brought my sister and me, before —" She looked away, her jaw tightening at whatever she recalled about her sister's tragic end. Her tone was bitter as she finished, "My father wasn't pleased that we'd traveled so far without him. He made sure we were all aware of that after we returned home."

Kiva almost wished Cresta's father was still alive so he could be made to pay for how he'd treated those he was meant to have protected. Judging by the look on Caldon's face, she wasn't alone in her thinking.

But Cresta caught both of their expressions and scowled at them, making it clear she didn't want their sympathy.

Caldon quickly turned his gaze back to the city. "I have a love-hate relationship with Ersa," he said. "Aesthetically, it's unique. But it's also a bit like opening up an unusual piece of fruit to find the inside is rotten."

Jaren stepped up beside them, leading his horse, Nightshade, by the reins. "It's bad form to speak ill of how other rulers run their kingdoms, especially those who, if not our closest allies, are certainly not our enemies. But I agree that Hadris has suffered under King Sibley's reign. He's too busy spending his citizens' gold on food and drink and courtesans to look outside his windows. Crime is rampant in Ersa, but rather than patrol the streets, his Royal Guard have orders to stay close to him while he carouses all day long. Last time I was here, he seemed to have no idea what was happening in his very city, and certainly not beneath it."

Kiva diligently kept her eyes ahead rather than on Jaren as he spoke, but peripherally, she was aware of him frowning toward the dark mass of buildings.

“What’s h-happening beneath it?” Tipp asked, squinting down at the sand.

“A labyrinth of twisting, deadly underground streets where the worst of humanity trade everything from poisons to people,” Caldon answered.

Seeing the widening of Tipp’s eyes and his impossible-to-miss curiosity, Kiva made a sound in the back of her throat, and Caldon, realizing his error, quickly added, “They also eat young boys for breakfast. Boil them in a big pot while they’re still alive. So don’t even think about wandering off, because we won’t be coming after you.”

Tipp snickered, seeing right through Caldon’s lie.

“Cal’s right,” Ashlyn said, causing Tipp’s humor to vanish into shock. “Not about the cannibalism — don’t be ridiculous. But it *is* a dangerous city, and we all need to stay together. Those of us who are going for the ring, that is. Eidran, are you still seeking out the anomalies?”

The spy nodded and answered, “Different strategy this time. If Galdric’s information is correct, this community lives closer to the city than the last, but it’s nearly sunset, so we’ll head there now and find an inn to stay at overnight, acting as if we’re just passing through. People are chatty when they’ve had a few drinks. Once they’re comfortable with us, we’ll try to get some answers out of them.”

Ashlyn nodded her approval and looked to Galdric. “You’re with him again.”

Galdric seemed resigned to this now, aware that he was the only one who could lead Eidran to the anomaly settlement, but regretting having ever said so.

“Who else is going with them?” Ashlyn asked.

Kiva noted the difference between this time and last time when the princess had ordered Cresta and Torell to follow Eidran — even if Cresta had disregarded the command. It was yet more proof that the two were now considered part of the team, rather than a rebel general and an escaped prisoner.

“I’ll go,” Tor offered. Seeing Kiva’s questioning look, he admitted, “Just looking at this city makes me feel claustrophobic.”

Eidran glanced around the group and said, “I think we need a woman with us, too. Three men traveling together make people nervous.”

Especially when two of those men were built like warriors, Kiva thought.

“I also think it should be you, Ash,” Eidran continued. “They might be more willing to talk if they see someone else who can use elemental magic.”

Ashlyn considered for a moment, before turning to Jaren and Caldon. “Can you two handle Sibley without me?”

“I always hated the way he looked at you when we were younger — like he was undressing you with his eyes,” Caldon said, his tone full of disgust. “I’d *prefer* it if you’re not with us.”

“We’ll be fine,” Jaren answered Ashlyn’s question. “I’ve dealt with Sibley before. He’s unpleasant, but only because he thinks everyone should celebrate life the way he does. That, and —” He coughed, and Kiva snuck him the briefest of glances to see his cheeks flushing slightly.

“That, and the last time you saw him, he tried to trick you into marrying all sixteen of his daughters,” Caldon finished for Jaren, chuckling as he clapped his cousin on the back.

“Sixteen?” Torell said, gaping. “Their poor mother.”

“Sibley doesn’t believe in monogamy,” Ashlyn explained. “Most Hadrisans don’t. His children are from different women.”

Torell looked embarrassed to not have realized as much, but even Kiva had been doing the math in her head until Ashlyn’s explanation.

“We’re losing daylight,” Naari said, impatient at their dallying. “Eidran, Galdric, Tor, and Ash will head to the village, and the rest of us to King Sibley to get the ring. Assuming all goes to plan, we’ll meet back here tomorrow morning and head south to Valorn.”

Kiva felt weary just thinking about how far away their next city was — and how much they still had to do before returning to Vallenia — but reminded herself to focus on one challenge at a time. Hadris didn’t have any arenas, so there would be no battles for them to undertake in order to get the second ring. They simply needed to ask King Sibley for it, and then enjoy — or perhaps endure — a night of his hospitality, before they could be away again.

But as their group parted ways, Kiva couldn’t ignore her fear that there would be some new complication to keep them from reaching their goal.

She told herself she was being paranoid as they wound a path through the grimy streets toward the palace at the opposite side of the city, but the feeling remained with her. It was almost a relief, since it helped keep her distracted from Jaren and everything she was desperately trying to bottle up inside.

When they finally reached King Sibley's abode, Kiva marveled at the view, since his palace was built atop a cliff looking down at a massive shipyard and out over the expansive Corin Sea. While it was made of the same dark sandstone as the rest of his city, the outside of his residence was splashed with color, with scarves and flags and banners of all shapes and sizes flapping in the wind from almost every available surface.

"It l-looks like a rainbow v-vomited on it," Tipp observed, his head cocked to the side. A wide grin stretched across his face. "I l-love it."

"Just wait until you see the inside," Caldon said, wrinkling his nose. "Your eyes are going to feel like they're bleeding."

Sure enough, after being stopped at the gates by a group of guards who quickly allowed them entry and ordered that their horses be taken care of, they were then escorted into the palace, proving Caldon's assertion true. Kiva cringed at the interior decorating, noting the clashing colors and tasteless portraits, some of which were so lewd that she covered Tipp's eyes as they walked past.

"No one is that flexible," Caldon muttered as they hurried by one particularly graphic painting.

"Speak for yourself," Cresta muttered back, causing him to make a choked sound.

Kiva just kept her gaze down and her hands firmly over Tipp's face until the guards delivered them into a receiving room and left them with instructions to wait for the king's steward.

Glancing around, she fought to control her expression as she took in the shockingly blue couches with bright orange cushions over a lime green rug, paired with sunshine yellow carpet and fuchsia wallpaper. The only relief was that, while there was an overabundance of portraits on the walls, at least all the people in them were clothed.

"The decorator was clearly blind," Cresta stated, shielding her eyes as if from a glare.

Tipp alone seemed immune to the room, and he bounded straight for the couch where a platter of fruits and cheeses rested on a small table. He began

stuffing his mouth, food spraying from between his lips as he declared, “Do y-you think King S-Sibley will give us a f-feast like in Yirin?”

“Gods, we’d all better hope not,” Naari said under her breath.

“The kind of feasts Sibley offers aren’t the kind you’d enjoy, buddy,” Jaren said, the tightness around his eyes revealing his distaste for the foreign king’s proclivities.

Realizing that she was looking at him, Kiva quickly turned to study a painting of a large man seated atop a colorful throne, a goblet of wine in one hand, a bunch of grapes in the other. “Is this —”

Before she could finish asking if the painting was of the king, the door opened, and her question was answered for her.

“Deverick, you old dog!” blustered the man from the portrait, and while he wasn’t holding any grapes, there *was* a full goblet in one of his hands. He was also considerably more rotund in person, enough that he was nearly waddling into the room, his red trousers and purple vest straining across his portly figure. The only item that fit him properly was the bejeweled crown atop his head.

“Sibley, thank you for —”

“Come here, my boy, come here!” the king interrupted Jaren, yanking him into a tight, one-armed embrace, the other stretched out to avoid spilling his wine. When he pulled back again, Kiva noted the glazed look in his eyes, along with the ruddy, sweat-damp tinge to his features.

The king was drunk. Or high. Possibly both. But he wasn’t slurring, indicating he’d had plenty of experience at keeping court in such a condition.

“What a fine young man you’ve grown into,” Sibley said, patting the uncomfortable-looking Jaren on the chest. He leaned in and added, “You know, half of my daughters are still —”

“Sibley, always an experience to see you,” Caldon cut in, saving his cousin.

The king turned to Caldon, but as he did so, he noticed the others in the room, his attention shifting curiously from Naari to Tipp, before coming to land on Kiva. He looked her over slowly, licking his lips, until Jaren pointedly cleared his throat. Sibley then hurriedly moved his gaze to Cresta, eyeing her body in a similar manner, though quicker, before his gaze rose to her face and arrested there.

There was no doubting that Cresta was beautiful, but in a fierce, intimidating way. Her serpent tattoo was enough to warn would-be suitors that they would have their hands full with her. But Sibley didn't seem to get that message, since he continued staring.

Placing her hands on her hips, Cresta drawled, "See something you like?"

The king came back to himself then, shaking his head as if to clear it. "I apologize. I thought you were someone else — someone dead."

Cresta arched an eyebrow. "Do I look dead to you?"

The king laughed it off and waved a hand in the air, nearly spilling his wine. "Forget I said anything. She was just a child, anyway. And you're *definitely* not." He looked her over again, his eyes lingering on places that had Caldor uttering a warning growl.

The king finally became aware of the mood in the room and quickly looked behind him to where a hunched man lingered awkwardly in the doorway. "Send for drinks, Tanton. My friends and I will celebrate as we catch up."

Kiva wondered if he'd heard rumors about the takeover in Evalon, but then remembered what Jaren had said about Sibley barely knowing what was happening in his own city. At least that was one conversation they wouldn't have to endure in their "catch up."

"Actually, Sibley, this isn't a social call," Jaren said. "We're here for Sarana's ring. The one she entrusted to your ancestor years ago."

The king visibly stilled, before raising his goblet and taking a large gulp. Then another. Before draining all that remained.

"My coffers are full of trinkets, dear boy," Sibley said genially. "I have troves of jewels — necklaces and bracelets and diadems. Swords and daggers and weapons of infinite value. I'm sure we can find something you'd like more than a dusty old ring."

Kiva tensed, her earlier feeling returning at the panicky look on the king's face.

He mopped the sweat from his brow and grinned widely at them, swaying slightly as he added, "I can have my steward escort you there straightaway and you can take a piece of your choosing. All of you. Gifts to celebrate our friendship. And then we'll dine and drink together afterward. I'll have the finest of entertainment brought in so we can enjoy —"

“Sibley,” Jaren interrupted the king’s rambling, his voice brimming with command, “where is Sarana’s ring?”

The Hadris monarch lifted his goblet again, grimacing when he found it empty. Only then did he sigh and reluctantly admit, “I don’t have it.”

Caldon swore and demanded, “Who does?”

“I need more wine. Would you like some wine? You, boy” — Sibley pointed to Tipp — “you look like you could use some wine.”

Tipp started. “Um —”

“He’s eleven,” Kiva said flatly. She ignored Tipp’s quiet mumble that he’d be twelve soon, and went on, “He doesn’t want any wine. Now answer the question.”

The king turned to her, his jowls wobbling as he offered what he thought was a charming grin. “I’m not sure if you’ve heard, but I’m always looking for new treasures to join my harem. I can already tell you’d be a favorite of —” He stopped abruptly when Jaren moved a threatening step forward.

In a low, dangerous voice, the prince asked, “Where is the ring, Sibley?”

Whatever the king saw in Jaren’s expression had him mopping his brow again, even more desperately. But he answered, “I gave it to a woman named Zofia Sage.”

Naari, Caldton, and Jaren all spoke at once, with one asking, “Why?” the other, “When?” and the last, “Where is she?”

Flustered now, the king said, “I invited her here to read my fortune — she’s a Mystican, you see. A damn fine one, and very rare. But she wouldn’t take gold as payment, only that ring. It’s been hundreds of years without anyone from your family coming to claim it — how was I supposed to know you’d show up in my lifetime?” He made a *harrumph* sound, as if he were horribly put out.

“How do we find her?” Jaren asked.

“She has a store in the Midnight Markets,” Sibley said, causing Caldton to swear again, with Naari, surprisingly, doing the same. “But be warned, she won’t just hand the ring over. You’ll have to pay — and not in gold. I strongly suggest you take up my offer to visit my troves instead.”

Jaren turned to pace the length of the room. Kiva tracked his movement, part of her wondering what he was thinking, the rest wishing she could

leave his presence to keep from being constantly reminded about what he'd said that morning.

You and I will never have to see each other again.

She winced and wrapped her arms around herself, ignoring Caldon's concerned look.

"What's the time now?" Jaren finally asked.

The king looked to the hunched steward, who quickly answered.

"There's still a few hours until midnight," Jaren noted, making Kiva realize the Midnight Markets must be more literal than she'd assumed. "We need a place to rest in the meantime. Can you accommodate us?"

It was asked politely, but there was an undercurrent of anger and frustration that the king, even inebriated, didn't miss. He quickly said, "Of course, of course, it would be my pleasure." He clapped his hands and called, "Tanton! Take them to the blue suite." He beamed at Jaren. "Only the best for my friends."

Jaren gave a terse nod of thanks.

"I'll be in the dining hall with some of my lovelies, should you wish to join me later," Sibley offered. He winked and added, "We'll be enjoying each other well into the night — you're welcome to come and make merry with us after your visit to the Markets."

Cresta made a gagging sound, saving Jaren from having to answer.

None of them bid the king farewell as they followed the hunched Tanton from the room, with Kiva once again covering Tipp's eyes as they passed yet more indecent portraits. Walking through the sandstone halls, she considered the king, unsurprised that Ersa had run amok under his care. While Thembi and Ryuu were warriors who commanded obedience from their Jirvan citizens, Sibley was lacking any sense of authority, more interested in his own comfort than anything else. Despite Jaren being only a prince — and not even that, technically, at the moment — Sibley was still cowed by him. He wasn't a king who inspired respect, but nor did he seem to care for it.

The further Kiva traveled from Evalon, the more she realized just how fortunate her home kingdom was to be under the rule of the Vallentis family — ignoring, of course, the current circumstances, which she was hopeful would be remedied as soon as possible.

"Here we are: the blue suite," said Tanton in a grating accent. Kiva had yet to hear the native Hadrisan language since arriving in the kingdom, but

she'd encountered it numerous times in Zalindov, so was familiar with the rough vowels and edged consonants.

Stepping through the door the steward held open, Kiva was unsurprised to see that everything, from the floors to the walls to the ceiling and all of the furniture, was blue. Navy, cerulean, azure, sapphire, turquoise — every shade imaginable was before them, with not even the scenery off the large covered balcony offering any respite, since it looked straight out over the aquamarine Corin Sea glinting in the sunset. But that, at least, afforded some natural beauty, unlike the blue explosion of the room.

“This is ridiculous,” Cresta muttered, glaring at the space as if it personally offended her.

“If you need anything, please ring the bell,” Tanton said, indicating a cord hanging near the door. “The guards will be made aware of your evening plans, so you’ll be free to travel through the gates as you please.” He hesitated, before adding, “Take care in the Markets — they are beyond His Majesty’s jurisdiction. Should you encounter trouble, he will be unable to assist.”

With that warning, he gave a shallow bow and left them alone.

“What’s the deal with these Markets?” Cresta asked, collapsing onto the periwinkle couch.

“And what’s a M-M-Mystican?” Tipp asked, his eyes lighting when he found a tray of pastries in the corner, despite everything he’d just eaten in the receiving room.

“Both are bad news,” Naari answered, her features tense.

Jaren strode toward the balcony, halting where the carpet ended, staring broodily out at the ocean.

“You all right?” Caldon whispered to Kiva.

She feigned confusion. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

His lips pressed into a thin line, not buying her act, but he didn’t get a chance to call her on it before Jaren turned back to them all and said, “The Midnight Markets are a place that I deeply wish we could have avoided.”

Caldon snorted. “You’re just remembering the last time we were there.”

A memory came to Kiva then, of her dinner with the Vallentis family at the River Palace, and the stories they’d shared, mostly to embarrass Jaren — including one about how he’d spent a night dancing at the Midnight Markets after Caldon had spiked his drink.

“I’m really trying not to,” Jaren said tightly. To the rest of them, he said, “There are two halves to the Markets, one that spills aboveground, which is mostly safe and focuses on revelry and celebration — think of it like a carnival, except it occurs all year round.”

“And the o-ther half?” Tipp asked between bites of a berry tart.

“It’s part of Ersa’s underground, where everything Cal mentioned earlier takes place — the trading of illicit substances, the buying and selling of human flesh, the hiring of assassins and spies.” Jaren’s brow was pinched. “It really isn’t somewhere we should go.”

Cresta pulled her feet up onto the couch, stretching out. “And yet, I think we can all guess which side we’ll find the Mystican on.”

Jaren made a frustrated sound of agreement.

“You d-didn’t say what a M-Mystican is,” Tipp pressed.

Kiva, too, was curious, since it wasn’t a term she was familiar with.

“As King Sibley said, Mysticans are incredibly rare,” Naari answered, moving toward Tipp and swiping a muffin off the tray. “They come from across the ocean, mostly Adastria, though some are from Mahari. Considering how far west we are, Zofia Sage is probably from the latter. I can’t imagine she would have crossed Wenderall and ended up here if she hailed all the way from the east.”

“But what d-does she *do*?” Tipp asked. “The k-king said she read his f-fortune. Is that even p-possible?”

“No one really knows what Mysticans can do,” Caldon said, shoving Cresta’s legs off the couch so he could sit beside her. He ignored her glare and continued, “Legend claims they’re gifted in the mind arts, a special kind of magic that we know little about here in Wenderall. They’re said to be able to do anything from predicting the future to knowing someone’s innermost secrets. Some can even move objects without touching them, while others can speak directly into your thoughts.”

“*Whoa*,” Tipp breathed, and Kiva found herself agreeing.

“So what’s our plan?” Naari asked, nibbling her muffin.

“We don’t have a choice,” Jaren said, unhappy about it. “We need the ring — so that means we have to find her, and then pay whatever price she demands.”

“What if she wants our firstborn children?” Cresta asked, frowning. “Or our kidneys?”

“Our kidneys?” Caldon’s eyebrows shot upward. “*That’s* what you’re worried about?”

The redhead tapped her chin thoughtfully. “I can probably give her one. But she’s not getting both.”

“Cresta’s right,” Naari said. “Not about the kidneys — that’s, well, never mind.” She scrunched her face and shook her head. “But she’s right that it’s risky to go in willing to offer anything. We have no idea what the Mystican might want.”

“It’s still a risk we have to take,” Jaren maintained.

No one was pleased, but they all knew there was no alternative. They’d just have to hope Zofia Sage would relinquish the ring for a price they were capable of paying.

Devising a quick plan of action, they all agreed to rest for a few hours in the separate bedrooms connected to the suite before meeting up again close to midnight. Unlike the others, however, once Kiva was alone, she didn’t try to sleep. Having no distractions for the first time since that morning, she could no longer hold back the tide of what she’d been ignoring all day, with every detail of her talk with Jaren replaying in her mind.

You made me fall in love with a lie.

I don’t even know who you are — and frankly, I don’t want to.

And perhaps the worst:

You and I will never have to see each other again.

She curled into a ball on her teal-colored bed, her arms around her knees, her wounded heart thumping dully. And finally, she released the tears she’d been fighting for hours, allowing them to flow in silent rivers down her cheeks, all while she begged for the pain to ease.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Kiva felt hollow as she walked with Jaren, Caldon, and Tipp into the Midnight Markets later that night.

Cresta and Naari had left earlier in the evening, choosing to scout ahead rather than rest. Kiva had wished she'd known in time to accompany them, because now she was stuck with a much more intimate group, including the one person she greatly wished to distance herself from. But she did her best to ignore Jaren, instead channeling her energy into keeping her eyes on Tipp. She'd wanted him to remain back at the palace, but their encounter with the king had made her wary about leaving him alone. And while she'd almost offered to stay with him, she was also aware that the dangerous nature of the underground Markets could result in her friends needing her magic.

So there they were, the four of them having just climbed down one of the many public entrances into Ersa's underground network, with the aboveground hatch having revealed a set of ladders eerily similar to those at Zalindov. They weren't all like that, Caldon had shared, rattling off other entrances he'd used during past visits — sandstone staircases and even mechanical shafts powered by luminium, along with different trapdoors with more ladders and ropes and pulleys and slides. Ersans had made it all too easy to access their criminal world from all across the city — and to escape it quickly.

"It smells b-bad down here," Tipp said, wrinkling his nose as they headed along a vast thoroughfare.

Kiva didn't feel as if she was underground; as long as she didn't look up at the dark rocky ceiling, it was just like walking through a normal street, with vendors lining the sides of the road, some peddling their wares, others sitting silently behind tables and watching as they passed. There were also a surprising number of Ersans moving from stall to stall, some angling furtively down narrow alleyways and through secretive doors cut into the earth. Kiva couldn't help being curious about those hidden establishments, what they contained and how they'd been hewn out of the sandstone itself.

She didn't, however, dwell on the question of how safe she and her companions were, and tried to forget that there was an entire city resting just above their heads.

"Should we split up?" Caldon asked as they walked past a woman who had three snakes coiled around her arms and neck, and dozens more for sale in a glass enclosure. The red streaks in their black scales identified them as necros adders, a single bite from which would cause death within seconds. Kiva quickly pulled Tipp away when he moved in for a closer look.

"Maybe we should just ask someone where we can find Zofia," she suggested, not wanting to separate, even if it meant she wouldn't have to be near Jaren. She'd scrubbed her face before leaving her room, but her eyes had still been red from crying, making her mumble an excuse about them being irritated from the sand when Tipp had expressed his concern. He'd bought the lie — but the look Caldon sent her said he hadn't.

Kiva hadn't dared glance at Jaren.

"It'll be faster to split up, but safer to stay together," Jaren answered, frowning at the mass of people. "We don't want to draw attention to what we're doing, not in a place like this, but Kiva's right — we're probably going to have to ask for directions."

"Ooooh, l-l-look!" Tipp said, pointing to a stall up ahead and beaming. "An a-apothecary. We should a-ask her. Everyone knows apothecaries h-help people."

Kiva couldn't help thinking of Mot from Zalindov, who, while thoughtful and kind to her, had deliberately misdiagnosed his patients so he could test experimental remedies on them, causing multiple deaths. The Midnight Markets were the kind of place he would have thrived at, so Kiva followed Tipp with caution as he skipped toward the woman behind a table covered in vials. Numerous plants and flowers and vines hung along the sides and across the top of her stall, most of which were unknown to Kiva, aside from a few highly poisonous buds that had her eyes rounding. The booth itself had copious stoppered flasks and bottles scattered over every available surface, none of which were labeled, and there was also a preparation area, where the woman was meticulously chopping ingredients and transferring them to a large stirring pot.

All of this Kiva took in quickly, but it wasn't the woman or her task that held her focus — it was the shelf behind her, stocked high with clear containers full of a familiar golden powder.

Angeldust.

So much angeldust. More than Kiva had ever seen in one place.

Her insides twisted, and she tore her eyes away.

“Excuse m-me,” Tipp said before Kiva, Caldon, or Jaren could stop him. “We’re l-l-looking for Zofia S-Sage.”

The woman didn’t look up, her hand steady on her dagger as she continued to chop, chop, chop.

Jaren stepped forward and spoke in the guttural Hadrisan language.

“I heard the kid,” the woman replied in the common tongue, with barely a trace of an accent. “What’s in it for me?”

“You would have our gratitude,” Caldon said, offering her a winning smile.

“Gratitude don’t pay the king’s taxes,” she shot back.

Jaren pulled out a small pouch of gold. “No, but this will. For your information — and your silence.”

The woman finally glanced up, holding out her palm. When Jaren handed over the pouch, she weighed it thoughtfully, then opened her mouth to give a stream of directions, none of which Kiva understood, but Jaren and Caldon listened intently before murmuring their thanks.

The apothecary merely went back to her work, ignoring them once more.

They turned to leave, but as they did, Tipp asked, “What’s th-that?” while pointing to a large jar full of what looked suspiciously like blood, inside of which floated a pale —

“Nothing,” Kiva said quickly, grabbing his arm and dragging him away, her stomach roiling. Even Caldon made a quiet retching sound, while Jaren rubbed his eyes as they hurried from the apothecary’s stall, as if hoping to erase the image from his mind.

The four of them continued down the thoroughfare, passing everything from exotic creatures in cages to strange weapons that had the princes lingering with appreciation. There were also entire stalls piled high with more angeldust, poppymilk, and other unidentifiable drugs, causing Kiva’s anxiety to spike every time she saw a hint of the glittery powder. She still hadn’t told anyone — especially Jaren — what she’d gone through at Zalindov, the horrors of her addiction and withdrawal. Just seeing the angeldust glinting innocently under the luminium beacons made her heart

race and her palms sweat, with her battling to keep her mind in the now and not fall back into the nightmare she'd barely survived.

"Are you all right?"

The quiet words came not from Caldon or Tipp, but from Jaren.

Kiva stiffened and kept her eyes straight ahead, focusing on a shirtless man dancing with a collar and chain around his neck as she answered, "Of course."

There was a weighty pause, before Jaren said, "It helps if you don't look too closely. This is their world, it's their normal. They don't see it as we do. And we'll be out of here as soon as we can."

He thought she was struggling with the Markets — when really, she was struggling with her memories.

"I'm fine." Her tone was as detached as his had been for weeks. "Caldon said this is where the worst of humanity resides, but I spent ten years with the worst of humanity. This isn't just their normal — it's mine, too. I'm used to it."

That was a blatant lie, especially when she recalled what she'd seen in that bloodied jar. But the last thing she needed was Jaren feeling obligated to worry about her due to some misplaced sense of duty. Or worse, guilt.

Another weighty silence came from him, before he tried, "Ki —"

"There you are!" Naari's voice cut him off, with her approaching from a side alleyway they'd just turned down. "We found Zofia. She's only a short walk from here."

Kiva sent a silent *thank you* to the guard for interrupting whatever Jaren had been about to say, then followed quickly after Naari as she led them through the narrow alley and into another large thoroughfare almost identical to the one they'd just left. This side, however, smelled fresher and sloped upward, with a slight breeze and the distant sounds of music indicating that it led straight into the outdoors section of the Midnight Markets, where the revelry took place.

"Where's Cresta?" Caldon asked as they passed yet more suspicious stalls.

"Trying to convince the Mystican to hand over the ring," Naari answered, sidestepping a man and woman haggling loudly in the middle of the road. "Zofia refused to negotiate until we were all there. Somehow she knew there was more than just the two of us."

A chill crept over Kiva as she considered the strange magic of the woman they were about to approach, and that chill only grew when Naari guided them down another dark alleyway and pushed open a jade door etched into the sandstone, the sign above it in scripted Hadrisan.

“Enter in if you dare, but do so being fully aware, there is a payment to prepare: the heart will tell what you most care,” Caldon read.

“I have a bad feeling about this,” Jaren muttered, but even so, he followed Naari over the threshold, with the rest of them at his heels.

“Oooh,” Tipp said as soon as the door closed behind them. “It smells m-much nicer in here.”

Kiva could barely breathe from the overpowering scent of incense, and she had to waft a hand in front of her face as she squinted through the smoke haze to take in the room. Candles, not luminium orbs, illuminated the space, at the center of which was the only piece of furniture: a wooden stool, upon which sat the most beautiful woman Kiva had ever seen. Her skin was as dark as the sandstone surrounding them, a rich ebony covered with silver tattoos in an unrecognizable rune language, the ink traveling from her hands up along her arms, even circling her neck, before disappearing beneath her simple homespun tunic. Her hair and eyes were also the same remarkable shade of silver, the latter shining with an unnatural glow as she smiled and beckoned them closer.

Cresta was already standing there, her arms crossed, her face set into a scowl, indicating she’d had no luck retrieving the ring while Naari had been gone.

“Welcome,” the Mystican said, her soft accent unlike anything Kiva had heard before, lulling and melodic. “How may I be of service?”

Cresta grumbled under her breath about how she’d repeatedly said what they were there for, but the gentle smile didn’t leave Zofia’s face. Kiva wondered how old she was; she appeared young, but there was an agelessness about her, something in her unusual gaze that spoke of untold wisdom.

Caldon gave Jaren a hearty shove forward, prompting Jaren to turn and glare at his cousin before clearing his expression and approaching the beautiful woman. “I’m —”

“Prince Deverick Jaren Vallentis of Evalon,” Zofia said, her smiled widening. “It’s a pleasure, Your Highness. Although I suppose that’s not your title right now, is it? Still, that is undoubtedly who you are.”

Jaren looked at Naari and Cresta, but they shook their heads, their solemn faces indicating they hadn't shared anything about him with the Mystican.

Another chill snaked down Kiva's spine, this one causing her to shiver. She hung back as the others edged closer to Zofia, instinct telling her to keep her distance.

"If you know who I am," Jaren said, unwavering, "then you know why I'm here. King Sibley gave you a ring that was never his to give. It belonged to my ancestor — and now it belongs to me. I'd like it back, please."

Zofia cocked her head to the side, her silver hair tumbling smoothly over her shoulder. "I sympathize with your plight, princeling, but I cannot hand it over for free. I have a reputation to uphold."

"We w-won't tell anyone," Tipp said, staring at the woman as if she were an ancient goddess.

Her eyes gentled, and her tone softened even more as she looked at him. "You have a kind heart, dear one. Your mother would be proud."

Tipp jerked, and Kiva moved unconsciously forward, stopping only when she saw that Jaren was already reaching out to place a comforting hand on the young boy's shoulder.

"What do you want in return for the ring?" Jaren asked in a voice that made it clear the woman was to leave Tipp alone. Even words said with care could still cause damage — Kiva knew that more than most.

Zofia looked thoughtfully at the prince, pressing a finger to her lips. She then turned her musing gaze to Caldon, then Naari, then Cresta, before finally glancing past them all and finding Kiva. The silver in her eyes flared, her lips tipping upward as she declared, "You have a tortured soul." Her smile widened. "Come with me."

Kiva's heart skipped a beat when Zofia stood and moved toward a door at the back of the room.

"She's not going anywhere with you," Jaren stated in an unyielding tone.

Zofia didn't even turn around. "She is if you want your ring. Your beloved is going to provide the payment for it."

Your beloved.

Gods, that *hurt*. Pain tore through Kiva, enough that she had to close her eyes against it, but they shot open again when she felt a hand on her arm, a

gentle, achingly familiar grip.

“You don’t have to go with her,” Jaren said quietly, urgently. “We’ll find another way.”

Kiva yanked her arm free and moved backwards so fast that she nearly stumbled. Her reaction caused his face to tighten, but she quickly turned away, unable to bear being so near to him and the mixed messages he was sending.

I don’t even know who you are — and frankly, I don’t want to.

She couldn’t afford to forget what he’d told her, how he truly felt when he wasn’t being the Jaren who was concerned for her welfare. It was in his nature to protect her — something he couldn’t help. But it was an instinct, nothing more.

You and I will never have to see each other again.

There was no hope left for the two of them, Kiva knew that now. He’d made it clear. But their mission hadn’t changed, and she was determined to do her part in aiding its success, even if that meant paying whatever price the Mystican required.

“Kiva,” Caldon said as she stepped forward. “Are you sure —”

“I’m sure. I’ll be back soon.”

She had no idea if that was true, but she sent a confident smile to Tipp, one that wobbled only slightly as she moved it to Cresta and Naari and Caldon, taking in their anxious faces, before heading toward where Zofia waited at the doorway into the next room.

Kiva didn’t look at Jaren. Her heart couldn’t take it.

Zofia chuckled as she neared and said to her friends, “You need not fear for Kiva Corentine. She’ll be out momentarily.”

Another shiver traveled down Kiva’s spine, this one stronger, since she doubted Cresta or Naari would have shared her name, either. But she kept her chin high and pushed aside her panic as the Mystican ushered her through the door and closed it behind them.

The room was small, but more comfortable than the previous space, with a pair of large emerald cushions on the ground and a low-lying table between them.

“Please sit,” Zofia invited, gesturing to a cushion as she claimed the one opposite and rested her inked hands casually on the table.

Kiva sank onto the downy seat, relieved that the incense wasn’t as strong in here, though there were still numerous candles around the space,

making it look almost dreamy.

Zofia watched Kiva in silence, before waving her hand toward a shelf along the far wall. Two items immediately sailed toward them, causing Kiva to inhale sharply at the foreign magic, but she reminded herself that Jaren had once been able to do something similar using his wind element. This was a different kind of power, but just because it was unfamiliar, that didn't mean there was any reason to fear it.

The Mystican made a humming sound of agreement, as if she could read Kiva's thoughts and approved of them. Maybe she *could*, Kiva realized, squirming uncomfortably. But before she could grow too distressed, Zofia placed one of the items at the center of the table.

It was Sarana's second ring, the band made of gold like the first, but with a large white topaz in place of the ruby.

The air ring.

Kiva wanted to snatch it up and run, but given the magic she'd just seen — and the amused warning in Zofia's eyes — she knew better than to try. Instead, she said, "Name your price."

It was a dangerous request, but the Mystican was no fool — it was obvious how desperate Kiva and her friends were.

"You have a choice," Zofia said, leaning forward. "There are two things you most fear. In order to reclaim the ring, you must face one of them."

Kiva dug her nails into her thighs, right over her faded scars. "I have a lot of fears. You're going to have to be more specific."

Zofia's mouth quirked up again, her silver eyes flaring once more. That was the only warning Kiva had before images assailed her vision, memories playing out across her mind — *her* memories. The day she met Jaren, with him covered in blood and near death. The night before the second Ordeal, when she'd slept in his arms for the first time. Their near-kiss in the infirmary's garden. How he'd jumped into the quarry and breathed life into her. Their fight in the tunnels, and the betraying revelation of who he was.

Memory after memory slammed into her as Zofia sifted through her mind and replayed all their tender moments in Vallenia, his loving touch, his kind words, the way he'd slowly but surely convinced her to choose him over her own family, without even realizing it. He'd earned her respect, but he'd won her love. And when Zofia finally touched on the night of the masquerade, when Jaren had kissed her with such longing, such passion, Kiva finally snapped, "*Enough!*" She knew what came next, the

devastation that followed that night and in the months since then. She didn't need to see it again. Didn't *want* to see it again.

At her command, the images stopped, and she leaned back on her own cushion, panting as if she'd run a race, glaring at the Mystican.

"He is one of your fears," Zofia said mildly. "If you choose to pay for the ring by facing him, all it will take is a kiss."

Disbelief — and dread — strangled Kiva. "What?" she breathed.

"You heard me," Zofia said. "The ring for a kiss."

Kiva shook her head, not even having to think about it. "I can't."

"You already have," Zofia returned. "This would be no different."

You made me fall in love with a lie.

Jaren's words burned across Kiva's mind, and she rasped out, "You're wrong. I won't force him to kiss me. I can't do that to him." He already hated her enough without her adding physical coercion to the list of grievances. "You said this was my payment, not his. What's my second choice?"

A strange look came over Zofia then, almost like regret. It was enough to make Kiva brace, expecting to have her memories violated again, but the Mystican didn't delve into her mind this time. Instead, she placed the second item she'd retrieved on the table, right beside the ring.

Kiva examined the small velvet box, relieved to know that, whatever it was, it couldn't be worse than having to kiss Jaren without his consent.

But then Zofia opened the box, and ice instantly flooded Kiva's veins.

Because inside was a small vial of angeldust.

Chapter Twenty-Three

“No,” Kiva gasped, jumping to her feet and backing away. “No.”

Zofia spread her hands in apology. “This is your second fear. The choice is yours as to which you will face.”

“I can’t,” Kiva said, still gasping. “*I — can’t —*”

The Mystican only sat there, waiting patiently for Kiva’s decision.

“There has to be something else,” she begged, her eyes glued to the golden powder. “Please. I’ll do anything. Anything but —” She couldn’t finish, her terror overwhelming. She sought for calm, but it eluded her. All she could think about was the two impossible choices she’d been given.

You made me fall in love with a lie.

Gods, *gods*, Kiva couldn’t do it. She couldn’t put him through that. Couldn’t put *herself* through that. Kissing Jaren would rip open a wound she hadn’t even *begun* to heal from. And not just her — it would also hurt him. She knew it. And — *gods dammit* — that thought alone brought her more pain. They both needed time to accept what was no longer between them, time to *move on*. Her kissing him would only make that harder.

But the angeldust . . .

Kiva trembled as she stared at the vial sitting innocently on the velvet. It was a small amount, not enough that she would have to go through a full withdrawal again, but given how addicted she’d been only two and a half months earlier, the effects would hit her hard and fast, and leave her feeling dreadful for hours afterward.

It was only one night, though. It would be awful, and then it would pass. But if she kissed Jaren . . .

Better for her to suffer alone than to damage them both beyond repair. *Further* repair.

“Think carefully, Kiva,” Zofia warned, seeing her decision solidify. “One of these choices is easy, the other hard. But both lead to the same result.”

Kiva was warring too much within herself to comprehend Zofia’s meaning, knowing only that *neither* of the choices were easy, and *both*

would have devastating consequences. “Why are you doing this?” she whispered. “How can this be worth more than gold?”

The Mystican’s beautiful features softened. “I know you’ll find this difficult to believe, but I’m trying to help you. One day, you’ll be grateful.”

Tears burned the back of Kiva’s eyes, a potent mix of frustration and anger and fear. She knew better than to tell Zofia how wrong she was, that nothing good could come of this choice. Instead, she sank back onto the cushion, plucking the vial from the velvet and weighing it in her hands.

The gold powder stirred within the glass when she unstopped the lid, the familiar caramel scent making her feel a sickly combination of dread and longing. It was the longing that scared her the most, nearly making her seal the vial again. But then Jaren’s hard, unfeeling eyes came to her, and she knew, down to her soul — her *tortured* soul — that she couldn’t kiss him. He would hate every second, and she . . .

She would not.

And when they were done, nothing would have changed, except that she’d have another memory of his lips on hers, the taste of him in her mouth, the touch of him on her skin.

She wouldn’t be able to bear it.

The angeldust at least would be out of her system by morning. A momentary inconvenience, she told herself, nothing more.

She knew it was a lie, that she was ignoring the lasting damage it could cause her, the nightmares it would reawaken. The darkness hadn’t managed to claim her last time — but it was still waiting, ready to finish its work.

Even so, she had to make a choice.

And there was only one that she could live with.

Before she could change her mind, Kiva raised the vial to her lips and threw back the contents.

The gold dust coated her throat as she swallowed, dissolving into a caramelly syrup. It took only seconds before she began to feel the effects, her tremors easing, a lightness overtaking her. For the first time in weeks, all her cares seemed insignificant.

Zofia sighed. “You made the hard choice, just so you know. It would have been much easier for you to kiss him.”

Kiva just shook her head at the Mystican’s now-blurry figure, dropping the empty vial onto the table.

“You’ll never be able to move forward until you conquer the past,” Zofia said softly. “One way or another, you’ll have to face him eventually.” She leaned forward and whispered, “Don’t be afraid to share your heart, dear one. Only then will you be able to truly heal.” Quieter, she added. “*Both of you.*”

The words made Kiva’s pulse skitter, but her fear faded as the room began to spin around her, the fiery candlewicks smudged into flaming lines. Some part of her knew she should be concerned, but instead she fought to recall why she was there, the memory finally coming to her, indistinct and hazy.

“You owe me a ring,” Kiva slurred, aware she had very little time before the angeldust stole what was left of her wits. She could already feel the dreamlike state taking hold, a relaxed, euphoric sensation liquifying her mind and body.

Zofia reached across the table and took Kiva’s hand, sliding Sarana’s ring down her finger for safekeeping.

Kiva stared at the topaz, mesmerized by how it sparkled in the candlelight, before her rapidly declining mind remembered that her friends were waiting. She stood — and then stumbled three steps before managing to stay upright. A giggle left her, but she slapped a hand over her mouth, knowing she had to act normal, that no one could *know*. If they learned she’d willingly chosen to take the angeldust, they’d want to know *why*. And they wouldn’t understand. None of them would.

“You and your guard can see yourselves out,” Zofia said, not moving from her seat. “I wish you all the best, Kiva Corentine. Your future is as bright as the stars.”

What a nice thing to say, Kiva thought, staggering to the door, all of the animosity she’d felt toward the Mystican having been swept away by the angeldust. She only just remembered to drop her drug-addled smile before she stepped back into the smoky room, prepared to tell the others of her success.

But only Naari was there.

Kiva’s euphoria dimmed, before the angeldust pulled her under more fully. It didn’t matter that her friends were gone. It was *good* they were gone, since it meant they wouldn’t try to question her. But then she saw the look on Naari’s face, and a hint of unease managed to slip through her deepening haze.

“Did you get the ring?” the guard asked.

Knowing her words would come out slurred, Kiva held up her hand in answer.

Naari seemed relieved, but her features remained tense. “Don’t panic, but Tipp snuck off. We should have been watching him more closely, especially with how interested he was in the Markets, but we didn’t expect him to slink away. The others are looking for him. I waited to tell you, but we need to go join the search.”

Kiva nodded, her head flopping on her neck. She knew she should be alarmed, that the last place a curious eleven-year-old should be running amok was the deadly Midnight Markets, but the drug made her worry seem fuzzy and senseless. Tipp would be fine. They should just let him have his fun. She almost opened her mouth to say so, but Naari took her silence for dread and sent her a reassuring look before exiting Zofia’s store, assuming Kiva would follow.

Kiva did.

But then she didn’t.

Because once they reached the crowded thoroughfare, Naari hurried off in one direction, while Kiva paused to listen to the music in the distance.

Pretty song, she thought. Even her mental voice sounded slurred, with her now fully yielded to the angeldust. She couldn’t remember the last time she felt so light, so happy, so *free*.

Kiva grinned and skipped forward, heading away from Naari and up the sloping incline toward the fresher air. The sounds of strings and drums grew louder with every step, making her want to dance and sing. So that was what she did, somehow finding herself aboveground and nestled between tall dark buildings full of color and bright with luminescent lights, people everywhere jumping and spinning to the music.

A delighted sound left Kiva when hands tugged her forward, sweeping her into a tide of arms and legs as she twirled from person to person, dancing on her own and with groups, her head thrown back with elation.

Everything was so beautiful, the crescent moon like a smile in the sky. She stared at it for a long time, stared and stared and stared, before the music carried her away again.

She didn’t know where she was, and even better, she didn’t care — about anything. All was right in her world. There was no Zuleeka and no Navok, no magic-stealing dagger or magic-giving rings. No warring

families, no angry princes, and above all, no broken hearts. It was just Kiva and the music, along with cheering people and rainbow colors and bright lights blurring around her.

But then a hand latched on to her arm, yanking her firmly out of the mass of twirling, joyous bodies.

“What do you think you’re *doing*?” came Jaren’s furious voice, as he continued dragging her away from the crowd.

“The moon is smiling. We have to smile with it,” Kiva slurred, stumbling after him. And then into him, when he stopped suddenly. “Oops,” she said, giggling. “We bumped.”

From one blink to the next, Jaren was directly in front of her, his face mere inches away, his blue-gold eyes *right there* as he examined her closely.

“Beautiful,” Kiva whispered, reaching out to touch him.

He jerked backwards before her hand could make contact, his gaze slitting with realization. “Are you *high*?”

Kiva peered upward at the tall sandstone buildings. “High,” she said, pointing. “Very high.”

Jaren cursed loudly. “I can’t believe you. After everything —” He bit out another curse, then grabbed her arm again. “Come on. We found Tipp back with the Mystican — he’s fine. Everyone’s headed to the palace.”

“Not the right palace,” Kiva said, tripping as Jaren guided her along the dark street, the festival noises fading behind them. “The River Palace is the right palace. The River Palace is home.”

His fingers tightened, as if he was surprised. It didn’t hurt, but it reminded her of something.

“You shouldn’t touch me. No, that’s not right. I shouldn’t touch you.” Her face scrunched before clearing again, a triumphant cry leaving her as she said, “You don’t *want* me to touch you. That’s it.”

“Quiet, Kiva,” Jaren said in a hard voice. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Angry again.” Kiva blew out a breath. “I’m always making you angry.”

“I’m not angry,” Jaren stated, leading her down another alleyway. “I’m *livid*. What were you thinking, taking — what was it? Silverwish? Bloodwraith?” He leaned closer and sniffed, before edging back again and saying with clear disgust, “Angeldust. Unbelievable.”

Everything was swirling around Kiva, the colorful scarves like fluorescent bats flapping their wings. Something on the ground caught her attention, and she clapped gleefully. “Happy kitty!”

Jaren tugged her back before she could try to pet it. “That’s a dead rat.”

Kiva pouted as he pulled her away. “Sad kitty.”

“Everworld help me,” Jaren muttered.

“I’m tired,” Kiva said, and right there in the middle of the dirty, dark alley, she folded her knees and collapsed. When Jaren swore again, she squinted up at him and noted, “You curse a lot more now than you used to.”

“I wonder why,” he said under his breath.

The next thing Kiva knew, she was in his arms, with him striding quickly through the darkness.

“So strong.” She sighed contentedly and nuzzled her face into his neck. “So perfect.”

His arms tensed around her, but he didn’t reply. She closed her eyes and breathed him in, his familiar scent loosening something deep inside her that not even the angeldust could soothe.

“Miss you,” Kiva whispered against his skin, causing his tension to grow. “So much.”

From that point on, time held no meaning for her, the drug distorting everything she knew, until she became aware of other people around them, and a room that was way too blue. She tried to focus again just as she was lowered onto something soft, with her arms being pried away from their death grip on Jaren.

“No,” she whined. “Come back.”

He ignored her and stepped away as the others came into view, their voices reaching Kiva as if from a dream.

“What do you *mean*, she’s high?” Caldon demanded.

“Come on, Tipp,” Naari murmured, “let’s go look for King Sibley’s kitchens. I could use a midnight snack.”

“But Kiva —” Tipp started, until Jaren quietly interrupted, “She won’t want you to see this, buddy.”

Cresta, meanwhile, was swearing loud enough to be heard in Evalon.

Kiva was vaguely aware of Naari leading Tipp out of their suite, but her own eyes remained locked — blurrily — on the ex-quarrier. “I had to do it,” she slurred. “I didn’t have a choice.” She laughed. “Well, I *did*. But I *didn’t*.”

“What’s she on about?” Caldon asked.

“She’s been rambling nonsense ever since I found her,” Jaren said, his tone still bristling with irritation. “You won’t get anything out of her — she needs to sleep it off.”

“This isn’t like her,” Caldon defended Kiva. “Something must have —”

“Shut up, both of you,” Cresta snapped at them. “You have no idea what she —”

“*NO!*” Kiva shouted, sitting up, the room tilting around her. The spike of panic left as quickly as it had arrived, but she remained cognizant enough to say, “Don’t tell them.”

“You can shut up, too,” Cresta said, pushing Kiva back down and crouching in front of her. “I got you through withdrawal once, I’ll damn well do it again. But as a so-called healer, you should have known better than to dabble with angeldust when you barely survived your last addiction.”

“I didn’t *want* —”

“What are you talking about?” Jaren spoke over Kiva, his eyes no longer filled with fury, but dangerously alert. Caldon, too, had stilled at his side. “She’s never used angeldust before.”

“That was true, until her psychopath of a sister — and yours, for that matter — ordered that she be kept drugged for the whole journey from Vallenia to Zalindov,” Cresta shared bluntly. “She was so addicted when she arrived that it took *weeks* for her to function again. I still have nightmares about her screaming at me to put her out of her misery. And given how rabid she was, I’m not ashamed to admit I considered it.”

Both Jaren and Caldon looked as if they’d been slapped.

Some part of Kiva was feeling panicked again, but the angeldust quickly numbed her distress. She decided the best thing to do was ignore them both and speak directly to Cresta, which she did, slurring, “Don’t worry, I didn’t take much.” She then yawned loudly and snuggled down into the couch, exhaustion combining with the drug to lull her into a perfectly relaxed state. Her eyes closed, and since she could no longer see anyone, she promptly forgot that the two princes were in the room, continuing to speak only to Cresta as she explained, “I had to do it or the pretty mind reader would have made me kiss Jaren. That was the payment she wanted — I had to face one of my two fears: him or angeldust. I didn’t

want to take it. It nearly killed me last time. But Jaren *hates* me. He would have only hated me more if I'd kissed him."

She rolled onto her side, unaware of the dead silence now ringing in the room.

Kiva's thoughts were scattered as she mumbled, "I didn't even get to tell him about Kerrin. I saw him die, did you know? My little brother — he was only five, and he was killed by the Royal Guard. Captain Veris held me back, so I didn't have a chance to heal him. I didn't know I could throw my magic then. If I'd known, I could have saved him." Kiva yawned again. "I like Captain Veris. I shouldn't, but I do. I shouldn't like Jaren, either. Or Caldon. Or Ashlyn. Or any of them. But they're all very likable. You feel the same — I can tell. Even if you don't want to. I'm not sure why that is. Maybe it goes against your churlish Mirraven nature." Kiva snickered. "Churlish. That's a funny word."

Unable to get comfortable, she returned to her back and flung an arm over her face, her words now muffled as she continued babbling, "Rooke killed my father — I can't remember if I told Jaren. I was going to mention it this morning, but he didn't want to hear anything from me. I was also going to say how my family were never rebels before Zalindov — that all happened after I was sent there. I didn't choose that life. And when I was finally free to make that choice, I *still* didn't choose it." Quieter now, she said, "I made mistakes, but I didn't mean to make them. And I didn't get to tell him that, because he didn't want to listen. That's why I couldn't kiss him. I wanted to — so much. But I also know he would have only agreed so we could get the ring. And that *hurts*. Knowing he wants nothing to do with me *kills* me. Every time I look at him, I feel like I can't *breathe* — it's like there's something squeezing my chest and choking my lungs and —"

"Kiva," Cresta muttered, "maybe you should —"

"I'm in love with him, can you believe it?" Kiva said, laughing. She opened her eyes in time to see Cresta wince and look off to the side, but she didn't understand why, nor did it stop her from continuing, "Well, I know *you* can, since you had to put up with me telling you *every single day* at Zalindov. At least until the withdrawal passed. Then you had to stop me from wanting to kill myself."

Cresta winced again, deeper this time, her gaze still turned away.

"And somehow, you did," Kiva said. "Stop me, I mean. You saved me. You helped me remember I had a reason to live." Musingly, she added, "If

my heart didn't already belong to Jaren, I think I'd be in love with you. But then Caldon would be angry at me, and I don't want anyone else angry at me." Sad now, Kiva whispered, "I hate that Jaren hates me. But I understand, because after everything I did, I deserve —"

"All right, that's enough," Cresta said in an unyielding voice. "Are you done playing the victim now?"

Kiva had trouble focusing on the redhead, but she glared in her general direction and slurred, "I'm not a victim."

"That's right," Cresta stated. "You're *not* a victim. You're a *survivor*." She held Kiva's blurry eyes. "So start acting like one."

"But I —"

"Your brother is dead, your father is dead, even your mother is dead — there's nothing you can do about that," Cresta said without mercy. "Bad things happen in this world, and you deal with them. You say Jaren hates you, that he wants nothing to do with you? Then you deal with that, too. But you know what you don't do?" She didn't give Kiva the chance to answer. "You don't give up. You don't wallow in self-pity. And you don't, for whatever gods-damned idiotic reasons you have, choose angeldust over a kiss. Everworld help me, I don't even know where to start with that, but you'd better believe you're in for a verbal lashing once you're sober again."

"But I got the ring," Kiva said petulantly, holding up her hand. "We need the rings so Jaren can get his magic back."

"We need the rings to stop Navok from getting them and to save your precious Evalon," Cresta corrected. "But the bottom line is, you're more important than any stupid ring, and you put yourself at risk tonight for no reason. If Jaren hadn't found you —"

"Jaren will always find me," Kiva said confidently, her eyelids fluttering shut against her will, another yawn leaving her. "He might wish he'd never met me, but he'll always protect me. He can't help it. He's too good. Too pure. None of us deserve him. Especially me."

"I think I just vomited a little," Cresta muttered, before exhaling loudly. In a slightly more compassionate voice, she said, "You're in for a rough morning, so stop talking and try to sleep while you can. And you'd better pray you don't remember any of this."

"Why?" Kiva asked, her slurring more pronounced now that she was beginning to drift off. "You've seen me worse than this." She blindly

reached out to pat the ex-quarrier as she said, “You’re a good friend, Cresta. I’m sorry you lost your family, but I’m glad you’re a part of ours now.”

The silence that followed her statement was long enough for sleep to tug at Kiva. Whispered voices buzzed in her ears as she fought to remain conscious, one of them Cresta’s, the second a distressed male, and the third also male and distressed — and familiar enough to flood her with warmth. It was that voice that came closer, murmuring quietly, soothingly, and then Kiva felt gentle fingers trail across her cheek, before she was carefully pulled up into a pair of strong arms.

Feeling safer than she had in months, Kiva cuddled into the warm body with a sigh, whispering a slurred, “Jaren.”

“Sleep, Kiva,” he whispered back.

And then she was moving, before being lowered onto something soft again, with blankets being pulled over her as she was tucked in like a cocoon.

The last thing she felt before finally succumbing to sleep was the impossibly soft press of lips against hers.

That was when she knew — she must already be dreaming.

Chapter Twenty-Four

When Kiva awoke, the ground was shifting.

She lurched upward and staggered out of bed, only to realize she had no idea where she was. She wasn't in her blue bedroom. She wasn't even in the *palace*. Because the view out the small, circular window in the slatted wooden wall showed nothing but —

Ocean.

The ground wasn't shifting because of the angeldust leaving her system. It was shifting because she was on a *ship*.

Kiva moaned as the floor swayed, and quickly slapped her hand over her mouth. Unthinking, she ran from the boxy cabin, darting along a short hallway and up a narrow set of stairs out into the bright sunshine, barely making across the deck before she leaned over the wooden railing and vomited.

That was how Caldon found her, with him breezily commenting, “I leave you alone for a few minutes and *that's* when you choose to wake up? Timing, Sunshine. We need to work on yours.”

Kiva retched again, releasing nothing but bile. She hadn't eaten much the day before, but even if she had, she couldn't remember if she'd already brought it up in the night. She couldn't remember *anything*, apart from —

Horror crashed into Kiva, the events following the Midnight Markets returning with searing clarity, everything she'd done, everything she'd *said*.

And worse, who had *heard*.

She might have forgotten about Jaren and Caldon in the haze of the moment, but they'd been in the blue suite the entire time she'd babbled to Cresta. And Jaren —

Kiva heaved again, but it wasn't in reaction to the angeldust. Mortification flooded her, enough that, even when there was nothing left to expel, she still leaned over the rail, genuinely considering whether she should plunge into the water and never resurface.

“Don't even think about it,” Caldon growled, reading her mind — or perhaps just seeing the wretched look on her face.

Turning stiffly, Kiva found him holding a damp cloth in one hand and a tumbler full of water in the other, pushing both toward her. She took the offerings, wiping her mouth before guzzling down the water, too embarrassed to meet his eyes. But then his arm shot out and he tilted her head until their gazes met.

She braced, certain he would be furious that she'd chosen the angeldust, and perhaps even more livid that she hadn't told him about Zalindov. He was her best friend, and yet, she'd been too ashamed to tell him how far she'd fallen in those early days at the prison.

But Caldon didn't yell at her. There wasn't a single trace of anger on his face. Instead, all he said was, "You missed your training this morning."

Kiva's lips wobbled, emotion slamming into her.

"Don't cry," Caldon said firmly. "If you cry, I'll cry. No one wants to see that."

Despite his warning, tears prickled her eyes.

"What did I just tell you?" Caldon said, frowning. But then he sighed and tugged her into his arms.

She hiccupped, but managed to get control of herself before she descended into full-blown sobbing. "I'm sorry," she said shakily. "I just need a minute."

"Take all the time you want, Sunshine," Caldon said, tucking her under his chin. "I'm not going anywhere."

His soft declaration smoothed a jagged piece of her, and she was soon able to pull away and say, "I really messed up last night."

"No more than usual." His mouth quirked. "It's becoming a running theme with you. At least no one got stabbed this time."

"I feel like I did," Kiva said, pressing a hand to her pounding head. Now that emptying her stomach wasn't her priority, she was becoming increasingly aware of her throbbing temples and tired, achy muscles. "Are you sure we didn't train today? I feel like I've been trampled."

"Cresta says it'll ease in a few hours," Caldon said, nodding over Kiva's shoulder. "But you're going to feel rotten until then."

Kiva followed his gaze toward the front of the ship, where she spotted the redhead sparring against both Torell and Ashlyn, the former meeting Cresta's blade, and the latter attacking relentlessly with wind and earth magic, trying to trip them both up. Kiva marveled at their skills — not just

the two generals, but Cresta herself, who was slowly gaining the upper hand.

She moves like a fighter.

Caldon's words from weeks ago returned to Kiva, and she saw the truth of them now. Having had regular practice with competent opponents, there was no denying how talented Cresta was with a blade, how single-minded she was in her focus.

But Kiva didn't keep her eyes on the trio for long. Instead, she nervously scanned the rest of the deck, seeing Eidran and Naari sitting in the shade of the foremast, cleaning their weapons, while Tipp was standing with Galdric on a higher deck at the back of the ship, pointing up at the sails, which were straining against an unnatural amount of wind. It was then that Kiva realized they were gliding through the water much faster than was surely normal, making her wonder if Galdric was using his magic to propel them forward.

Delaying the one question she was most anxious about — that being, where Jaren was — Kiva asked, somewhat stupidly, "Why are we on a ship?"

Caldon pulled an apple from his pocket and handed it over. He waited for her to take a tentative nibble before answering, "The others didn't have any luck with the anomalies, but they realized while they were gone that, given how far Lyras is from Ersa, we'd make better time by sailing — especially with two wind elementals among us."

So Kiva had been right: Galdric *was* using his magic to quicken their journey.

"This is one of Sibley's vessels," Caldron said, patting the railing. "His crew, too, but they mostly keep to themselves — aside from when they're gawking at our magic. To them, we're like something out of a legend." He shook his head, amused, then went on, "There's a cook, which means no travel rations for a few days, and there's also a groom, who's keeping the horses calm — they're in stalls down below, in case you're worried about that beast of yours." He arched an eyebrow, before adding, "And since I know you're desperate to ask but afraid of the answer, Jaren's with the captain right now, so you can stop looking terrified that he's going to appear out of nowhere."

Kiva acted as if she had no idea what he was talking about. Caldron chuckled, but his humor faded quickly, turning into concern as he said, "It's

a small ship, Sweet Cheeks. We'll be crammed together for another few days before we're close enough to windfunnel the rest of the way. You won't be able to avoid him. And I think, after what he heard last night —"

"Please, don't," Kiva interrupted hoarsely. The small bite of apple wasn't sitting well, but she was unsure if that was because of her angeldust detox, or their conversation. "I'd really like to forget that happened."

"You can forget all you want," Caldron said, "but that doesn't mean he will."

Kiva closed her eyes briefly before turning to stare out at the ocean. In a trembling whisper, she asked, "Do the others know about last night?"

Caldron snorted. "Do you think your brother would be sparring right now if he had any idea? We told him you weren't feeling well, and you took a moradine tonic to sleep it off. He didn't bat an eyelash when Jaren carried you onto the ship."

Kiva swiftly repressed that image. "What about Tipp? I know Naari won't say anything, but Tipp . . ."

"Jaren told him you wouldn't want Tor knowing what happened," Caldron said, "so Tipp promised to keep quiet. But be warned, he's probably going to be clingy for the next few days. He didn't like seeing you like that." Caldron nudged her shoulder. "None of us did."

Kiva attempted a weak smile. "You should have seen me in Zalindov."

Caldron's face darkened, and she instantly regretted her words.

To keep his mind off what she'd gone through at the prison, she quickly said, "I've never been on a boat before. Is there anything I need to know? Or do?"

"For today, you just need to rest," Caldron said. "When you're not at risk of puking your guts up, we'll make the most of our time and train as much as we can until Galdric magics us to Lyras. We won't have many more chances after that, since Lyras and Arden are close enough for us to windfunnel directly between them. And after Arden . . ."

"We head back to Vallenia," Kiva said, her insides churning at the thought of confronting her sister.

"Hey, don't jump ahead," Caldron said, nudging her again. "One day at a time."

"But I still have so much to learn," she said, rubbing her temples as the throbbing intensified. "What if I can't —"

Caldon interrupted, “There’s no point living in what-ifs. Don’t waste energy fearing problems that don’t yet exist.”

“But Zuleeka *does* exist.”

“Yes, but you don’t have to face her *today*.”

Kiva still couldn’t let it go. “And Navok exists, too.”

“Navok’s not your problem,” Caldon said firmly.

“I’m sorry, did you miss the part where I almost had to *marry* him?” Kiva spluttered.

“I’ll rephrase: Navok’s not *exclusively* your problem,” Caldon said. “Yes, fine, we all know he’s desperate to get his hands on you and your magic, but the larger picture is, Navok is a problem for *all* of us, in the sense that he wants to take over the world. And with an anomaly army, he could probably do that. But that’s why we’re on this ridiculous quest — to *stop* that from happening. We’re already doing everything we can, Sunshine, so let go of your worries and trust the process.”

Kiva mulled over Caldon’s words, her gaze dropping to where Sarana’s second ring still encircled her finger. Her mind skipped from one thought to the next, before she finally asked, “Now that we have two of the rings, should we just leave the others where they are? Even if Navok finds the final two on his own, he’ll still need the ones we have.” She’d barely started speaking before realizing there were too many unknowns for them to leave it to chance. Ashlyn had once wondered if they were playing into Navok’s hands by retrieving the rings, and Jaren had agreed that they probably *were*, but at least the Hand would be safe in their possession — and they could use it *against* Navok. Never mind that Kiva’s main reason for getting the rings hadn’t changed, that being to return Jaren’s magic. Maybe then she’d be able to rid herself of her allconsuming guilt and finally move on from everything she felt toward him. Gods knew that was something she desperately needed, now more than ever after the humiliating events of last night.

“Judging by the look on your face, you figured out your own answer,” Caldon said, tipping his head toward the sun and closing his eyes, his golden hair shifting in the breeze. “But to confirm, it’s too risky. If we have all the rings, we have all the power. And we can use that power to make our own anomalies to combat his, should he move on Evalon.”

“We’d only use the Hand on willing people though, right?” Kiva said carefully. “Those who actually *want* magic and volunteer to fight?”

Caldon turned back to her, frowning. “I can’t believe you just asked that.”

Kiva felt instant remorse. She knew that wasn’t the Vallentis way, to force someone into something they didn’t want. “Sorry. I just —”

Her mouth snapped shut, but not because of Caldon’s indignant expression; it was because two new people had appeared on the deck, one wearing a feathered captain’s hat, and the other —

Jaren.

He did a double take when he saw her, and said something quickly to the short, dark-skinned captain, before heading straight for where she and Caldon stood.

Kiva made an alarmed sound and blurted out a nonsensical, “Headache. Sleep. Now. Later.” Then she ran from Caldon, ignoring his frustrated voice calling after her. All she knew was that she couldn’t face Jaren. Not yet. So she hurriedly retraced her steps from earlier, almost tumbling back down the narrow stairs before somehow finding the boxy cabin she’d awoken in. More alert now, she realized there were two small beds, not one, but she didn’t spare a thought to who her bunkmate was, slamming the door and locking it, then sliding down with her back resting against the wood.

A moment later, there was a loud knock, followed by the sound of the handle rattling.

“Kiva, let me in.”

Jaren’s command caused her racing heart to stutter. She was frozen, unable to think of anything but the previous night and everything she’d said while under the influence of the angeldust.

“Please, Kiva,” he said, his voice muffled by the wood. “We need to talk.”

But Kiva didn’t want to talk. She knew why he was there — because he was *Jaren*. Last night, she’d shared too much, and now he knew exactly what she was feeling.

Knowing he wants nothing to do with me kills me. Every time I look at him, I feel like I can’t breathe.

Kiva closed her eyes as renewed embarrassment swept over her.

I’m in love with him, can you believe it?

She covered her face and drew her knees up to her chest, wishing she could go back in time, wishing she could *forget*.

But wishes were for fools. So Kiva just sat there, waiting until she heard a quiet sigh and then his footsteps moving away. Only then did her tension fade, her shoulders slumping as her adrenaline fled, the pain in her temples now shrieking. But she didn't move, didn't try to get more comfortable. Instead, she attempted to piece together her heart, knowing it was impossible — because it had just walked away.

Kiva spent the rest of the day locked in her cabin, but she didn't waste it sulking or fretting. It took a few hours for her stomach to settle, and a few more for her headache and muscle pains to ease as the last of the angeldust was purged from her body, but she used that time to think, to strategize.

Yes, she'd made a fool of herself the previous night. Yes, she'd said things she wished no one — *especially* Jaren — had ever heard. But she couldn't change the past, so now she just had to live with it.

It was that realization that had her leaving the small cabin that night and venturing onto the deck once more, following the rowdy sounds of voices until she reached an open door toward the back of the boat, beneath where Tipp and Galdric had been standing on the higher deck that morning. It was the captain's quarters, Kiva realized once she edged closer, and inside he was dining with her friends and what must have been most of his very boisterous crew at a large wooden table loaded with steaming food. Her stomach made a gurgling noise as the scents of cooked meat and fresh bread hit her, and she pressed a hand to her middle, uncertain if she was hungry or still nauseous. But she didn't feel the urge to run toward the railing again, so she inched forward, her nerves thrumming as she spotted Jaren sitting at the crowded table beside Tipp and Torell, the three of them laughing at whatever the young boy had just said.

The image knocked the breath out of Kiva, and she must have made a jerking motion, because Jaren looked up and saw her, something shifting over his face that she couldn't read. She didn't turn away this time, only moved further into the room, relieved that the captain and his crew had engaged the rest of her companions enough that they didn't notice her sneaking in and claiming the empty seat beside Caldon.

"It's good to know my training's paying off," he said, passing her a basket of warm rolls.

"Sorry?" Kiva asked, busy trying to calm her nerves.

"I've never seen you run as fast as you did today."

Kiva grimaced and turned to him with an apology on her tongue, only to see the laughter in his eyes. She pulled a face, causing him to chuckle.

“Are you good?” he asked. “Or should we anticipate another mad dash?”

“I’m good,” she promised, taking a cautious bite and nearly moaning at the soft, buttery flavor of the dough. “I may have . . . overreacted, earlier today.”

Caldon held up his thumb and forefinger, pressing them together. “Just a smidge.”

“In my defense —”

“No defense needed,” he said, loading her plate with food. “You panicked. It happens to the best of us. Now eat up, because we can still fit in some training tonight. And just so you know, Cresta’s been waiting all day for you to feel better so she can scream at you without feeling guilty about it. My guess is, you don’t want to face that on an empty stomach.”

Kiva winced and didn’t dare look toward where the redhead was talking with Naari, Ashlyn, and the captain, knowing she deserved whatever the ex-quarrier was going to say. Instead, she scanned the unfamiliar faces of the crew and asked, “Where’s Galdric? And Eidran?”

“Galdric’s resting.” Caldton took a sip from his wooden tumbler. “He’s been using magic for most of the day, and he has to be careful not to deplete it entirely or he won’t be able to windfunnel us once we’re close enough to Valorn. Ash will be taking over for him tonight, with the two of them sharing the load for the next few days.”

“And Eidran?”

“Poor bugger is seasick,” Caldton said, but there was humor in his voice. “It hit him just after lunch. I’m not sure who had the worse day: you or him.”

Concerned, Kiva asked, “Why didn’t someone come and get me?”

Caldton sipped his drink again. “Does your magic work on seasickness?”

“I don’t know, but even if it doesn’t, I’m still a healer,” she said. “I could have helped him some other way.”

“Perhaps. But that would have required you unlocking your door,” he returned dryly.

That caused Kiva’s cheeks to heat. “I needed time to think.”

“And did that time do you any good?”

While Caldon was speaking, Jaren stood, and, after nodding to Torell and ruffling Tipp's hair, he left the table, smiling politely to the crew members he passed on his way toward the door.

Kiva's mouth turned dry and her pulse kicked up speed, but she quickly answered Caldon's question. "I'm about to find out."

And then she pushed back her seat and hurried after the crown prince before she could change her mind.

Jaren was already halfway across the deck by the time she exited the captain's quarters, moving swiftly enough that she had to call his name, prompting him to turn with clear surprise.

Kiva approached slowly. The night was dark, but the ship was lit by luminium lanterns that cast a soft glow across the wood, with moonlight reflecting off the white sails overhead. It was absurdly romantic, but she quashed that thought and concentrated on the speech she'd spent all day memorizing.

When she was only a few feet away, she stopped to gather herself, unconsciously taking in how his dark leathery armor fit him perfectly and highlighted his strong muscles and his —

No! Kiva scolded herself sharply, knowing now was *not* the time to be admiring how good he looked. This was already going to be hard enough for her.

Summoning every ounce of her courage, she looked over his shoulder at the ocean and recited, "I want to apologize for what happened last night — for what I did, and for what I said." She slid the topaz ring from her finger and handed it to him, careful not to touch his skin as she dropped it into his palm. "I know that must have been uncomfortable for you, not just the angeldust part because of everything with your mother — and just to say, I — well — you now know I've had some problems with it in my recent past" — she hugged her elbows awkwardly — "but I didn't choose it because I *wanted* to choose it. As I said last night, the Mystican saw it was one of my greatest fears, and she exploited that." Kiva winced at the unspoken mention of what her *other* greatest fear was, and hurried to add, "So to clarify, it's not something I'm tempted to partake of willingly in the future, in case that's a concern."

Aware that she was flubbing her speech, she quickly went on, knowing the next part would be even more challenging. "As for everything I said about you, I think it's best if we both try to forget, um, all of that." She

wincing again at her poor articulation, before making herself meet his gaze. In the back of her mind, she noted that his face wasn't blank and emotionless like it had been for most of their journey, but she couldn't afford to think about that, and only said, with bald honesty, "Drugged or not, it wasn't fair for me to heap that on you. You've made your feelings clear, and I fully respect what you told me. The last thing I want is your pity, so please don't —" Her voice cracked, but she coughed and continued, stronger now, "I just think it's best if we put it behind us, and move forward as if it never happened." She took a fortifying breath and finished, repeating some of what Caldon had said earlier that day. "It's a small ship, and even once we're on dry land again, we still have to be near each other until this is all over. But I promise that once we have the rings, and Zuleeka and Navok are out of the picture, you'll get your wish and never have to see me again."

Kiva staunchly ignored the ache in her heart as she said the words, revealing nothing outwardly, even if she was weeping on the inside. She wouldn't break down in front of him — she'd already experienced enough humiliation in his presence to last a lifetime.

With her speech done, she waited for his response, part of her wanting to flee before he could speak, but the other part aware that it was time for her to face her problems rather than run from them.

As luck would have it, Tipp chose that moment to bound out of the captain's quarters, with the rest of their friends following more sedately behind. He skipped right over to Kiva and nestled into her side, looking up at her with worried eyes as he asked, "Are you f-feeling better?"

Emotion flooded her and she drew him closer. "Yeah, buddy. Thanks."

It was true — and not just about her physical state. She felt lighter now that she'd confronted Jaren, even if he hadn't had a chance to reply before they'd been interrupted. Perhaps it was better this way, she told herself. They each knew where the other stood, with her having made it clear that she wanted to ignore what had happened and move on. He would respect that; he would probably even *appreciate* that.

But even so, Kiva still intended to avoid him as much as possible until the day came when they could finally part ways. It was the only way she knew how to protect herself — from *him*.

With their conversation disrupted as the group pulled Jaren into a discussion about their sleeping arrangements and plans for the next day, Kiva felt no guilt in allowing Caldon to draw her away to train for the next

few hours. They could have continued longer, but Cresta finally lost patience and dragged Kiva back to what was apparently their shared cabin. The redhead then proceeded to yell loudly — and at length — before forcing a promise from Kiva that she would never, *ever* take angeldust again. Only then did Cresta yank her into a rough hug, before flopping onto the second bed, rolling over, and promptly falling asleep.

Having rested for most of the day, Kiva struggled to do the same, remaining awake as the boat rocked beneath her. In an effort not to think about Jaren, she turned her mind to their quest for the rings, considering everything she knew about Sarana Vallentis while unconsciously fiddling with the amulet around her neck, her fingers running over the jewels in the crest. There was something about the Hand of the Gods that had begun to bother her of late, but every time she tried to figure out what it was, it eluded her, like an itch she couldn't quite scratch. That night was no different, and no matter how hard she sought for clarity, none came. But her attempt helped calm her mind enough that she eventually felt the pull of sleep, and she didn't resist when it finally claimed her.

Chapter Twenty-Five

True to her plan, Kiva managed to stay clear of Jaren for the next few days, spending most of her hours training on the upper deck with Caldon and even Ashlyn — the latter who, after imbuing the topaz ring with her power, had filled the amulet with both wind and earth magic. When the princess wasn't attacking Kiva, she divided her attention between propelling the boat forward and practicing her windfunneling, capable now of relocating herself from the ship to the shore and back again. She still couldn't travel anywhere near as far as Galdric, but she didn't have to see her destination anymore, and she was moving further with every attempt.

Kiva's own magical training was also seeing improvements, with her no longer needing to rely on happy memories, her power coming more instinctively and rapidly than ever before. It was easiest when facing Caldon's flames, even against Ashlyn's boulders and vines and everything else she created with her earth element. Her wind attacks, however . . . those would have knocked Kiva straight off the boat if not for the amulet's protection. But an invisible opponent was exactly what Kiva needed to train against, since she was determined to be as prepared as possible by their return to Vallenia. Zuleeka was waiting — and Kiva would be ready.

During the few moments when she wasn't training, Kiva spent her time checking on the horses, exploring the boat with Tipp, and comforting Eidran — thankfully, her magic *did* heal seasickness, and he gratefully accepted her aid every time his nausea returned. She found that, like when they'd been riding together, she truly enjoyed being in the spy's quiet, steady company. It didn't matter that she barely knew him — she had a feeling *no one* did, and that was how he preferred it. But that didn't mean he wasn't a vital part of their group, or that he didn't care for them all, in his own way. He just had a different kind of personality, prone to independence and solitude, rather than socializing just for the sake of fitting in. Too often people considered such a temperament to be strange or even rude, but Kiva saw it as a strength. Eidran knew who he was, and he embraced his autonomy with a contentment that she envied. It was

effortless for her to sit with him in silence, the two of them lost in their thoughts, neither feeling the need to speak, just to *be*. She always left his presence more settled than when she arrived — and given how troubled she felt most of the time, that was a true gift.

The days sped by as they traveled south through the Corin Sea, swiftly closing the distance between Hadris and Valorn. The warriors in the group — Naari, Eidran, Caldon, Jaren, Ashlyn, Torell, and Cresta — dedicated their waking hours to honing their fighting skills against both physical and magical attacks, with Cresta continuing to outshine them all. When Kiva asked her one night why she trained so fiercely, her only answer was to shrug and say, “There’s always going to be someone stronger than you. It doesn’t hurt to be prepared.”

Kiva couldn’t fault her logic, even if she felt as if there was more to it than that. Something had changed in Cresta — she was no longer an outsider silently mocking their group; she was now fully integrated into it. Kiva had even caught her teaching Tipp the best way to slice open an opponent’s femoral artery, and while Kiva hadn’t been thrilled by the lesson itself, her heart had warmed at the patient, even thoughtful interaction between them.

Galdric was another person who had found his place in the group, if not as deeply as Cresta, with him having earned their collective respect from his tireless efforts to keep them moving swiftly forward. He’d also — tentatively — offered to tell Kiva stories about her mother, but she’d turned him down, not wanting to know about her rebel life. If Tilda truly had loved Kiva the way Galdric claimed, then Kiva wanted to remember the mother she’d known as a child before Zalindov, with nothing tainting those memories. Anything else, she could ask Torell for — but only when he wasn’t spending every available second with Ashlyn. The two of them were still dancing around each other, but it was obvious to everyone where they were heading.

Kiva was happy for her brother, even if her lonely heart gave a pang of longing every time she saw the two generals together. In each instance, she carefully kept from looking at Jaren, even during the moments when she felt his eyes on her — which was occurring more and more often. Despite her determination to avoid him, he repeatedly sought her out, but by some miracle, every time he did, she was in the middle of doing something or talking with someone, keeping him from saying whatever was on his mind.

It was becoming clear that he didn't agree with her desire to maintain distance between them, and she was growing frustrated by his attempts to approach her. As far as she was concerned, they'd both said everything that needed to be said, and him now wanting to say *more* was only making a hard situation worse. Because of that, she did everything she could to stay away from him — for his benefit as well as hers.

Finally, after four and a half days of being cooped up together on the ship, Galdric said they were close enough to Lyras to windfunnel the rest of the way. It took some time to gather their belongings and bring their horses up onto the deck, but as soon as they were ready to leave, Captain Temi and his crew came to see them off, waving hearty goodbyes when Galdric summoned his magic and swept them from the ship.

The windfunneling was once again an unpleasant experience, and when they arrived at their destination, Kiva wobbled as her sea legs became accustomed to dry land again. Zephyr, agitated by the magic — or just owing to his waspish temperament — snapped his teeth at her, so she frowned and murmured, “Behave,” before turning her attention to the view.

Where Ersa had been a city made of dark sandstone in the midst of a blackened desert, Lyras was its polar opposite. Nestled in a sunken valley, the capital was comprised of pale buildings leading to a large, crystalline palace, all surrounded by what looked like snowcapped peaks. But Kiva knew it wasn't ice dusting their summits — Valorn was the only kingdom in Wenderall to lay claim to entire ranges of salt mountains. Formed atop naturally shifting mineral deposits, the treacherous slopes were notorious for killing even the most intrepid of hikers, largely due to the volatile earth constantly moving and creating unplotable — and deadly — crevices.

Looking at the mountains, Kiva shivered, especially as she took in one rising above them all, its white tip pointing skyward like a beacon warning fools away.

“Those look like the m-mountains around Z-Zalindov,” Tipp said, his voice uneasy. But then he grew excited as he focused on the city and asked, “Is their p-palace made out of ice? Doesn't it m-melt?”

“Not ice, kiddo,” Caldon said. “It's refined salt, laced with luminium. Same for most of the buildings here. Visually, this city has no equal in all the kingdoms.”

Lyras was beautiful, for sure, but Kiva was still partial to Vallenia and its golden River Palace. She refused to consider whether that was because

of the city itself, or the people who ruled it.

Ashlyn led her horse forward until she was in front of the group. “I’ve been debating whether it’s worth us seeking out the anomaly village this time,” she said, “given that we haven’t had any luck so far. But this is the last settlement Galdric heard Navok mention, so we might as well see the plan through. We’re also a lot further away from Mirraven here — the villagers might feel safer talking, especially if we tell them where we’re from.”

Valorn, Kiva knew, was one of Evalon’s strongest allies, along with the southernmost kingdom of Nerine. If there was a chance that their close relationship might convince the villagers to trust them, then Ashlyn was right about it being worth the attempt.

“Same groups as last time,” the princess declared. “I’ll go with Eidran, Galdric, and Tor to the village, while the rest of you meet with Queen Issa and Lady Silence.”

“Lady S-Silence?” Tipp asked.

“Issa’s adviser,” Ashlyn answered.

Seeing the puzzled looks on both Tipp’s and Kiva’s faces, Jaren edged closer and shared, “Issa’s mother died during childbirth, and her father passed away unexpectedly a few years ago, leaving her as their only heir. But she’s not yet of age, so Silence acts as both mentor and counsel, signing off on any decisions she makes. We won’t see one without the other.”

“We *will* see a lot of very adoring courtiers, though,” Caldon said, and Kiva couldn’t tell if he was eager or resigned. “It’s an offense to say no to Valornian hospitality, so if they offer you something, best to accept, even if you don’t want whatever it is.”

Jaren noticed Kiva’s worried look and said, “Within reason.”

She nodded and shifted away from him, causing frustration to flash across his features. Kiva ignored him, still seeking to protect them both, and asked Galdric, “It’s getting late — is the anomaly village far?”

He answered, “Further than the last two. But we should make it by nightfall.”

Kiva pointed to the thunderheads gathering beyond the nearest mountains. “You need to keep an eye on those clouds.”

Torell and Eidran frowned up at the sky, while Ashlyn cursed quietly and said, “I was hoping we’d return in time for us to all stay together tonight, but it looks like we’ll have to find an inn again.” She brushed her

pale hair over her shoulder and sighed. “I guess we’ll meet you back here in morning.”

They hashed out a few more details before the four anomaly hunters mounted their horses and rode away, heading toward a gap in the mountain range. Kiva and her group also moved out, but toward the city. Like Ersa, Lyras had no fortified wall — the mountains themselves provided a natural deterrent to any would-be attackers — but they were intercepted by a group of patrolling guards who, as with the previous cities, escorted them straight to the palace.

Up close, the salt-and-luminium combination was truly unique, making the crystalline architecture seem otherworldly. Even after Kiva and her companions relinquished their horses to the servants and stepped inside, the interior remained like something out of a dream, with white marble pathways meeting pillars that spiraled up to frosted ceilings dusted with countless luminium orbs.

Kiva struggled not to gape as they were led along the spacious hallways, but she did manage to adopt an unapproachable air when a trio of tittering courtiers headed for them, their formal gowns and perfect styling making her aware of her travel-worn appearance. Her time on the ship had at least allowed her a chance to thoroughly wash her clothes — and her body — but still, there was a vast difference between the splendor of what the women wore and her own functional leather outfit.

She mentally shook her head, wondering why she even cared. It didn’t matter how she looked. All of her companions were in the same boat, even if both Jaren and Caldon seemed to somehow make their armor look better than anyone else’s.

Jaren especially.

Stop it, Kiva scolded herself, grateful when their guard escorts waved off the courtiers before they could come any closer.

After a lengthy walk through endless hallways and up pale stone staircases, the guards delivered them to a comfortable receiving room with cream-colored armchairs facing an impressive white-oak desk. Behind it sat a girl who couldn’t have been more than twelve years old, her brown skin, unruly hair, and impossibly large eyes making her seem even younger. Standing just behind her and to the side was a stern-looking woman with graying hair and square spectacles on her nose. Her intimidating expression warmed, however, when she saw who it was who had interrupted their day.

“Prince Deverick, what an unexpected pleasure,” Lady Silence said, smiling widely. “And Prince Caldon, too. How lovely.”

Kiva searched for a lie in her voice, but she seemed genuinely delighted to see them.

“Jaren, it’s been far too long,” Queen Issa said, hurrying out from behind her desk and throwing her arms around him in a welcoming hug, prompting Kiva to fight an irrational surge of jealousy.

“You’re looking a little green there, Sweet Cheeks,” Caldon murmured from beside her. “Envy isn’t your color.”

She shot him a look, prompting a quiet chuckle in response. The sound made the young queen pull away from Jaren and then launch herself at Caldon, which, frustratingly, didn’t bother Kiva at all. In fact, she found it rather endearing that Issa was so familiar with the princes. Lady Silence, however . . .

“Your Majesty, remember your lessons,” the older woman said, sounding weary, as if the subject of courtly etiquette had been often repeated between them.

“But it’s Jaren and Cal,” Issa said, almost whining. “They’re my friends.”

“A queen doesn’t have friends,” Silence said.

Issa tightened her grip on Caldon. “This queen does. Especially when they’re this handsome.”

Tipp snickered, and even Kiva had to cough to hide her laugh. She couldn’t fault the young queen’s taste.

Diverted by Tipp’s humor, Issa drew away from Caldon and took in the rest of their group. Her dark eyes inspected Tipp the longest, causing his cheeks to turn pink. “Who are you?” she asked.

Kiva wasn’t sure if the question was to all of them, or just to Tipp. He also seemed unsure, and turned helpless eyes to Jaren.

“You already know Naari,” the prince said, prompting Issa to wave cheerfully in the guard’s direction, “and beside her is Cresta Voss, Tipp Peridon, and Kiva Corentine.”

The queen’s head spun toward Kiva. “*Corentine?* As in —”

“She’s a friend,” Jaren said firmly.

Kiva ignored the feeling that came with his declaration, knowing he was just trying to keep her from being dragged away by the guards. As a close

ally, Issa would be well aware of the rebel situation — and the bloodline spearheading the movement.

“How interesting,” Issa said quietly, looking at Kiva in a different way, no longer a vivacious child but instead a calculating queen, hinting at the woman she would one day become.

“Perhaps you would like to invite Prince Deverick and his companions to take a seat?” Lady Silence prompted her charge.

“Oh! Where are my manners?” Issa said, shoving Caldon and Jaren forward. “Please, make yourselves comfortable.”

There were only four armchairs in front of the desk, but neither Naari nor Cresta seemed inclined to sit, both remaining like silent sentinels as the others lowered themselves onto the plush material.

“You absolutely *must* dine with me tonight,” Queen Issa said from behind her desk once more. “We’ll catch up properly then. But I have another meeting in a few minutes, so perhaps you’d like to share why you’ve come? It’s been weeks since we’ve heard anything from Evalon. Months, actually. I grew so concerned that I sent an envoy to check all was well — he’s due to return any day. But I guess I won’t need to hear his report now that you’re here. I’m so excited that —”

Lady Silence cleared her throat, and Issa’s face flushed when she realized she’d been babbling.

“Sorry,” she mumbled, before wincing. “Wait, I’m not meant to say sorry. Queens don’t apologize. But, uh, sorry.” She winced again, then sat up straighter and said, much more formally, “Please tell us why you’re here.”

Caldon looked as if he was struggling to hold back laughter, but Jaren managed to keep his composure, adopting a kind expression that immediately eased the young queen’s embarrassment. Kiva nearly sighed, seeing that look on his face.

“We won’t keep you from your meeting, and we’d be honored to dine with you tonight, thank you,” Jaren said, though his rigid posture had Kiva thinking he’d prefer not to. At least Issa hadn’t yet heard about the situation in Vallenia, sparing them from having to discuss the takeover. “As for why we’re here, I’m unsure if your father had the chance to tell you, but a long time ago, my ancestor entrusted something to yours for safekeeping, and now we’ve come to reclaim it.”

Unlike Jaren, Kiva hadn't considered whether the premature deaths of Issa's parents could have left her without knowledge of the ring, and she felt a sudden burst of anxiety when Issa turned to look at Silence in question.

But then the young queen shifted back to Jaren and asked, "Do you mean Sarana's ring?"

Instant relief swept over Kiva, and she saw both Jaren and Caldon relax slightly, as if a weight had been lifted from their shoulders.

"Yes," Jaren answered, leaning forward in his seat. "Do you have it?"

Given the challenges that had come with the two previous rings, Kiva's pulse sped up as she waited for the queen's answer.

Issa looked at Silence again, biting her lip. The adviser's face revealed nothing, but she nodded encouragingly to her ward.

"I *sort of* have it," Issa said slowly.

Her uncertain expression made Kiva's heart plummet.

Cresta spoke from behind them, her voice sharp. "What does that mean?"

"It's just . . ." Issa scratched her nose and avoided their eyes. "My father said we were left with clear instructions about who could claim it. Instructions from Sarana herself, handed down with the ring."

Caldon groaned, and Kiva nearly did the same, recalling how they'd been told something similar in Jirva before being drugged and thrown into the arena.

Jaren alone didn't react to Issa's words, though his body was lined with new tension. "And those instructions were?"

Issa looked pleadingly at Lady Silence, so the adviser took over to say, "When Sarana entrusted the ring to Issa's ancestors, she did so with the hope that one day the Vallentis and Corentine descendants would not always be blood enemies."

Kiva squirmed when both Silence and Issa flicked their eyes toward her.

"As such," the adviser went on, "while the ring might belong to Sarana's bloodline, she instructed that it can only be claimed by a Vallentis *and* a Corentine who are on amiable terms."

Caldon laughed with relief, pointing to Kiva and saying, "We already told you, she's a Corentine. And we're definitely on amiable terms. So we've already fulfilled Sarana's requirements."

Lady Silence nudged Queen Issa, who fidgeted and said, “Yes, well, the thing is . . . When I said ‘sort of’ before, what I meant was that I know where the ring is, but I can’t give it to you. You have to go and get it. A Vallentis and a Corentine. Together.”

Kiva stiffened with dread as Jaren asked, “Go *where* to get it?”

There was a lone window in the queen’s receiving room, looking straight out over the darkening city and to the salt mountain range beyond — specifically toward the largest mountain, rising high above the rest.

It was to that peak that Issa looked, her voice a quiet squeak as she answered, “The ring is in a cave at the top of Mount Nebu. A Mystican cast a protective spell over it hundreds of years ago, ensuring only a Vallentis and a Corentine together can take it off the mountain. That’s where you’ll have to go. But only two of you — those were Sarana’s rules.”

There was an apology in her eyes, but Kiva’s mind was already leaping ahead to how she was the only Corentine currently in Lyras. She wished Torell hadn’t left with the others, even wished either Ashlyn or Galdric could be there to windfunnel them to the summit. But neither option was available, so she quickly took control of the situation and blurted, “Caldon will go with me.”

His eyebrows arched as he turned to her, but when he saw the panicked, desperate look on her face, he nodded slowly and said, “Sure. We’ll take snacks. It’ll be fun.”

Kiva sent him a grateful smile, keeping her eyes firmly away from Jaren. She didn’t need to know what he was thinking, certain the last thing he wanted was to be stuck climbing a mountain with her — since that was the last thing *she* wanted.

“The hike is treacherous,” Lady Silence warned. “It’s too late for you to go now; you’ll have to leave the city before dawn if you want to make it up and back by nightfall. And if the weather turns, you’ll need to seek shelter in one of the caves until it passes.”

“The weather often turns on the mountains,” Issa said, happier now that she knew no one was going to yell at her. “So be prepared for anything.”

Kiva’s palms turned clammy as the queen and her adviser gave instructions on the best path to take, reiterated how dangerous it was, and offered to have their servants organize supplies. Soon afterward, they excused themselves for their next meeting, and an escort arrived to deliver Kiva and her friends to a private suite that was just as pleasing as the rest of

the palace. Only when they were alone again did they look at each other, their faces grim — except for Tipp's.

Sighing dreamily, he turned to Kiva and asked, "How d-do you know if y-you're in love?"

In an entirely unconscious reaction, Kiva's eyes shot to Jaren, only to find him already looking at her. For a second, she thought she saw his expression warm, but she was too horrified to keep her gaze on him, and quickly stared past him out the window. All she could see were the storm clouds forming over the dusk-lit Mount Nebu, causing her stomach to knot, so she turned back to Tipp and croaked out, "How about we save that conversation for another day?"

Cresta — gods bless her — jumped in to ask, "Are we really just going to sit on our asses while these two" — she pointed to Kiva and Caldon — "head up that?" She jabbed her thumb toward the window right as a bolt of lightning streaked across the sky.

"It sounds like we don't have a choice," Naari answered, her jade earring glinting beneath the luminium orbs.

"I'm not worried," Caldon said, and indeed, he looked perfectly relaxed as he flopped onto a lush beige couch. "We'll be gone before you all wake up, and then back with the ring before you have a chance to miss us." He winked at Kiva, his confidence helping to calm her twisted insides.

Naari and Cresta offered a few more complaints before finally accepting that Sarana's instructions had been clear, and if an ancient Mystican had been involved with protecting the ring, then it was too risky to ignore the directive they'd been given. Jaren remained silent during the discussion, staring out the window, while Tipp continued to sigh dreamily every few minutes, his mind — and possibly his heart — stolen by the young queen. Kiva would have thought it adorable if not for her nervous preoccupation with the coming day.

When dinner arrived, Kiva politely declined Issa's invitation, wanting an early night before her predawn departure. Caldon couldn't refuse as easily, but he assured Kiva he wouldn't stay out late, and said he'd meet her in the common room of their suite at an hour that made her groan. She then said good night — and goodbye — to her friends, asking Cresta and Naari to keep an eye on Tipp. To Jaren, Kiva only looked at his shoulder and promised she'd do what she could to get the ring. She didn't wait for his response before she retreated to one of the bedrooms, swiftly closing her

curtains to block the view of the rain now lashing the city, and the angry mountain beyond.

Ridding her mind of all thoughts and climbing into bed, Kiva worried that she'd have trouble sleeping, but by some miracle, she drifted off with ease, and woke feeling refreshed and ready to tackle the day. She dressed quickly and couldn't resist a peek out her window, but there was little to see aside from the luminium-lit city streets, the sun nowhere near ready to crest over the mountains. The rain, at least, had stopped, and she sent a prayer of thanks to anyone listening.

That prayer halted on her tongue when she stepped into the common room, because it wasn't Caldon who was waiting for her.

It was Jaren.

Kiva came to a sudden stop. "What are you doing here?"

"Cal drank too much at dinner," Jaren answered, inspecting the packs the servants had prepared. "He'll be asleep for a few more hours, and useless for most of the day."

Heart now racing, Kiva speared her eyes toward the bedroom Caldon had claimed, wondering if her magic could heal the effects of a drunken, sleep-deprived fool. But she knew better than to hope, furious at him for putting her in this position.

"Maybe we should wait until tomorrow," she said, her voice higher than normal. "Tor will be back later today, and the others, too. Maybe he can —"

She broke off when Jaren strode toward her, debating whether to run back into the safety of her room. But she held her ground, turning rigid when he was close enough to slide one of the packs over her left shoulder, then her right, adjusting the straps until everything was secure, his movements gentle but efficient.

Kiva was barely breathing, the warmth of his body hitting her, his face *right there* as he examined his work.

Only when he was satisfied did he back away again and say, "We have a long journey ahead. Let's go."

He turned to leave, not giving her a chance to protest.

She wouldn't have been able to anyway, too stunned by his tender actions to do anything but follow him out the door.

Chapter Twenty-Six

The first few hours of their hike were blessedly uneventful.

Their journey began with them riding out of the sleepy city, the sky still navy but beginning to turn indigo by the time they reached the foothills. They didn't speak, which helped ease some of Kiva's nerves, since she could almost imagine it was Caldon beside her, just as long as she didn't look in Jaren's direction.

Her tension continued to fade when they arrived at the base of Mount Nebu and found a clear path that was easy to traverse on horseback, leading them about a third of the way up the mountain. At that point, the trees were less dense and the terrain started to crumble underfoot, with the unstable salt threading deeper through the rock the higher they traveled. Queen Issa and Lady Silence had warned them to monitor the ground, and had also shared directions to an enclosed goatherders' cave full of hay and straw that would keep the horses comfortable until the return trip.

Once Zephyr and Nightshade were settled, Kiva and Jaren set out on foot. The sky was now a dusty pink color and free of clouds, but they still had hours of climbing ahead. Kiva refused to worry about the weather changing, and focused on placing one foot in front of the other as they continued upward. Without the added weight of Zephyr, the mountain wasn't at risk of crumbling beneath her, but it was rocky enough that she had to be careful not to trip. Jaren didn't have healing magic — if she twisted an ankle, he would have to carry her, and that was something to be avoided at all costs.

As the slope intensified, Kiva began to pant lightly, and then much more heavily the higher they climbed. They were still beneath the tree line, and every so often she spotted a cave nestled into the rockface, reminding her about the potential need to seek quick shelter. But so far, everything had gone smoothly, and Kiva was feeling hopeful that they would reach the summit and return in record time.

"Let's take a break," Jaren said when the trees began to thin, the first either of them had spoken in hours.

Kiva nodded and sank onto the ground, groaning as she lowered her pack and rubbed her tired shoulders.

“How are you traveling?” Jaren asked, pulling a waterskin from his own pack, along with a pouch of nuts and berries.

Kiva’s stomach rumbled, and she dug through her supplies until she found the same items. “A bit sore, but nothing terrible,” she answered. Polite and casual, like two strangers making small talk — she could do this. She actually felt more comfortable with him than she had for a long time, her energy devoted to surviving the climb, with nothing left to fuel her nerves. “You?”

“Same,” Jaren said.

Given his fit physique, Kiva doubted the truth of his answer. *He* hadn’t been panting at all, and she was certain he’d only suggested the break for her benefit. But she didn’t say anything, grateful for his consideration and eager to return to their companionable silence.

Knowing they would soon be without the privacy of the trees, they both made sure to relieve themselves before continuing onward, after which they set out again, the slope increasing to thigh-burning levels, the path vanishing along with the trees. Soon all that was left were jagged boulders and sharp rocks, all of which they had to carefully navigate, often by climbing over them. More than once, Jaren held out his hand to help Kiva, and each time she felt the burn of his touch long after he released her.

As the sun rose high in the sky, the gray sediment yielded to the white salt, indicating they were nearing the summit. The climb was more arduous now, and they had to take frequent breaks, but the wind chill above the tree line was too biting to allow for anything more than some water and a few mouthfuls of food before they moved off again.

It was after one of those breaks that they came across their first crevice, the salted ground cleaved in two and stretching as far as their eyes could see, like someone had taken a blade and cut it right through the mountain. Kiva froze at the sight, adrenaline flooding her as she looked over the edge and deep into the fissure. She couldn’t see how far down it went, causing a thrill of fear to travel up her spine at the very real reminder of where she was and the risks of their journey.

“We’re going to have to jump over it,” Jaren said, also peering into the cleft.

Kiva swallowed, looking again across the surface for an end to the fracture, seeing nothing but the fierce jagged line in both directions.

“Hey,” Jaren said, noting her fear and reaching for her hand. “It’s only a few feet across. We’ll jump together.”

Kiva stared numbly down at where his fingers tangled with hers, suddenly feeling too much. She quickly pulled away and croaked out, “You go first. I’ll follow.”

Jaren watched her for a long moment, likely seeing that her fear had increased — and wasn’t solely because of the mountain anymore. He nodded slowly and said, “Take a running leap, just to be safe. Like this.”

He backed up a few steps and then bounded forward, clearing the crevice with ease and landing lightly on the other side.

“Now your turn,” he called.

Kiva didn’t think about what she was doing, knowing that if she did, she would yield to her better judgment. Instead, she backed up and then sprang forward, pushing off from the hard white salt and leaping straight over the gap. She stumbled a little upon landing, the weight of her pack tipping her backwards toward the crevice, causing a second of instant, paralyzing terror. But then Jaren was there, his arms snaking around her and drawing her forward until she was a safe distance from the fissure, her heart thundering and legs trembling as she remained pressed against his body, unable to move.

“All right?” he asked quietly.

She couldn’t answer immediately, partly because of what had just happened, but also because he’d yet to let her go. Somehow, she managed to pull herself together and step away, brushing her hair behind her ear with a shaking hand as she nodded and replied with a hoarse, “Thank you.”

It took a while for Kiva’s tremors to ease, and they spiked all over again with each new crevice they found, the jagged lines cutting into the mountain with alarming regularity the higher they ascended. Some they were able to walk around, but others were like the first and required them to jump — though Kiva was careful to consider her pack now, adding extra distance to her leaps to avoid any more surprise embraces.

Soon her concerns about the fissures were replaced with anxiety about the weather, since dark clouds had begun to form worryingly close to where they climbed. Both she and Jaren continued scanning upward with unease,

and when the first spot of rain touched Kiva's cheek, she knew they were reaching a point where they would have to consider finding shelter.

But then she saw it — the cave at the top of the mountain.

Jaren saw it too and turned to smile widely at her, his expression so joyous, so carefree, that she staggered to a halt.

That was when the earth moved.

Kiva felt as if she was standing on the back of a great beast that had awoken, the salt shifting, the ground cracking, an almighty roar echoing across the mountain range. The sound made her want to cover her ears, but she was too busy trying to remain on her feet, her hand automatically reaching for Jaren's, grabbing hold of him just as the peak split in two —

Right beneath their feet.

A terrified shriek left Kiva and she leapt backwards, hauling Jaren with her, but the salt cracked and crumbled under him, unable to hold his weight as the crevice opened like an angry slash across the summit.

And then he was falling.

"*NO!*" Kiva screamed as he plummeted into the fissure, his mass pulling her down until she was on her stomach and hanging precariously over the edge, holding on to him for dear life. She stretched out her free hand to reinforce her grip, straining against his bulky weight, a new wave of terror hitting her when she realized he was too heavy for her to pull him up on her own.

"You need to help me!" she cried.

But he was already working on it, reaching with his left hand, his knuckles white as he found a grip on the ledge and began to pull himself upward. Kiva added her strength, heaving with all her might.

And then, suddenly, he was out, the force of his momentum causing them both to tumble backwards onto the surface with him landing on top of her, the two of them lying there, panting fiercely, unable to move.

Kiva wasn't sure who was shaking more. Her arms circled Jaren instinctively, her heart pounding so hard that she could barely hear her own labored breaths. There were tears trickling from her eyes, a fear response she couldn't help, just as she couldn't let him go, even knowing that she should.

She wasn't sure how long it took before he was able to rise onto his elbows, looking down at her with wonder as he said, "You saved me."

Her senses returning, Kiva pushed at his chest, but he didn't move.

“You’ve saved me plenty of times,” she said weakly. Raindrops began sprinkling lightly on them, the quiet *drip, drip, drip* touching Kiva’s face and blending with her tears.

Jaren shifted, but only so he could move his hand to her cheek, his fingers gently tracing the evidence of her distress, prompting an involuntary shiver in response. “Why are you crying?”

Kiva pushed at his chest again, a new kind of panic hitting her. “Can you please move?”

He didn’t budge. “Why are you crying, Kiva?”

“Why do you think?” she said, growing angry now. Anger was good. Anger meant she didn’t have to feel everything else she was currently experiencing. “I just watched you fall *into a mountain*. You could have *died*.”

“And that upset you?”

Kiva gaped at him, then shoved him with all her might, hard enough that she was able to wriggle out from beneath him and lurch up to her feet. Her back gave a sharp bark of pain from where she’d landed on her pack, but she ignored it and glared at Jaren as he rose before her. They were both careful to keep a safe distance from the new crevice, the mountain having settled once more, even if Kiva felt as if everything within her was still shifting dangerously.

“Did you seriously just ask that?” she hissed, swiping at her face and scowling up at the sky as the sprinkles increased. A rumble of thunder in the distance made her aware that they needed to hurry for the cave before any lightning arrived, but she couldn’t bring herself to move, waiting for Jaren’s answer.

“I did,” he said, his eyes steady on hers. “You’ve been avoiding me. I have no idea how you feel. So I asked.”

Unlike Kiva, he was no longer shaking, as if he was already over the near miss of what had just occurred, his focus entirely on her now.

Her anger growing, Kiva leaned forward and said, “I’ve been avoiding you because it’s what you *want*.”

“I’ve been trying to talk to you for days, you know that. It’s been incredibly frustrating,” Jaren returned, his calm voice at odds with his statement. “You’ve been avoiding me because you’re afraid.”

Kiva glared at him. “I’m not afraid.”

“You are,” he said. “You’ve barely been able to look at me for weeks.”

Kiva threw out her arms, too shaken by everything that had just happened to filter her response. “You’re the one who wouldn’t look at *me!* You told me you wanted nothing to do with me — so I *gave* you that!”

“I lied.”

With those two words, every part of Kiva stilled, her anger vanishing into a strange numbness as she took in his honest, open expression. Then panic flooded her, and she shook her head firmly, taking a step backwards, her heart beginning to pound all over again. “You didn’t. You’re just confused. You — You hate me.”

Pain, raw and unmistakable, washed over Jaren’s features. He closed his eyes slowly, and when he opened them again, it was still there, haunting his gaze. “I could never hate you, Kiva.”

She shook her head again, adamant now, refusing to listen. “You do. And that’s — that’s fine. You don’t need to act like you don’t. After everything I did —”

“What did you do?” Jaren asked, moving a step closer.

Kiva’s mouth opened and shut, words failing her, because he knew *exactly* what she’d done. “I — Zuleeka — That night —”

Jaren cocked his head to the side. “Did you give your sister the amulet?”

Kiva jolted at the question, and then it was she who had to close her eyes, recalling the lies her sister had told in the River Room and the devastation on Jaren’s face. “No,” she answered, her voice turning hoarse. “I didn’t even know she’d stolen it from me. But —”

“Did you tell her about my magic, that I could wield all four elements?” Jaren interrupted, moving another step forward.

Kiva shifted backwards, but then she had to stop, the crevice too close behind her. “I —”

“Did you?” he pressed.

“No,” she said again. He’d trusted her with that secret, and she’d never told anyone, just as she’d promised.

“Did you help her steal the Book of the Law?”

Kiva curled in on herself, remembering how Tipp had been blamed for her sister’s actions. “No,” she rasped out.

He took another step toward her, his voice soft now. “Did you give her the dagger?”

This time Kiva could only stand there, shaking, and whisper, “Of course not. I had no idea what it was, or what it could do. I never wanted —” Her voice cracked, making her unable to finish.

But she didn’t have to, because Jaren was right in front of her now, whispering too as he asked, “Then why have you been blaming yourself for what happened?”

Kiva couldn’t stand to look into his tender, understanding eyes, knowing her heart wouldn’t handle what was sure to come once the shock of his near-death experience passed and he remembered everything she’d done, everything she *was*. Her lips wobbled as she said, “I told her about the Royal Ternary. You lost *everything* because of me.”

“Zuleeka didn’t give a damn about the Royal Ternary,” Jaren said. “You heard her that night — she’d always planned to get the Eye and use it on me. *That* was her goal. And she herself admitted that she’d been planning to take Evalon for years without knowing about the Ternary. The information you shared just gave her an added incentive to speed up her timeline.”

“It also gave her the *means*. Everything she did —”

“Was what *she* did,” Jaren interrupted firmly. “Zuleeka’s actions were not yours. Her choices were not yours. That night, your sister would have killed me if not for you. You saved my life. Why do you keep making yourself the villain in your own narrative?”

The question echoed in Kiva’s ears, but she couldn’t stop shaking her head, tears blurring her vision. Words were beyond her now, but Jaren wasn’t finished. He reached out to touch his fingers beneath her chin, tilting her head back until she had no choice but to look at him, his gaze steady on hers as he asked in a quiet voice full of meaning, “When are you going to see that I don’t blame you for what happened that night?”

“You do,” Kiva croaked, unable to let him forget. “You do, and you should.”

“I was angry,” Jaren said, still quietly. “I was hurt. And you were the easiest person for me to take that out on. That was wrong of me, and I’m sorry. But what I told you in the desert wasn’t true. And what you said when you were on angeldust —” This time it was his voice that cracked, his expression ravished, as he whispered, “Not once, even on my worst days, did I hate you. Hearing you say that, knowing you didn’t want to *live* —” The haunted look returned to his face. “I felt like I was being stabbed in the heart all over again.”

Even seeing the truth of his declaration, Kiva was too scared to believe him. “But I lied to you,” she whispered, her tears trickling steadily now, mixing with the sprinkles that were falling heavier around them. “You said — You said you fell in love with a lie.”

Jaren shifted forward until he was all she could see. “I *did* fall in love with a lie, but that lie was *you*. I fell in love with you, Kiva. I *am* in love with you. Then and now, nothing about that has changed — except now I know the real you.”

Kiva couldn’t listen, his words hurting too much. “Please, stop —” She held out her hand to keep him away, needing to remind him that he was wrong, needing to protect herself from the dangerous hope unfurling within her, like a flower opening beneath the sun. But there wasn’t enough room between them, and he grasped her fingers, pressing them to his chest, his strong hand covering hers.

“I was never angry that you lied to me,” Jaren said softly. “I was angry because you didn’t trust me enough to tell me the truth.” His eyes were locked on hers, everything he was feeling clear for her to see. “Caldon knew all your secrets, and he still loved you. You never gave me that chance. After everything we’d been through together, you still didn’t trust me. *That’s* why I was so upset. Not because of everything else beyond your control, not even because of the mistakes you made. But because you never really let me in. I gave you every part of me, and I thought you gave me every part of you, but the whole time, I didn’t even know who you really were.”

Upon hearing his declaration, the ground shook beneath Kiva again, but it wasn’t the mountain this time. It was from the realization that she had a decision to make. She could keep running away from him, guarding her heart so as to never risk such pain again. Or she could give Jaren what he’d just given her: the truth, messy and broken as it was.

Inhaling shakily, Kiva made her choice.

“You did know who I was.” Her voice was so choked that it was a wonder he could hear her. She stared at his hand covering hers and forced herself to go on, “You knew me better than I knew myself. I was dead for ten years, and you breathed life back into me. You saved me. You freed me. You *made* me. And in showing me who you were, in sharing your family and your kingdom and your life with me, in sharing your *heart* with me, you gave me the strength to carve my own path.” More tears fell as she

made herself look into his emotion-filled eyes and continue, “You’re right — I should have told you about me. But it wasn’t because I didn’t trust you. You made it impossible for me *not* to trust you. It’s just — I thought if I told you the truth, that I was torn between my family and yours —” Her voice broke, and she rasped, “I was afraid I would lose you.”

Jaren’s gaze was so intense that it almost burned, but she didn’t look away as she pushed aside the last of her fear to declare, “You helped me realize what I wanted, just by being you. You gave me the courage to say no to my sister and the rebels.” Her entire body was trembling now, but she made herself whisper, “I chose you, Jaren. I will *always* choose you. Because I love you, and I —”

Kiva didn’t get to finish before Jaren’s lips slammed down on hers, swallowing the rest of her words.

A surprised sound left her, but then her mind caught up to what was happening, urging her to hold on to him with a desperation that was rivaled by the force of his own embrace.

The kiss wasn’t gentle — it was fierce and bruising and full of everything they’d both repressed for weeks, for *months*. Kiva wound one hand around his back, sliding it beneath his pack, while the other moved up into his rain-damp hair, holding his face to hers. She couldn’t stop a sob from leaving her when they broke for air, too overwhelmed by all she was feeling, but then he was kissing her again, his tongue darting into her mouth, causing her to whimper against his lips. Her knees buckled, and he took her weight, their kiss deepening even further. A moan left him and slid down her throat, causing tingles of awareness to flood through her. Warmth pooled in her stomach, fire blazed across her skin, her body coming to life beneath his hands. She never wanted to let him go, she wasn’t even sure if she *could* —

But then a loud boom of thunder sounded, breaking into the haze of their passion. They both glanced upward, neither having noticed that the rain had begun to fall in earnest, soaking their clothes and dripping down them to the rocky salt at their feet.

Kiva was panting, her fingers still tangled in Jaren’s now-mussed hair, her other arm wrapped around him like her life depended on it. She stared at him, still dazed, seeing a reflection of that in his expression, with him looking back at her as if — as if —

“You really don’t hate me, do you?” she whispered tremulously.

A soft laugh left him, the sound so light that new tears touched Kiva's eyes, the gaping hole in her heart beginning to stitch seamlessly back together.

"No, sweetheart," he whispered back, kissing the tears from her cheek. His lips remained against her skin as he murmured there, "I really don't."

She couldn't help it — right there in his arms, she began to cry, her shoulders shaking, her chest heaving as everything flooded out of her in deep, cleansing waves. She was aware of Jaren rubbing comforting circles into her back, of the soothing words he murmured into her ear. But that wasn't what she wanted from him. Breathing his name, she tilted her head up, and he was instantly there, his mouth taking hers again, tender, loving, everything he was, everything he'd always been.

"I'm sorry," she said against his lips, needing to say the words, needing him to know she meant them. "I'm so sorry."

"No more apologies," he whispered against her mouth.

"But I —"

He kissed the protest right off her lips, making her forget what she'd been about to say — making her forget her own *name*. His joy, his forgiveness, his *love* — that was all Kiva knew, her heart so full that it hurt, the pain beautiful and perfect and unending.

But then another rumble of thunder came, followed by a flash of light, and they couldn't ignore the danger anymore.

Jaren tore his mouth from hers, his eyes glazed and heated, his face flushed, his breathing heavy. But he managed to come back to his senses faster than Kiva, and linked their fingers, saying, "We need to get to the cave."

Kiva marveled at the feel of his skin against hers, his easy, willing touch, hardly daring to believe this was real. But when she looked at him, she found the truth staring back at her, right there for her to see.

He didn't hate her. He didn't blame her.

He loved her.

Just as he'd said.

"Truly, as much as I want to continue this —" Jaren's voice was husky, his eyes darkening as he stared at her lips. "And trust me, I really, *really* do —"

Thunder crackled across the sky again, followed by another flash of light, closer now.

“We’re sitting ducks out here,” Kiva finished for him, not needing any more prompting. It took a mammoth effort, but she somehow set aside everything that had just happened and tugged him forward as the heavens opened, the rain suddenly pouring down in sheets, limiting their vision and making it impossible for her to hear anything, even her own thoughts.

They sprinted blindly forward, putting distance between them and the crevice, slipping and sliding on parts of the salt mountaintop where thin layers of moss had grown, now slick from the rain. By some miracle they managed not to fall, closing the distance between themselves and the cave with every step, lightning now beginning to streak continuously around them.

But finally, they made it, leaping through the entrance to the cave just as a bolt of lightning struck the mountain, near enough for Kiva to feel the static on her skin, her hands slamming over her ears at the deafening crack of thunder that accompanied it.

“That was a bit too close,” Jaren murmured, panting hard.

Kiva couldn’t respond, too busy trying to draw air into her lungs.

When she eventually stopped wheezing, she swiped hair from her face and frowned down at the water cascading off her body, unable to keep from stating the obvious: “I look like a drowned rat.”

Jaren’s lips twitched. “Maybe a little.”

He, of course, still managed to look as perfect as always, even dripping a river’s worth of water. It was painfully unfair, she thought, scrunching her nose at him.

Jaren chuckled and reached for her, the intent in his eyes saying he couldn’t care less how wet they both were, or even that they’d finally reached their destination. She knew they should be looking for the ring, but with the storm raging outside, they wouldn’t be going anywhere for a while. They had time. They could take this moment to enjoy each other, they could —

Kiva’s thoughts halted when she saw the blood on his hand.

“What happened?” she asked, taking his palm in hers and moving closer to the cave entrance, seeking the light so she could inspect the wound.

“It’s nothing,” Jaren said. “The edge of the crevice was sharp, that’s all.”

Kiva thought back to how he’d helped pull himself up — he’d been hurt the whole time since then, and she hadn’t noticed.

She looked at him now, having to make another decision. This one should have been easier, given everything they'd just gone through, and the declarations they'd made to each other. But nerves still tumbled in her stomach as she held his eyes and summoned her magic, the golden glow appearing instantly, lighting the cave and flowing softly from her into him.

Kiva wanted to look away, afraid of what she might see in his expression. It was irrational; he knew she had healing magic — he'd watched her practice it for weeks. He'd *helped* her practice it. But using it on him, for the first time since the night she'd saved his life . . . It was irrevocable proof of who she was.

A Corentine.

His once sworn enemy, turned traitor to her own bloodline.

She had no idea how he would react, whether he would suddenly realize what she had feared for so long: that there was no hope for them, the challenges against them too great.

But that wasn't what happened.

Instead, Jaren cupped her face with his free hand, her golden glow like a halo surrounding them both as he whispered a single word: "Beautiful."

Kiva closed her eyes and swayed toward him, unable to bear up under the weight of her emotions. She felt his lips press against her forehead, a gentle, tender brush, just as she sensed her magic fading, his wound now fully healed. Only then did she open her eyes, seeing the affection shining clear in his expression.

"So beautiful," he murmured again. But this time, there was no golden light. He wasn't talking about her magic now — he was talking about *her*.

His face softened as he saw the realization hit her, as he watched something settle deep within her, the final broken pieces of her sealing back together, healed by a different kind of magic that could only come from him. A quiet sigh left her and she leaned forward, tucking her face into his neck and just holding him as the storm continued outside, neither of them needing more than that, the simple, heartfelt embrace comforting them both after so long apart.

They didn't move for a long time — long enough for the thunder to fade and the rain to ease, even if it was still falling too heavily for them to risk the descent just yet.

But regardless, Kiva eventually made herself pull away and say, "We should probably look for the ring."

Jaren exhaled and nodded his agreement, loosening his hold but staying close as they turned and squinted into the darkness of the cave, moving forward together.

“I don’t suppose you noticed any luminium torches in our packs?” Kiva asked, the light vanishing the further they moved from the entrance.

“None that I saw,” Jaren answered. Dryly, he added, “Wouldn’t it be great if one of us had magic that glowed?”

Kiva flushed and immediately summoned her power again, ignoring Jaren’s quiet laugh as she held out her palm, illuminating the space around them.

The cave wasn’t deep; if not for the storm, they wouldn’t have needed help from her magic, but it kept them from tripping over the uneven ground as they headed toward the back wall. There they found a hollow carved into the rock, at the center of which was Sarana’s earth ring resting at stomach-height, the emerald glinting as Kiva’s glow reached it.

Her skin prickled when she noticed an unnatural bluish light contained within the hollow, reminding her about the ancient Mystican who had spelled it safe. Navok never would have been able to steal this ring, Kiva realized, not without a Vallentis and a Corentine together. But that didn’t matter. She still knew it was best for them to have all four in their possession. And now that Kiva and Jaren were back to being . . . *Kiva and Jaren* . . . nothing had changed about her wanting to return his magic. That was still her priority, even if it was no longer needed for his forgiveness.

“Do we just . . . grab it?” Kiva asked, eyeing the blue light with trepidation.

Jaren took her hand in his. “Only one way to find out.”

Together, they moved their arms forward, their fingers passing into the hollow without resistance, allowing them to collect the ring and pull it back out again.

Kiva shifted nervously, waiting for a sign that what they’d done would leave them trapped or cursed or something equally troubling. But nothing happened.

“That was easy,” Jaren noted, sounding as relieved as she felt.

Even so, Kiva snorted. “Sure, if you forget the climb, the crevices, the multiple near-death experiences, and the storm — not to mention all the emotional drama.”

Jaren’s mouth quirked up at the edges. “Emotional drama?”

Kiva waved a hand between them. “What would you call it?”

Amusement lit his face. “I didn’t realize we were giving it a name. But how about That Time on the Mountain When You *Finally* —”

Kiva pressed her hand over his mouth. “You’re right, no name needed.”

He kissed her palm, his eyes dancing. The sight made warmth bubble within her, and she released a soft, dreamy sigh.

But then she pulled herself together and said, “It smells awful back here. Let’s find a comfortable spot — with better airflow — while we wait for the rain to pass.”

They headed back to the cave mouth and tossed their soaked packs aside before sliding down to sit against rock wall. It was natural for Kiva to lean into Jaren, for his arm to curl around her, for them to sit like that for a long time, staring out at the rain in comfortable silence.

But it was just as natural for her to eventually look up at him, to see his eyes already on her, and then, whether she moved first or he did, for their lips to find each other again. There was nothing frenzied about their kiss this time, just a slow exploration, tender and sweet. They weren’t in a hurry, and by unspoken agreement, they kept things from becoming too heated, neither wanting to rush into anything, especially in a smelly cave at the top of a mountain. They had time now — an entire future ahead of them.

That thought made Kiva sigh dreamily again, before she rested her head on his chest, his arms holding her close.

“What are you thinking?” he asked quietly.

“All good things,” she said, sounding as dreamy as her sigh.

Jaren’s body shook with humor beneath her. “Any specifics?”

Kiva saw no reason to hide it from him, not after everything they’d gone through that day. “I was just thinking about the future. Our future.”

He made a humming sound of contentment. “And what do you see?”

Kiva kissed his chest, over his heart, and repeated, “All good things.”

This time his chuckle was audible. But then he sobered and said, his voice hesitant, “You once told me that it was your dream to study at Silverthorn Academy. Was that — Did you mean that?”

Kiva closed her eyes, realizing that, while he might have forgiven her, there were still layers of trust they needed to rebuild. She burrowed deeper into him and said, her voice quiet, “Aside from hiding my family and my magic, everything else I told you was true. So yes, in an ideal world, where Zuleeka and Navok don’t exist, where you never lost your magic and your

kingdom, where everything is sunshine and daisies — in that world, Silverthorn is part of my dream.”

“Part of?” Jaren repeated.

Kiva rolled her eyes, knowing what he was really asking, but also grateful that his hesitation had vanished. “You might have a role in it, too. Maybe.”

A laugh huffed out of him, and he kissed the top of her head. “That’s good to hear, since you’re also in my dreams of the future. It’d be uncomfortable for us both if you’re imagining someone else.”

Kiva snickered, but cuddled him even closer, her heart full to bursting. “I think we both know there’s no competition.”

Jaren made another contented sound, but then his voice turned serious as he said, “Speaking of the future . . . we should probably talk about Zuleeka.”

Kiva tensed. “What about her?”

The hesitation was back when Jaren answered, but it was a different kind of hesitation now. “Tilda . . . Galdric . . . everyone has been saying you’ll have to confront Zuleeka, that you’re the only one who can. Even I told you that’s what I expect — and like everything else I said in the desert, I shouldn’t have made you believe that. It was unforgiveable of me to put that on you.”

Kiva’s brow scrunched. “What are you talking about?”

Quietly, Jaren said, “She’s your sister.”

When he offered nothing else, Kiva replied, “I’m aware of that. What’s the problem?”

Jaren shifted beneath her, before saying, with deliberate care, “Tor and Zuleeka are the only family you have left. If you don’t want to face her, if you can’t handle the idea of using your magic against her . . . I’ll understand. We all will. None of us will make you do anything against your will. We’ll find another way.”

With each word out of his mouth, Kiva’s tension had grown — and then dissolved.

“Thank you for saying that,” she said, somewhat hoarsely. “It means a lot.”

Jaren relaxed again. “We’ll figure something else out,” he told her, kissing her forehead. There wasn’t a trace of anger or frustration or disappointment in him, just complete understanding.

But Kiva shook her head, because she wasn't finished. "That means a lot," she repeated, "but Zuleeka needs to be stopped. And if my mother thought I was the only one who could heal the darkness out of her, then I have to try." She thought of all the people she loved, knowing they'd be in danger as long as Zuleeka remained a threat, and added, "I'll never be able to live with myself if I don't."

"But she's your sister," Jaren said again, softly.

"She was, once," Kiva said, remembering the child she'd known over a decade ago. That girl was gone, replaced by a hard young woman who had no qualms hurting people. Even Kiva and Tor — her own family. "I don't know who she is now, whether she's been corrupted by dark magic or if her actions are more willful and deliberate than that. But either way, the power she has is too dangerous. I can't ignore that — and I won't." Kiva fidgeted with a seam over Jaren's rib cage as she added, "Though . . . no one has said what happens if I *do* manage to heal her. I'm not — I don't —"

"No one expects you to harm her," Jaren said quickly, his arms tightening in comfort. "Once her dark magic is gone, your part will be done. We'll figure out the rest later."

Kiva nodded her gratitude, not letting herself consider what Zuleeka's future might look like. Everything she'd told Jaren was true, but it still pained her to think about the sister she'd once loved.

She might be our sister, but actions have consequences, and one day soon she's going to learn that.

Kiva remembered Torell's words from early in their journey, his unwavering sense of justice soothing something inside her. Zuleeka's fate would soon be decided, and when it was, Kiva would not only accept it, she would be a part of it.

And for the first time, she finally felt ready.

She'd escaped Zalindov prison, not once, but twice. She'd overcome an angeldust addiction, pulled herself out of the deepest darkness, and found the will to continue living. She'd battled in a Jirvan arena and killed a woman, the horror of the experience having scarred her — but it hadn't broken her.

And Zuleeka wouldn't break her either.

Kiva's fears remained strong, especially knowing the power her sister wielded, but Kiva was powerful, too. And she would fight with everything she had, give *everything she had*, because her friends were counting on her.

And when the time came, she would not let them down.

Resolved, Kiva embraced her mental reckoning, feeling it solidify within her. Not wanting — or needing — to discuss Zuleeka anymore, she flattened her palm against Jaren’s hard stomach and said, “Speaking of sisters . . .”

He tensed beneath her.

Carefully, so carefully, Kiva went on, “Have you thought about what will happen when you see Mirryn? After what she did . . . I know that must hurt — I know that *does* hurt.”

Jaren closed his eyes slowly and nodded. “I always knew there was an element of jealousy there, but I never imagined . . .”

When he looked at Kiva again, the emotion in his expression made her blink back tears.

“The worst part is, I understand why she did it,” he went on. “The way I feel about you . . . if she feels even a *fraction* of that toward Serafine . . .” He trailed off, then said, quieter, “I just wish she had told us about Navok’s demands, and about her own bitterness, rather than betray us. We could have talked about it, come up with a solution together, but now . . .” He sighed. “What happens to her is out of my hands. Mother’s, too. Mirryn committed treason — if we manage to reclaim Evalon, then the Royal Council will decide her punishment, and we’ll have to abide by it.”

Hearing the heartache in his voice, Kiva hugged him tighter, knowing exactly how he felt. Both of their sisters had made choices, and assuming all went as planned, both would have to pay for those choices. But that didn’t mean it would be easy — for any of them.

“Gods, why are families so difficult?” Kiva mumbled.

Jaren gave a light chuckle — it was weak, but it helped break the weighty feeling that had descended upon them both. “That’s a question for the ages.”

Kiva copied his sigh and sought distraction by pulling the amulet free of her clothes, playing with the smooth edges and jagged gemstones. Eager to change the subject — for both their sakes — she looked at the ruby, topaz, and emerald quadrants, and said, “We have three of the rings now. That means only one left.”

Jaren murmured his agreement, reaching for the leather pouch he carried the rings in and handing it over without being asked. He then began

to absentmindedly trace patterns on her arm, as if he couldn't bear to not be touching her.

Even with the barrier of her clothes, the sensation was almost enough to distract Kiva, but she made herself focus and share something that had been on her mind for a while. "Do you think it's strange that Sarana sent the rings away without telling anyone in your family?"

Jaren's shoulders shrugged beneath her. "It's possible she did and it was forgotten over time."

Kiva turned the pouch in her hand and then upended the contents into her palm. "Torvin's dagger — the Eye of the Gods — was passed down through my family. My grandmother knew about its true power. My mother and Zuleeka, too. That knowledge wasn't lost to time." She frowned at the rings. "Ryuu and Thembi, Sibley, even Issa — their ancestors all made sure they knew what had been entrusted to them. I can't help wondering why Sarana didn't ensure the same for her own heirs."

Jaren shrugged again. "Your guess is as good as mine. I'd also like to know why none of our so-called allies ever mentioned anything, even in passing." He paused. "I'm assuming it must have been part of the instructions they were given — that we could only reclaim the rings without prompting. But still . . ." He blew out a breath. "It would have been nice to know about the Hand *before* we actually had need of it." His voice lowered as he added, "Just as it would have been nice to know that the dagger my family possessed wasn't the real Eye. *That* wasn't the most delightful of surprises."

His tone was wry and held no trace of pain, but Kiva closed her hand around the rings, her attention diverted now as she softly asked, "Do you miss it?"

"The Eye?" Jaren asked, sounding puzzled.

She was about to tell him no, but he went on before she could.

"I went through Ashlyn's possessions when Cal and I arrived at Highworth Keep. The blade she has there looks exactly the same as the Eye. A perfect replica, just like the ceremonial one I wore for official events. The resemblance is astounding. But I didn't want to keep it, if that's what you're asking. I saw no need, with it not being the actual Eye."

Kiva shook her head. "No, I meant your magic. Do you miss it?"

She didn't know why she was asking — of *course* he missed his magic. But she wanted to know every part of him, even the parts that hurt.

Especially those parts.

He turned silent, considering his answer. All the while, he continued tracing patterns on her arm, as if it were equally soothing to him.

Finally, he admitted, “I struggled at first. The early days were the hardest. It was like I had a phantom limb — my mind told me I still had magic, even if every time I tried to use it, nothing happened.”

His hand moved then, trailing softly up over her shoulder until his fingers began playing with her hair. “Believe it or not, you actually helped me, in a way.”

Kiva started, and swiveled to look up at him. “Me?”

“Cal told me about your power, how you’d repressed it for a decade, terrified of what would happen if someone realized what you could do,” Jaren answered, his voice contemplative. “It made me realize how fortunate I was to have had such freedom. That day we went to Silverthorn together and visited the children — I’ve been able to do things like that my whole life.” Sadness touched his face then, but his gaze remained focused on his fingers in her hair, as if he couldn’t quite look at her as he shared, “That’s what I miss the most. Not the battle training or even the everyday uses my magic had, but the ways it could bring joy to others. Like what my mother did at the River Festival, and what the rest of my family does at the other seasonal celebrations — it requires so little effort on our end, but to our people, it means everything. So giving that part up has been hard. And also —”

He broke off quickly, as if regretting what he’d been about to say.

“Also, what?” Kiva gently urged.

It took a full minute before Jaren answered, still avoiding her eyes as he said, “You already know the reason I was named my mother’s heir is because I can wield all four elements. *Could* wield them,” he corrected, uncomfortable. At Kiva’s encouraging squeeze, he went on, “If we manage to reclaim Evalon, the Royal Council will most likely strip me of my title as crown prince. And I already mentioned how Mirryn will be charged for her role in everything. So that means Oriel will have to be named Evalon’s heir.”

Kiva’s arms tightened around Jaren, hearing his sorrow. But his next words surprised her, because he wasn’t upset for himself.

“Ori is so young,” Jaren said mournfully. “The decision will take the rest of his childhood away. There’s so much he’ll need to learn, most of

which my father helped me navigate, but now he —” Jaren stopped to clear his throat, his voice rough with renewed grief as he said, “Now I’ll have to help Ori. And I will — of course I will. I just wish that burden didn’t have to fall to him.”

Kiva’s heart ached for Jaren — for so many reasons. “I’m sorry about your father,” she told him softly. “I wish I could have been there for you.”

Jaren rested his lips against her temple and said back, just as softly, “I’m sorry you were sent back to Zalindov. When I saw you that first night at Stoneforge and Cresta told us where you’d been, what Zuleeka and Mirryn had done, how Rooke had allocated you to the tunnels . . .” He trailed off, shuddering.

“I survived,” Kiva said, not wanting to talk about it, partly because the memories still haunted her, but also because she could see how distressed Jaren was at the thought of her being back there. “But about your magic and Oriel — there’s something you keep forgetting.”

She opened her palm for him to see the rings she still held.

Jaren caught her eyes then, his like a stormy sea. “I know you want to use the Hand on me, and believe me, if it truly does what Galdric claims, then I want that, too. But I just — I don’t want to get my hopes up. For now, I need to focus on what I do have, not on what I don’t. If I get my magic back, then I’ll be forever grateful. But in case that doesn’t happen . . .”

He trailed off again, but Kiva didn’t need him to finish. She could understand his hesitancy, could even respect it. But she also knew that, despite him coming to a place of acceptance, it still pained him that his magic was gone, in ways she hadn’t considered. Not once had she thought about his title and how his lack of elemental power might affect his right to rule. In knowing that now, she was even more determined to help restore what he’d lost. While she was sure Oriel would make a good ruler, especially with Jaren’s patient guidance, there was no doubt in her mind that Jaren was born to be king. *That* was his future — and she was going to do everything in *her* power to make sure that came about.

“You have your thinking face on,” Jaren said, touching a finger to the crease in her brow. “Do I want to know what’s going through your mind right now?”

Kiva grinned. “Probably not.” He would learn soon enough — once they had the final ring. Just one more city, and then he would have his magic back. She had to believe that. She had to hope, even if he couldn’t.

A sudden absence of sound made Kiva look out the cave mouth, where she saw the rain was finally easing. It had to be midafternoon; there was no way they would make it down the mountain by nightfall, but if they reached the tree line by then, the danger of falling into a crevice would be gone. And once they made it to their horses, the lower part of the trail would be much easier, even in the dark — though she would still use her magic to light the way. While Kiva was tempted by the idea of having Jaren to herself all night, she wasn't keen to sleep in the smelly cave, especially with the temperature already dropping. Better for them to try and return to Lyras, especially before they lost any more light.

Jaren seemed to be of the same mind. "I think maybe we should —"

He was cut off when a wall of air slammed into them from the cave's entrance, prompting him to pull Kiva closer, shielding her with his body. But as quickly as it had come, the wind was gone.

Both Kiva and Jaren scrambled to their feet, looking at each other in bewilderment.

"What was —"

Kiva didn't get a chance to finish before Ashlyn stepped into view, her face pale.

"Ash, what —" Jaren began, but his cousin spoke over him.

"Navok's anomalies are in Evalon. They've surrounded Vallenia — and they're about to attack."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Ashlyn's declaration made Kiva freeze, but Jaren instantly strode forward until he was right in front of his cousin.

"Tell me everything," he said, his voice low and urgent.

The princess didn't delay. "We found a villager willing to talk. She said Navok has been sneaking anomalies into Evalon for months, with them crossing the border in twos and threes — numbers small enough not to raise the alarm — all under orders to travel south to Vallenia and wait for his command."

Ashlyn took a breath and continued, "They're obeying because he stole their families. Their husbands, wives, brothers, sisters, even their children — anyone they love, he had his soldiers kidnap for leverage, locking them away at Darkwell Keep." To Kiva, she quickly said, "It's an impenetrable fortress, even to those with magic." She turned back to Jaren, her face grim as she revealed, "If the anomalies don't use their powers for him, he'll kill the people they care about. This isn't a case of them having nothing to lose — they have *everything* to lose. And they know it."

Kiva ground her teeth, realizing how dangerous that made the anomalies. They weren't fighting out of loyalty to Navok — they were fighting because they were desperate. And a desperate enemy with that kind of power . . .

Gods, Kiva thought, a chill snaking down her spine.

"You said they're about to attack," Jaren prompted his cousin. "How could the villager know that? She might know what Navok has done and what he's planning, but how —"

"That news didn't come from the villager," Ashlyn said. "Issa sent a messenger to Evalon — she was worried because she hadn't heard anything from us in months."

Kiva remembered the queen mentioning that during their meeting yesterday.

"That messenger returned today, right as I arrived back from the village with the others," Ashlyn explained. "He was the one who shared the news.

He saw the anomalies with his own eyes.”

Jaren cursed, but his cousin wasn't done.

“It gets worse,” Ashlyn said. “Navok himself is on his way. He's sailing down the coast, just like we did from Ersa, with wind anomalies speeding the journey.”

Instead of becoming more distressed, Jaren straightened and said, “Our armadas will stop him. He won't get far.”

“He will. He *has*,” Ashlyn said, her features even grimmer now. “He has an entire ship full of anomalies with him, and not just wind elementals. They're laying waste to the coastline, for no other reason than to show his power. Entire villages are being set aflame, low-lying settlements are being flooded by tidal waves, the earth is cracking at his command. All of our ships that have been sent out to meet him have been torn apart without getting near enough to fire a single cannon. It's a warning — and a promise: he's on his way, and he will show no mercy.”

Silence rang in the wake of Ashlyn's damning statement, with Kiva unable to do anything but envision the horrifying image the princess had described.

“How long until he arrives?” Jaren asked, every muscle in his body rigid.

“Any day now.” Ashlyn turned to Kiva. “He was never going to honor the deal he made with your mother. All of this proves he was only using the rebels, waiting for Zuleeka and Mirryn to weaken us so he could swoop in and steal our kingdom. He's been biding his time until the protection we offered was gone, and now Evalon is ripe for the picking.”

Kiva was unsurprised that Navok had intended to renege on the deal, but she *was* surprised he was moving forward without having her bound to him, especially because —

“Zuleeka won't let Navok take Vallenia, not while she has magic that can stop him,” Kiva said. It made her feel sick to even think it, but at least there was one good thing that came of her sister's deadly power: Navok wouldn't have a defense against it.

“Zuleeka has locked herself in the palace,” Ashlyn revealed, her silvery eyes flashing. “She's doing nothing to prepare the city for an attack. *Nothing*. Our people need protection, and she —”

Ashlyn stopped and inhaled deeply, before saying, much calmer, “I don't think we can count on your sister doing anything right now, other than

looking out for herself. That seems to be what she's best at."

Kiva looked down at her feet, devastation and fury and shame warring within her. But then she felt Jaren's hand curl around hers, silently reminding her that he didn't blame her — for any of this.

"With any luck, Navok will confront Zuleeka once he arrives," Ashlyn went on, missing their nonverbal communication. "She'll have to defend herself then, hopefully wiping him off the board. But I think we all know Navok is too smart for that."

"Which means he has another plan," Jaren said, calculating.

"Or he's underestimating the strength of her power," Ashlyn countered.

Kiva knew they could stand there playing guessing games for hours, but that wouldn't help anyone, so she said, "What are we going to do?"

"We need to get back to Vallenia," Jaren replied instantly, his answer filling Kiva with pride. Even without his magic and his crown, he would do whatever it took to protect his people.

But Ashlyn shook her head. "No, you need to get the final ring. Now more than ever, we need the Hand of the Gods in our possession. Issa's messenger couldn't say how many anomalies there are, but right now, the only elementals we have on our side are Cal, Galdric, Aunt Ariana, Oriel, and me. We can't take on an army of magic users without help." She peered deeper into the cave. "I assume you found the third ring?"

Kiva held out her hand, all three of them still in her palm.

Ashlyn touched her finger to the emerald, infusing her earth magic into it, the green jewel flaring bright before fading again.

"Now you just need the last one," Ashlyn said as Kiva placed them all in their pouch and returned them to Jaren.

"Ash, we can't just leave Vallenia to —"

"I said *you* need to get the final ring," Ashlyn cut Jaren off. "I didn't say we all needed to go. Not this time."

Jaren's eyes narrowed. "What are you thinking?"

"Eidran, Tor, and I will head straight back to Vallenia while the rest of you go to Arden," Ashlyn said. "They're getting ready right now — Issa has already agreed to give us extra horses so we can ride hard, without stopping. And while I can't windfunnel as far as Galdric, I'm stronger than him, and my energy replenishes faster, so I can make smaller jumps, more often, and still have enough magic to spare for when we arrive. I'm hoping it'll be enough for us to make it back by tomorrow night."

“Why you three?” Jaren said. “Why can’t I —”

“Because Queen Lorah adores you,” Ashlyn stated. “So far, every ring has been a challenge, and we don’t have time to waste. If having the favor of Nerine’s ruler helps, even in the slightest way, you need to take advantage of that.”

Kiva didn’t think now was the time to mention that Issa adored Jaren, too, and yet here they were, having lost nearly a whole day climbing a deadly mountain.

“And as for why us three,” Ashlyn went on, “I gave orders to have some of my soldiers sent to Vallenia before we left for Jiirva — not enough, I wish I’d sent more, but I never imagined *this* . . .” She scowled, then shook it off and continued, “They need to see me with them, leading them against whatever we’ll be facing. Eidran will be doing the same with the Royal Guard — though I think we can also assume Captain Veris will already be preparing them to defend the city, with or without Zuleeka’s permission. And Tor” — Ashlyn’s eyes cut to Kiva — “is going to try and rally the rebels. He was their general; he’s hoping they’ll still be willing to fight with him. It’s a long shot, but . . .”

“A common enemy,” Jaren murmured.

“Exactly,” Ashlyn said.

Kiva clenched her hands, the thought of what her friends and her brother might be heading into making her feel queasy.

“Galdric will windfunnel the rest of you directly from Lyras to Arden,” Ashlyn shared. “After you have the ring, meet us in Vallenia as soon as you can. He won’t be able to windfunnel you again straightaway, but —”

“We’ll figure something out,” Jaren interrupted with a terse nod.

Kiva could tell he wasn’t pleased with the plan, his desperation to hurry back and help his city — and his family — conflicting with his knowledge that the final ring would allow them to even the odds. Not just in creating their own anomaly soldiers, but also in Jaren himself being able to battle magic with magic.

“I know it’s hard,” Ashlyn said, seeing Jaren’s inner turmoil. “But try to remember that, even without magic, our soldiers are well trained and unafraid. They’ll be able to handle themselves. And Veris will keep the Royal Guard strong. You’ve got time — just not much.”

“That time will become considerably shorter once Navok arrives,” Jaren said tightly. “I doubt he’ll wait long before ordering his anomalies to

attack.”

“So get there before him,” Ashlyn said pointedly.

“Maybe he doesn’t plan for them to attack,” Kiva said. “Maybe they’re just there to look intimidating and make us *think* they’re going to attack.”

The incredulous looks both Jaren and Ashlyn sent her made her blush.

“You never know,” she mumbled.

Despite her embarrassment, she was relieved to see Jaren’s lips twitch, just slightly. If nothing else, she’d managed to ease his tension, even if only for a moment.

“We need to get off this mountain,” Ashlyn said, beckoning them out of the cave. “I couldn’t windfunnel up here earlier because the weather was so bad, but we at least managed to have someone collect your horses, and they’re already back at the palace. Everyone is waiting, ready to leave as soon as we get down there.”

While Kiva felt physically ill at the thought of Vallenia being under threat of attack, she was grateful Ashlyn’s arrival meant they wouldn’t have to negotiate the steep descent. Her expression must have said as much, since Jaren’s lips gave another twitch. His features remained tense — and Kiva doubted that would change anytime soon — but it was clear he was choosing to focus on what they could control, rather than spiraling into his own dread.

Seeing that, Kiva gave his hand a reassuring squeeze as they followed Ashlyn out into the open, silently telling him she was with him, and they would get through whatever was coming together.

His face gentled in response, and he drew their joined hands up to press a quick, grateful kiss to her knuckles — right as Ashlyn stopped walking and turned back toward them.

The princess’s eyebrows shot upward, but all she said was, “It’s about time,” before summoning her magic and windfunneling them away.

The distance between Mount Nebu and Lyras was so short that it only took a few seconds of windy disorientation before they landed in front of the crystalline palace, where they found all their horses saddled and ready to go, Zephyr and Nightshade included. Tor and Eidran were talking with a pair of grooms who were handing over the reins to the spare mounts Issa had offered, but aside from them, Cresta was the only member of their traveling party in sight.

“Finally!” the redhead cried, stomping over to meet them. “What were you doing up there? Baking a cake?”

Kiva pressed her lips together, knowing now wasn’t the time to laugh.

Cresta, however, caught her mirth and frowned. “Did you miss the part where Navok and Serafine are on their way to Vallenia? What about that is funny to you?”

“Sera is with Navok?” Jaren asked.

“That’s what Issa’s messenger heard,” Ashlyn answered. “We can’t know for sure.”

“She’s with him.” Cresta’s voice was hard with certainty. “If anyone is a bastard enough to drag their defenseless sister into battle, it’s him.”

Before Kiva could question Cresta’s unexpected vehemence, Caldon appeared through the open palace doors, with Tipp, Naari, and Galdric close behind him. The latter three appeared relieved to see that Ashlyn had returned with Kiva and Jaren, but Caldon . . .

Kiva could only stare as he stormed down the palace steps toward them, his face a mask of fury. He came to a stop before where she stood with Jaren, his cobalt eyes spearing his cousin as he demanded, “Was it worth it?”

Baffled, Kiva looked to Jaren, who answered with two short, calm words: “It was.”

That was when Caldon’s gaze flicked down to where their hands were still linked, his anger bleeding away in an instant.

But still, he jabbed a finger at Jaren and said, “You could’ve just asked, asshole. You think I *wanted* to climb the damned mountain? You didn’t need to knock me out, especially when you know how sick undiluted moradine makes me. I puked for half the morning.”

Despite his words, he yanked both Kiva and Jaren into a fierce three-way hug.

“You’re both idiots,” he grumbled into their ears. “I don’t know why I love you. Frankly, I deserve better.” He then released them to place loud, smacking kisses on first Kiva’s and then Jaren’s cheeks, before saying, “No more lovers’ spats. My poor little heart can’t take it.”

Kiva stood stunned for a moment before she turned to Jaren, a question — and an accusation — in her eyes.

Flushing slightly, he confessed, “I may have fibbed a little about Cal over-imbibing at the party.”

Caldon snorted and muttered, “Over-imbibing my ass.”

Kiva’s eyes remained on Jaren, watching him squirm. Even with the threat they had just learned about, he still had it in him to be worried about her reaction. Seeing that, knowing he’d been so desperate to get her alone that he’d drugged Caldor, Kiva couldn’t help but shift up onto her toes and press a light, tender kiss to his lips.

“Y-YES!”

Before either of them could react, Tipp tackled them, nearly sending them to the ground. His arms locked around them, and he began jumping up and down, beaming so wide Kiva was sure it must have hurt.

“Don’t rush,” Cresta said. “It’s not like we’re in a hurry or anything.”

Her words were sharp, but when Kiva looked over, she found happiness in Cresta’s hazel gaze. The redhead had seen Kiva at her absolute worst, had known how devastated she’d been from having lost Jaren — and therefore understood better than anyone just how much it meant to Kiva to have him back now.

But still . . . Cresta was right. They *did* need to be on their way.

Together, Jaren and Kiva gently loosened Tipp’s grip until he was standing on his own, still with a blinding grin on his face. He seemed to realize, though, that it wasn’t the time to celebrate, and managed to rein in his delight as Galdric stepped forward.

“Did you get the ring?” the ex-rebel leader asked, his hair escaping its leather tie to fall in wisps around his fatigued face. Kiva wondered if he was strong enough to windfunnel them again so soon and prayed he could get them straight to Arden as planned.

“We did,” Jaren confirmed, just as Ashlyn, Eidran, and Torell joined their group, leading their horses and their spares.

“Time to go,” the princess said. She moved to her brother, pulling him into a quick, tight embrace, before doing the same to Jaren, rolling her eyes when they both made her promise to be careful. It was easy to forget she was the general of Evalon’s armies — right now, she was just a sister, cousin, and friend.

Kiva had seen Ashlyn fight; she knew the princess could handle herself. But as she watched her mount Spirit and prepare to depart, that didn’t make the fear Kiva felt for her any less. The fear she felt for *all* of them.

“See you in a few days,” Eidran said, his only goodbye to the group — though he did meet Kiva’s eyes, then slide his gaze to Jaren, before grinning

at them both. It was the first time Kiva had ever seen him smile, the expression enough to dazzle her until Jaren gave a pointed cough. She blushed and turned to see the amusement in his gaze, which only prompted her blush to deepen.

“There’s a reason Eidran prefers his solitude,” Jaren said just to her, humor threading his tone. “When he’s not careful, he ends up swamped by admirers.”

Kiva could believe that, since she was still fighting the powerful effect from just one smile. But she gave herself a mental shake as her brother approached, and left Jaren’s side so they could have a moment of privacy.

Tor opened his mouth, but Kiva got in first to say, “Promise me you won’t do anything stupid.”

His emerald eyes were solemn, but there was a hint of mirth there too as he replied, “Define stupid.”

“I’m serious,” Kiva said. “Ashlyn says you’re going to try and rally the rebels. But if it doesn’t work, if they won’t listen, if Zuleeka comes after you —”

“I promise,” Tor said softly. “As long as you promise, too.”

“I’m not the one riding into danger,” Kiva said, tacking on a silent *yet*. “Ignoring Zuleeka, if Navok’s anomalies attack, you’ll be fighting against elemental magic. That’s a battle not even you have faced.”

“We’ve been training for this,” Tor reminded her. “You don’t have to worry about me.”

“You’re my brother. I’ll *always* worry about you.”

There was nothing Tor could say to that, so he just opened his arms, pulling her into his strong embrace. She wanted to keep holding on, to keep him safe where she could always see him, but they were both aware that everyone was waiting, so they quickly broke apart and returned to the group.

Once there, Torell looked straight at Jaren and said, “Protect her.”

More serious than Kiva had ever seen him, Jaren replied, “With my life.”

Kiva would have huffed and reminded them that she’d survived for a decade in a death prison, if not for the meaningful look that was being shared between them, something that made her heart ache and feel full at the same time. When they finally nodded to each other, it wasn’t just as two people who cared deeply for her, it was also as two leaders, two warriors,

two princes. They had each earned the other's respect. Maybe even more than that — because after everything they'd been through, there was friendship there, too.

Tears burned Kiva's eyes, but she didn't let them fall.

"Love you, Mouse," Tor said, mounting his horse and backing away. "We'll be together again before you know it."

With that, he signaled to Ashlyn, and she summoned her magic, windfunneling the three of them out of sight.

Kiva released a slow breath and then looked to what remained of their group.

"Our turn," Naari declared, leading Zephyr and Nightshade over to Kiva and Jaren. "Everyone ready?"

At their confirmation, Galdric stepped forward, and Kiva tightened her grip on Zephyr's reins. The magic still hit her like a wall before lifting her into the air, the unpleasantness of the wind-travel never diminishing.

Unlike the trip down from the mountain, the distance between Lyras and Arden was considerable enough that when they finally landed outside the forest city, Kiva had to lean against Zephyr until her head stopped spinning. For the first time ever, he didn't try to bite her. She would have crowed with glee if their circumstances hadn't been so dire, and instead turned her attention to their final destination.

Nerine was a kingdom known for its lush forests, so it was unsurprising to see its capital surrounded by enough vegetation that it was difficult to tell where the woods ended and the city began. Even the buildings looked as if they were carved out of nature, with cylindrical bases meeting round rooftops, the heights and widths differing, all colored in earthy greens and browns and yellows.

Marveling at the view, Kiva thought there was something otherworldly, almost magical about Arden, especially with the luminescent orbs threaded along the moss-lined streets, like fireflies among the trees. And then there was the enchanting palace itself, rising high over everything, like a multi-leveled golden mushroom glinting in the fading afternoon light.

"It looks like a f-fairy-tale city," Tipp breathed.

Kiva nodded, sharing his wonder. More than any other place they had visited, she was eager to venture forth along the woodsy paths twisting toward the palace. But neither she nor her companions had the chance to so

much as mount their horses before a group of greenarmored guards rode out through a large timber gate to intercept them.

And it wasn't just guards — at their center was a matronly woman with a flower crown braided into her gray hair, her eyes a startling amethyst, her gown a pure, shining white, her bearing making her seem just as ethereal as the forest city she had come from.

“Queen Lorah,” Jaren said, bowing deep. It was the first time in all their travels that he'd used an honorific for any of the foreign rulers, as if he was deliberately trying to keep a polite distance between them.

“Jaren, dearest,” she said, her voice like chimes in the wind, “I've known you since you were a babe. How many times do I have to tell you to call me Aunt Lorie?”

Caldon coughed into his hand, but was unable to fully hide his mirth. Even Kiva had trouble repressing hers when she saw Jaren's discomfort, remembering how Ashlyn had said the queen adored him. Kiva had envisioned something very different — and from someone much younger.

Queen Lorah didn't wait for his response before she went on, “I was out riding with my guards when I saw you arrive in a — what was that? A whirlwind?” Her wrinkled forehead creased with uncertainty, but she shrugged, as if it hadn't been the strangest thing she had ever seen, and continued, “My curiosity was too piqued for me to wait. I simply had to come and see what brought you to me so unexpectedly.” She turned to Caldton. “You must have grown at least three inches since I last saw you, young man. You never come visit me anymore.”

“Allergies,” Caldton said with a straight face.

This time, it was Kiva who had to cough, unintentionally drawing the queen's gaze. But her amethyst eyes only lingered briefly before she peered around the rest of the group, from Naari, who she likely already knew, to Tipp, Cresta, and Galdric. Only then did she look back at Jaren and ask, “Would you care to explain your presence? Or would you and your friends prefer to ride back with me and we can catch up properly over tea?”

Since Lorah was still atop her horse, Jaren had to continue looking up at her from beside Nightshade as he answered, “Unfortunately, this isn't a social call — we have to return to Vallenia as quickly as possible.” He didn't ask if she'd heard any rumors about Evalon in recent weeks — or recent *days* — and only said, “We came for Sarana's ring. Do you have it?”

The brevity of his request in comparison to their three prior cities reminded Kiva of how urgently they needed to be on their way. She waited nervously for the queen's response, fearing yet another time-consuming challenge awaited them. But Lorah only cocked her head to the side, a furrow forming between her brows as she asked, "Sarana's ring?"

Dread instantly flooded Kiva. If Lorah didn't know about the ring, if it had been lost to time —

"She gave it to your family, long ago," Jaren said, as if hoping to jog her memory. His voice was steady, but Kiva knew his pulse must be pounding as fast as hers — and the same for the rest of their group, all of whom were dead silent. "It's vitally important that we retrieve it," Jaren went on, "so if you know where it is —"

Lorah just shook her head, causing Kiva's dread to grow. But then the queen arched a gray eyebrow and said, "You already know where the ring is, darling boy. Sarana never gave it to my family — she was going to, but she decided to keep it in yours."

For a moment, the only sounds Kiva heard were the buzzing of insects and the chirping of birds overhead, the normally relaxing forest noises doing nothing to soothe the panic that Lorah's statement caused within her.

Because with it came a memory:

A golden ring on Queen Ariana's finger.

The Royal Signet — one part of the Royal Ternary.

Which had been stolen by Zuleeka.

And then worn by Mirryn, the last time Kiva had seen them both, in the dungeons beneath the River Palace.

Kiva turned woodenly to Jaren, seeing the shocked realization on his own face.

"That can't be right," he said, almost desperately. "The Signet doesn't channel magic."

"None of the rings do, without each other," Galdric murmured, his voice weak. "On their own, you would never know what they're capable of."

Kiva looked closely at him for the first time since they'd arrived in Arden, noting that he was swaying on the spot, with sweat dotting his forehead. Windfunneling twice in two days had taken too much out of him, but he shook his head when he caught her worried look, reminding her that they had more immediate concerns.

“We need to ride for Vallenia, right now,” Jaren said in a hard voice. “I don’t know how we’ll get the ring from Zuleeka, but we —”

“Zuleeka doesn’t have it,” Kiva croaked out, drawing all their eyes. “Mirryn does.”

Both Naari and Caldon swore, but Kiva thought their odds of taking it from Mirryn were better than their odds of stealing it from Zuleeka. Jaren seemed to be in agreement, since his face, though pale, was determined.

“Would someone care to fill me in?” Queen Lorah asked mildly. “Jaren, darling —”

“I’m sorry, but we can’t stay,” Jaren interrupted, swinging up onto his horse. Kiva and the others quickly followed his lead. “Please forgive us. We must go.”

Ignoring royal etiquette — or *any* etiquette — he spun Nightshade in the opposite direction to Arden and took off down the forest path, with Kiva, Caldon, Naari, Tipp, Cresta, and Galdric close behind him.

At any other time, Kiva would have been disappointed about not venturing into the tree city, but now her only thought was to wonder how quickly they could make it back to Vallenia. Even if they rode hard all day and night, it would still take them days to cross the border into Evalon, and days more before they reached the capital. And now they wouldn’t even be arriving with the Hand of the Gods — nor would they be returning with Jaren in possession of his magic. Everything needed for a chance at keeping their kingdom safe was still before them, the uncertainty enough to make Kiva’s knees weak. But she tightened her thighs around Zephyr and silenced her troubled mind. With any luck, Galdric would regain his strength quickly and be able to windfunnel them a large portion of the way. That was her hope, desperate as it was.

Hours passed as they hurried through the thick Nerine forests, none of them speaking, taking only the shortest of breaks to rest their horses before setting off again. When night fell, they didn’t stop, using the glow of Kiva’s magic to keep from riding headfirst into any trees. Only when their horses were in desperate need of a proper breather did they finally take a longer break, grabbing a few short hours of sleep — though Kiva was unsure if any of them really slept.

Anxiety was thick in the air as the first traces of dawn had them up and ready to go again. Kiva wished she could offer comfort to her friends — especially to Jaren, who was tenser than she’d ever seen him. And then

there was Galdric, who, while no longer swaying, was clearly struggling with the pace of their ride. Tipp, too, looked as if he was about to topple right off his pony, but he stubbornly claimed he was fine when Kiva asked if he needed more time to rest. Aside from Jaren, only Caldon, Naari, and Cresta were handling the arduous journey, and that was with Kiva sending her healing magic into everyone at regular intervals, easing their tired muscles and boosting their energy.

Unfortunately, Kiva's power could do nothing to help replenish Galdric's magic. But finally, halfway through their third day of hard travel, right when Kiva herself wondered how much longer she would be able to last, he pulled them up and said, "I think I can windfunnel us now. I won't be able to take us the whole way, but I'll get us as close as possible."

A collective sigh came from their group, and they quickly dismounted and bunched together. His wind magic swept them up, more violent than ever before as he strained for every mile. When they finally landed at the edge of a different forest, Kiva swallowed her nausea and hurried to Galdric's side, right as he dropped to the ground.

"I'm all right," he said, panting hard and drenched in sweat. "I just need a minute."

"You need more than a minute," Kiva said sternly. She sent her magic into him, but other than slowing his raging pulse and bringing color back to his face, it did little to help. He didn't need healing — he needed *rest*.

Kiva turned to the others, taking them all in. Tipp was leaning heavily against Whistlefoot, both boy and pony looking as if they were two seconds away from collapsing. Jaren and Naari were pivoting around and murmuring to each other, trying to get their bearings. Cresta had one hand fisted around the sword Eidran had given her, the other clenching a dagger she'd picked up from someone else along the way, both weapons sheathed at her waist but her expression showing how desperate she was to put them to use. Only Caldon was looking back at Kiva, watching her with his brows raised in question.

She was about to share her thoughts, but Naari got in first, declaring, "This is the Emelda Forest, I'm sure of it. We're just outside of Oakhollow."

Kiva turned stunned eyes toward Galdric, amazed he'd managed to windfunnel them so far. But then a swarm of nerves hit her stomach,

because if they truly were near Oakhollow, then Vallenia was only half an hour away.

They were so close now.

Zuleeka was so close.

Kiva refused to let fear take hold. Instead, she said, “Tipp and Galdric can’t go on like this. They need to rest or they’re going to faint before we reach the city.”

“We’re so close, though,” Cresta said, echoing Kiva’s thoughts, her jaw clenching.

Kiva nodded and stood, walking directly over to Caldon. In a quiet voice, she said to him, and only him, “I need to get to Vallenia. I need to get that ring and use the Hand to give Jaren back his magic. And then I need to face my sister. This needs to *end*.”

“Why are you telling me what I already know?” Caldon asked, his eyes narrowing.

“Because I need you to stay here with Tipp and Galdric.” He immediately started to protest, so she quickly continued, “Jaren needs to be with me so I can use the Hand on him. And you know Naari won’t leave his side. As for Cresta” — they both looked at the redhead, who had already remounted her horse and was ready to leave with or without them — “she’s itching for a fight. She’s not going to listen if I ask her to look after them.”

Caldon crossed his arms. “And why do you think *I’ll* listen?”

“Because you might not feel much for Galdric aside from respect, but you love Tipp like a brother,” Kiva said, looking toward the exhausted young boy, his face smeared with travel dust, his hair like a red bird’s nest. “I need you to get him safely to the city and make sure he’s protected. Both your sword and your magic can ensure that.” She locked eyes with Caldon and whispered, “Please, Cal. I know I’m asking a lot.”

“At the risk of sounding arrogant, I’m one of the best fighters in the kingdom,” Caldon pointed out.

“I know — you trained me,” Kiva said softly.

“And you’re putting me on babysitting duty,” he said flatly.

Kiva chewed her lip and looked down at the leafy ground.

“Compromise,” he bit out. “I’ll wait until they can move, then I’ll get them to the city and stash them somewhere safe — but then I’m coming to you. I don’t care what you say, you’re going to need me. And even if you

don't, there's no way in hell I'm going to let you face your sister on your own. We're in this together, Sunshine. You and me. Got it?"

Tears blurred Kiva's eyes, and she lunged forward to embrace Caldon, whispering in his ear, "Thank you."

"Gods, why do you always cry when you're hugging me?" he muttered, patting her on the back. "We really have to work on that."

She eased away from him, smiling through her tears. "We will. I promise. But for now —"

"You need to go," he finished for her on a sigh. She knew he didn't like her plan — *at all* — but the fact that he was willing to listen, to protect Tipp, meant everything to her.

"I love you for this," she told him solemnly.

"You love me for a lot of reasons," Caldon said smugly. But then he turned serious. "No goodbyes. I'll see you soon."

She leaned up and kissed his cheek. "Soon," she agreed.

And then she strode over to Tipp and Galdric to say, "You're both staying here with Caldon to rest for a bit, and then you'll meet us in Vallenia."

Tipp shook his head blearily, but Kiva placed a gentle hand on his shoulder, moving in close to explain, "You know what I have to do, and I can't do that if I'm worried about you. Please, Tipp — I need to know you're safe. And I also need to know you're not going to tumble off your pony and break your neck. So wait with Caldon, just until you can stand without falling, and we'll be back together before you know it. All right?"

She could see he wanted to argue, but she held his eyes until he — reluctantly — nodded.

"B-Be careful," he said, his voice cracking with exhaustion.

"I will," she whispered, pulling him into her arms, then easing him down onto the ground. To Galdric, Kiva said, "Is there anything else I need to know about the Hand? Do I just put the rings on and send my magic through them?"

"As long as they already have Vallentis magic, that should be all you need to do," Galdric confirmed, his voice so weak it was barely audible.

Kiva squeezed his arm. "Thank you for pushing yourself so hard for us," she said, with feeling. "Now rest, and let Caldon take care of you. Healer's orders."

“Wait — Kiva —” he called as she began walking away. She turned and caught his soulful brown eyes as he said, “With your sister, don’t let her strike first. Don’t forget what she’s capable of. Don’t hesitate.”

Nerves returned to Kiva’s stomach — but determination steeled her spine. “I won’t.”

She then remounted Zephyr and listened as Jaren, Naari, and Cresta uttered brief goodbyes, before the four of them were racing along the road again, their path familiar this time as they left the forest and flew along the coastline. The day was clear, the weather perfect, and if not for what Kiva knew was ahead, she might have thought they were out for a pleasant midday ride. But then they crested the last sea cliff and saw Vallenia laid out before them.

There, they came to a sudden, shocked halt.

Because rising above everything else was the shining River Palace.

And it was on fire.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Navok had come.

That was all Kiva could think as she and her friends galloped the remaining distance to Vallenia, before tearing through the city streets and along the winding River Road at a harrowing pace, urgency thrumming them forward.

Ever since they'd learned that the Mirraven king was on his way, Kiva had prayed they would arrive before him, if only to be one step ahead before he ordered his anomalies to attack. But her hopes had been in vain. And now, not only did they have to get the final ring, but they would also have to face both Navok *and* Zuleeka.

At least the anomalies weren't attacking the city — *yet*. Only the palace was under fire, and the closer they moved to it, the more Kiva could see that the flames were contained to the barracks, the stables, and the grounds — on both the eastern and western sides of the river. Despite that, the streets of Vallenia were mayhem, with citizens screaming and running as far as they could from the center of the city. Kiva, Jaren, Naari, and Cresta were the only ones foolish enough to be riding *toward* the danger, but they didn't stop, pushing their horses faster until they finally reached the palace gates.

There was no one guarding them — and they were sealed tight.

Jaren cursed as they all quickly dismounted and rushed forward for a better look through the cast iron fence. Their view revealed a large portion of the extensive gardens bordering the path up to the palace, and while normally those gardens were perfectly manicured, right now they were in shambles. The earth was shifting and cracking, the plants unnaturally overgrown, many places raging with fire, others being lashed by river waves — and in the middle of it all were guards and anomalies fighting ferociously with both magical and mundane weapons.

Kiva recognized the dark armor of Evalon's soldiers and the silver of their Royal Guard, even the gray leathers worn by Navok's anomalies — and by his Gray Guards too, since not everyone fighting for Mirraven was using magic. There were no soldiers from Caramor, thanks to the

dissolution of their alliance, but Kiva's relief was brief, and it fled entirely when she spotted people dressed in everyday clothes. Her heart clenched when she saw the figure leading them, right in the thick of the battle, his sword raised as he roared instructions that she was too far away to hear.

Torell.

He'd rallied the rebels. And with him, fighting back-to-back, was Rhessinda, her braided ashy hair swinging wildly as she defended herself and her general.

Kiva wanted to tear through the fence and run to help them, but she knew she would be useless in large-scale combat, only getting in the way. That knowledge solidified as she watched Tor swing and parry and push back the Gray Guards, as he ducked and dodged magic from the anomalies, reminding her he was capable of handling himself. But still she longed to pull him to safety. He would never let her, though. She knew her brother — he would always fight for what he believed in. And right now, he was fighting for Evalon.

No — he was fighting for the Vallentis family.

Because there was Ashlyn, battling mere feet from him, her pale armor covered in mud and blood as she swung a sword in one hand and threw magic with the other, sending Gray Guards and anomalies flying, her loyal soldiers equally unflinching against their supernatural opponents.

"We need to get in there," Jaren said urgently, his knuckles white on the iron. "We need to help them."

It took everything in Kiva to say, "We can't — we need to get inside the palace. Our priorities haven't changed: the rings, Navok, Zuleeka."

"If we take Navok down, his anomalies will have no reason to fight," Naari said, watching the battle, her features grave. "Kiva's right — we can't lose time helping them. We need to head straight for the palace."

Cresta waved to the mess of bodies and magic. "How do you plan to get through *that*?"

Jaren's tension was palpable, but he tore his eyes from the fight. "We don't go through it." His gaze dropped to the ground. "We go under it."

Understanding hit Kiva, and she breathed, "The tunnels."

Only Cresta seemed confused, but she didn't ask questions as they remounted and raced to the hidden entrance at the rear of the palace. They had to leave their horses there, with Kiva giving Zephyr a quick, grateful pat before lowering herself into the iron grate. The secret passage was

pitch-black, just like the last time she'd traveled down it, but she swiftly called her magic to light their way.

None of them spoke as they ran along the narrow path and reached the fork Kiva had once taken to spy on the Royal Council. They didn't venture that way, instead continuing upward, ascending the steep, rocky steps until they finally exited through the creaky door leading into the larger underground thoroughfare that passed beneath the river, connecting the two sides of the palace.

There they paused, breathing hard and looking at each other in question.

"Where to now?" Cresta demanded, peering left and right along the luminium-lit, pillared space.

"We need to find Mirryn," Kiva panted. Jaren could fight well with his blades, but he could do so much more with his magic. Navok's anomalies were acting out of desperation — they'd lived in peaceful villages for most of their lives, and regardless of whatever training they'd undergone after being conscripted, they weren't equipped for battle, given what Kiva had seen aboveground. If they'd known how to use their powers effectively, they would have been slaughtering Ashlyn's soldiers and Tor's rebels with a wave of their hands. Instead, they'd been floundering, the damage real but trivial in comparison to what it *could* have been. Jaren, however, had spent his entire life training his magic in battle scenarios. Kiva had *seen* him down in these very tunnels, practicing against his family. If she could return his powers, then he could —

"But where *is* she?" Cresta asked through gritted teeth. "And don't forget Navok. I need to —"

"This way," Jaren interrupted, running forward again, heading west.

Kiva doubted he had a plan other than to get them aboveground, but she said nothing and just bounded after him, aware that Cresta's patience was wearing thin. She wasn't sure why the ex-quarrier was so on edge and could only assume it had something to do with their Zalindov days and the redhead's overzealous thirst for violence. Cresta needed to be part of the battle, not watching from the sidelines. But Kiva knew they wouldn't be remaining that way for long. Because as soon as Navok realized they were there . . . as soon as *Zuleeka* realized they were there . . . and specifically, that *Kiva* was there . . .

Cresta would have her chance to fight; Kiva was sure of it.

Sprinting to the end of the tunnel, the four of them ran up yet more stairs until they were finally aboveground again, in the shining white and gold entrance hall of the western palace. But before they could make it any further, the ornate front doors burst open, and Eidran and Captain Veris stumbled backwards through them, fighting off six gray-clad opponents, none of whom, thankfully, appeared to have any magic.

Jaren, Naari, and Cresta lunged forward, unsheathing their swords and jumping straight into the fray. Kiva barely had time to blink, let alone consider how she might help, before all six Gray Guards were on the ground. She didn't look at them as she moved stiffly to join her friends, her healer's compassion at war with her logic, even if she knew there was nothing she could do for them now.

Veris was panting fiercely, but he still managed to bob his chin in a short bow toward Jaren. "Your Highness, General Ashlyn said you were on your way."

Eidran's chest was heaving as he looked at Jaren and reported, "The anomalies' training is limited, but their numbers are overwhelming. And they came with an entire legion of Gray Guards. We won't be able to hold them off for much long —"

That was all he managed before more gray-leathered warriors flooded through the doors, weapons raised, the battle outside now feeding into the palace.

Jaren shoved Kiva back just as two men roared and charged toward him. He dispatched them with ease, before taking on two more, all while Naari and Cresta fought fearlessly beside Veris and Eidran. But no matter how many Gray Guards they brought down, still more appeared through the doors.

"Where's Navok?" Cresta shouted to the captain, barely audible over the sounds of crashing steel and pained groans.

Veris didn't question who she was, only yelled back, "Last I heard he was locking Serafine in the library, but that was a while ago — he could be anywhere now!"

Cresta grunted as she kicked a man in the chest, sending him flying. Before anyone could stop her, she bolted out of the entrance hall — not through the doors to the battle on the grounds, but deeper into the palace.

"*Cresta!*" Kiva screamed after her, incredulous. Did she really expect to find Navok in the multi-floored labyrinth of the palace? There were two

sides, for everworld's sake. As Veris had said, the Mirraven king could be *anywhere*. And even if Cresta *did* find him, what did she intend to do? He would almost certainly be surrounded by anomalies — she wouldn't even get *close* to attacking him.

But as much as Kiva feared for her foolish, headstrong friend, she was now also concerned for the rest of them, since still more warriors were pouring through the doors, and this time there were magic wielders among them. Unable to just stand there and watch, she rushed forward, scanning the ground for a fallen weapon. But before she could make it two steps, the marble tiles cracked open under her feet and she had to scurry backwards again.

"Where's my sister?" Jaren yelled to Eidran, hacking at the vines trying to creep up his legs.

"Queen's chambers," Eidran called back, flinging a dagger toward a fire elemental, his aim lethal. "She's unguarded, but —"

He didn't finish before he was thrown across the room by an air anomaly, who Naari immediately turned her attention to, cutting the woman down before she had another chance to use her magic.

Eidran shook himself off and leapt back into the fray, just as Jaren ran out of it, dashing over to Kiva and tugging her behind a pillar, momentarily hiding them from sight.

"We need to go," he said, panting.

Kiva took in the war zone happening around them and shook her head. "They need you here."

"But —"

"I can't help with this fight," Kiva cut him off, "but I know how to get to the queen's chambers. Eidran said Mirryn is unguarded — I'll be fine. I can do this." Her pulse spiked at the thought of going on alone, but they would only be apart for a few minutes, and what she'd said was true — he was needed here, and she was not.

Jaren glanced at their struggling friends, before turning back to her, his eyes conflicted. But he finally nodded and reached into his pocket, withdrawing the leather pouch containing the first three rings and pressing it into her palm. "Get the Signet, then come find me." He leaned in and gave her a fierce, desperate kiss, before pulling back again and ordering, "If Zuleeka comes out of hiding, you run. You don't face her without us there to back you up, understand?" He didn't wait for her to agree before he

touched the amulet at her chest. “And whatever you do, don’t take this off. Mirryn is worse with a blade than you are. As long as you’re wearing this, she won’t be able to hurt you.”

Since the amulet was still imbued with Caldon’s and Ashlyn’s magic, Kiva knew it would keep her safe from anything but water. She wasn’t afraid of facing Mirryn, but as she stared back at Jaren, her courage wavered at the thought of leaving him, however briefly. She didn’t fear for herself, but she *did* fear for him. And not just him — there was also Naari and Eidran and Veris, who were fighting just beyond the pillar; Torell and Ashlyn and Rhessinda, who were outside battling on the grounds; and Cresta, who had vanished to gods knew where. Kiva’s only relief was that Caldon, Tipp, and Galdric were still making their way to Vallenia, safe from the innumerable enemy that the rest of their friends were facing. But that wasn’t enough to calm her, not when everyone else was in such imminent danger.

“Go, Kiva,” Jaren said softly, seeing the worry growing in her eyes. He kissed her once more, the barest of lip touches. “Go.”

With that, he turned and ran straight back into the fight, where even more Gray Guards had arrived, but so too were there now more silver-armored Royal Guards to help balance the numbers. Regardless, Eidran, Veris, and Naari were being swarmed, and Jaren immediately dove in to aid them.

Kiva allowed herself two seconds to watch his sword fly, seeing how capable he was even without his magic and telling herself that nothing would happen to him, nothing *could* happen to him, before she spun on her heel and sprinted away.

She barely noticed the white and gold hallways blurring by, the portraits on the walls, the statues standing at attention, focused only on racing as fast as she could along the lengthy palace corridors and up the red-carpeted staircases. Higher she rose, her lungs screaming with every floor she passed, until finally she was bolting along the passage she needed, the gilded doors of the queen’s chamber now in view and coming closer with every step.

Kiva paused only long enough to shove them open, sending them slamming back against the walls as she bounded straight through.

But what she saw on the other side had her staggering to a halt.

“What?” she breathed, the word more a gasp given her heavy panting.

Slower now, Kiva moved further into the room, peripherally aware of the familiar opulence surrounding her, the high ceilings and lush carpets, the lavish fireplace and the crystalline piano, the full windows that looked straight out at the gardens — which were still raging with the battle — and the river, right where the bridge spanned between both sides of the palace. But Kiva barely noticed the room or what was happening beyond it; her attention was solely on the three people draped across the queen’s red velvet couches.

Kiva hadn’t known what to expect upon her arrival — she’d assumed she would find Mirryn alone and had planned to wrestle the ring from her. What she hadn’t imagined was that not just Mirryn, but also Ariana and young Oriel would all be in the room — and she *certainly* hadn’t anticipated that all of them would be asleep.

Except . . . that wasn’t what this was. Because as Kiva edged closer, she could see the black shadows swirling around them.

Zuleeka’s magic — just like the unnatural coma forced upon Naari.

Kiva shuddered at the reminder of how powerful her sister was, but she pushed her dread aside and hurried toward Mirryn. As she passed Oriel, she leaned down to check his pulse, only to jump back again when Flox leapt out from behind a cushion, the normally placid silverbear hissing and swiping at her.

“Easy, boy,” Kiva said, retreating from his sharp teeth and claws. “I’ll free them in a minute.” First she needed to take advantage of Mirryn being unconscious.

Closing the distance between them, she looked down at the golden-haired princess, belatedly realizing that something must have happened between her and Zuleeka if she’d ended up on the wrong side of Zuleeka’s magic. So much for them being equal partners — equal *queens*.

Despite her curiosity, Kiva couldn’t spare a thought to that now, and reached for Mirryn’s hands, searching, searching, searching.

But the princess wore no ring.

In desperation, Kiva patted down her clothes and checked the pockets of her blue gown, but there was nothing, making Kiva curse with awareness that she now only had one option — she would have to wake Mirryn and ask where it was. If Zuleeka had taken it . . .

Don’t think about that, Kiva told herself, not needing another reason to panic. Instead, she summoned her magic and sent it into the princess,

focusing on banishing the shadows and reversing Zuleeka's power. She then guided her healing light toward Ariana and Oriel, unwilling to leave them cursed for a moment longer.

It was a mistake, Kiva knew, as the shadows evaporated.

Not because Mirryn was now blinking and sitting up, nor because the queen and her son were doing the same. But because, after days of hard travel with limited rest, Kiva hadn't realized how low her energy had dropped. And using that much magic at once, even if it had come easily to her —

She swayed on the spot and flung a hand to her forehead.

Kiva couldn't remember the last time her power had taken so much out of her. Ever since she'd learned to fuel her magic with positive emotions, it had become nearly effortless for her, barely a drain, only making her tired after the longest of training days. But now she was feeling it.

And with Zuleeka still at large, it was the worst possible time for Kiva not to be at full strength.

It was too late to take it back, though, so Kiva spent a moment breathing deeply and assessing how she felt, relieved to find it wasn't as bad as she'd feared. She couldn't explain it, but it was as if she could *feel* her magic replenishing itself, almost like it knew the threat she would soon be facing and wanted to be ready. She might have wept, if she weren't so aware of the three stunned royals in the room, all of whom were staggering to their feet.

"Mama!" Oriel cried, stumbling toward Queen Ariana with a much happier Flox in his hands. His mother pulled him close as he burst into tears, the tender action enough to steal Kiva's attention for the barest of seconds.

But then she turned back to Mirryn, who was standing shakily before her, looking nothing like the haughty, imperious young woman from all their previous interactions.

"What are you doing here?" the princess breathed. Her blue eyes flicked to the windows and widened when she saw what was happening on the grounds. "What's —"

"Where's the Royal Signet?" Kiva interrupted.

"I — what?" Mirryn's face was pale as her gaze snapped back to Kiva. Something came over her then, and she lurched forward to grab Kiva's hands, saying with urgency, "I tried to stop her, I swear I did. I made a mistake — the worst mistake I've ever made. But when I tried to fix it —"

when we tried to fix it” — her eyes filled with tears as she glanced toward her mother and brother — “Zuleeka was ready, and she attacked us before we could use our magic on her. I tried — we tried —” She released a broken sob. “Please, Kiva, you have to believe me. I made a m-mistake.” Another sob left her, tears now trickling down her face as she whispered, “Navok p-promised I could be with Serafine. He lied. Everything I did, everyone I h-hurt, was for nothing.”

Kiva didn’t know how to feel about the princess’s heartache — or about her seemingly genuine remorse. A part of her couldn’t help softening toward Mirryn, especially because of her own terrible mistakes and the guilt she’d carried for so long. But Kiva was also aware that now wasn’t the time for them to be discussing this.

Prying her hands from Mirryn’s fierce grip, Kiva looked from her to where Ariana and Oriel were still standing together, both visibly shell-shocked, before saying, “We can talk about that later, but right now, Navok is here. The palace is under attack.” She gestured toward the windows and the battle raging on the grounds, the fires having spread, the earth more cracked and flooded than ever, with armored bodies warring — and many lying still. “I don’t have time to explain why,” Kiva went on, “but I need to know where the Royal Signet is.”

“I have it,” Ariana said instantly. She didn’t ask questions, not even to confirm whose side Kiva was on, indicating Mirryn or Zuleeka must have already shared where Kiva’s loyalties lay. Instead, all the queen did was hold up her hand, revealing the ring sitting on her finger.

Kiva’s knees nearly buckled. In that moment, she realized Mirryn’s remorse hadn’t been an act — if she’d given the Signet back to her mother, then that meant Zuleeka no longer had possession of the whole Royal Ternary, nullifying the clause that allowed her to keep the throne.

But considering everything, Kiva doubted anyone cared about the ancient law anymore.

Shaking off her thoughts, she moved straight to Ariana, pulling the other three rings out of the leather pouch until they tumbled onto her palm. The queen’s sapphire eyes widened, the shock, the *awareness* telling Kiva that Ariana knew exactly what they were — and what they could do.

But before either could demand an explanation from the other, Galdric strode through the doors to the queen’s chamber, his eyes shifting from

Kiva's palm to the queen, whose hand was still in the air, the four rings visible for all to see.

His weathered features stretched into a grin. "Looks like I arrived just in time."

Kiva gaped at him, failing to grasp how he could be there. He was meant to be resting near Oakhollow — or at the very least, slowly making his way to the city. Perhaps stashed away in whatever safe place Caldon found if they'd made good enough time. *Anywhere* but walking into the queen's chambers, as if he'd known exactly where Kiva was. But she didn't get a chance to ask how any of that was possible, because more people stepped through the doors, at least a dozen, all in gray leathers, none of them bearing physical weapons.

Anomalies.

And behind them was King Navok, sauntering into the room to stand beside Galdric, a satisfied smirk on his handsome face.

But Kiva didn't care about Navok.

She didn't even care that he and Galdric were smiling at each other, not as a king and his once-prisoner, but in a way that told her they weren't enemies at all — and perhaps never had been.

Instead, the only thing Kiva cared about was Tipp.

Because Navok was holding the young boy close —

With a dagger pressed to his throat.

"Tipp!" Oriel cried, dropping Flox and lunging toward his friend, but Ariana hauled him back, right as Navok's anomalies came on alert.

"Uh-uh-uh," the king tutted to all three Vallentis royals, tightening his grip on Tipp. "My personal guards are trained to kill without hesitating. You so much as try to summon your magic, and they'll take you down without a thought."

A quick glance, and Kiva knew Navok wasn't lying — these anomalies were different from those outside. Their motives were unclear, their intentions dark and deadly. She knew that, because Xuru was among them, the fire wielder looking at her with anticipation in his black eyes.

Kiva's pulse began to pound in her ears as she turned back to Tipp, taking in his red, puffy face, and the tears streaming down his cheeks. It wasn't fear in his expression — it was something much worse.

Devastation.

Anguish.

Grief.

Seeing all that, Kiva's blood turned cold. Because she knew — *she knew* — there was only one reason for him to be looking at her like that. She held his eyes and croaked out, "Where's Caldon?"

Fresh tears fell as Tipp opened his mouth and uttered two quiet, broken words:

"He's d-dead."

Chapter Twenty-Nine

For a moment, Kiva heard nothing except the ringing in her ears. She was aware of Ariana turning white and Oriel going limp in his mother's arms, of Mirryn's hands covering a horrified gasp. But all Kiva could do was stare at Tipp, seeing the confirmation in his swollen red eyes.

"I'm afraid the boy is correct," Galdric said, unaware that she had stopped breathing, stopped *thinking*. "It was really too easy — I can't believe any of you bought my exhausted act. As if I wouldn't have made sure I had enough energy to windfunnel the entire way here and then still have power to spare." He snorted mockingly. "The moment you and the others left, all I had to do was moan, and the arrogant prince came running to check on me. He never even saw my blade coming."

Kiva shook her head.

No.

She refused to believe it.

Caldon was strong — he was one of the strongest people Kiva knew. He'd survived stab wounds before. *She'd* stabbed him once, and he'd been fine. She had to believe —

"Granted, it was only a shallow wound —"

Kiva nearly collapsed from relief.

"— but there was enough necros venom lacing the tip to bring down an entire army."

The ringing returned to Kiva's ears, louder this time, her vision blurring with it.

Necros venom — from a necros adder.

A single bite could kill a full-grown adult.

In seconds.

"*No.*" This time she said the word aloud, her voice unrecognizable. "I don't — I don't believe you." She was trembling all over, her body reacting to what her mind refused to accept.

"That doesn't change the truth," Galdric said, shrugging. "The prince is rotting in a ditch right now." A laugh left him as he pointed to Tipp. "This

one tried to shove water down his throat, even as he choked on his last breaths. Water! As if that was going to do anything!” Another laugh. “So much for all the years he spent as your assistant. The boy clearly has a lot to learn. But in his defense, nothing short of your magic would have saved the prince — there’s no cure for necros venom in all of Wenderall.”

More tears rolled down Tipp’s face, but Kiva’s eyes remained dry. Not because she didn’t feel like joining him, but because she *couldn’t*. What she felt was too much, too consuming, the thought of Caldon being *dead* —

A sob left Ariana, reminding Kiva that Caldon’s family was standing right there.

But she couldn’t think of that.

Couldn’t think of him at all, rejecting what she’d just been told, ignoring the truth in Galdric’s gloating smile, the agony in Tipp’s eyes. Instead, she welcomed the numbness spreading through her veins, knowing it was all that kept her from crumpling to the ground. Through stiff lips, she rasped a single word: “Why?”

“Why did I kill the prince?” Galdric asked, before carelessly answering, “One less Vallentis brat to get through. You gave me the perfect opportunity when you asked him to stay behind. Thank you for that — as I said before, you made it too easy.”

Kiva didn’t let his words penetrate, not that they could have made it through the ice overwhelming her entire body.

Caldon was dead.

Caldon was dead.

Even through her numbness, Kiva could still feel her heart cracking in her chest.

But somehow, she forced out, her voice hoarse, “No — why all this? Why are you here with Navok?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Galdric answered, cocking his head to the side. “I’ve been playing you from the very beginning.”

Kiva flinched, even if she’d already come to realize as much.

“I loved your mother — I never lied about that,” Galdric said, his tone softening, before it hardened again. “But when she started having second thoughts, when all she could think about was freeing you to heal Zuleeka, when she began to wonder if her own bloodline even deserved to rule, that was when I knew — the rebels were always better off with me as their leader.” His face darkened. “My family has served the Corentine bloodline

for centuries, all the way back to Torvin's era. But of all the generations, *I* was the one who unified the rebels, *I* was the one who found us a willing heir of royal blood. And your mother *was* willing — until she wasn't. She cared too much for her family. That was her weakness. And her undoing."

Kiva swallowed at the look in his eyes, but Navok spoke then, sounding bored.

"Can we hurry this along?" He pressed his dagger deeper into Tipp's throat until a drop of blood appeared on the blade, causing the young boy to wince and Kiva's stomach to lurch.

"Patience, my friend," Galdric said. "She deserves to understand."

"We're not friends." Navok's light brown eyes flashed. "And I don't care what she deserves. You can give her the full bedtime story later."

Galdric sighed, then turned back to Kiva and said, his words faster than before, "Everything I told you was true, how Tilda went to Navok to make a deal. But I didn't follow her out of loyalty, or even out of love. I followed her because I intended to make my own deal."

Kiva's hands were fisted now, the rings cutting into her palm, her focus shifting between Galdric and Navok.

"I'd heard how interested Mirraven's new king was in magic, so I went there to bargain with him, offering information about the Hand of the Gods," Galdric explained. "He'd already made his agreement with Tilda, and thus already intended to get you out of Zalindov, wed you, and use you against Zuleeka, but now he had a new reason: that being, only you can use the rings."

"Yes, yes," Navok said, impatient. "We made a deal: Galdric would act like my prisoner, and you would free him — don't look so surprised, you're too predictable. It was easy to rough him up a bit, and even easier to make you think I was trying to stop you from escaping, when really that was the plan all along." His voice turned bitter. "Though even I can admit I didn't realize Ashlyn had infiltrated my palace. She'll pay for that soon."

Navok glowered at the carpet, but then his face cleared as he continued, "After you freed Galdric, he was to tell you about the rings and how *desperately* important it was for you to keep them away from dangerous little me." The king's smile was a slash of teeth. "He was then to help you collect all four of them, with his reward being that you will use the Hand on him first while my army wipes the Vallentis family and their loyal soldiers off the map, leaving the throne open for the true rebel leader to take the

crown. Without a Vallentis or a Corentine to rule them, Evalon's citizens will bow down to any king with elemental magic — and thanks to you, he'll have that magic."

"That's our bargain," Galdric told Kiva. "Both of us get magic, but I get Evalon, while Navok gets the rest of Wenderall, taking one kingdom at a time, building his anomaly army as he goes."

"And I get one more thing, too," Navok said, his eyes snaring Kiva's. "After destroying your sister, you will rule by my side. I have an agreement to keep with your mother, after all. Not even I would risk breaking a deal with the dead."

Kiva was breathing heavily, disbelief giving her the courage to demand, "Why would I help with *any* of that? You can't force me to use my magic. You can't *make* me —"

Galdric interrupted, his voice knowing, "Because you have the same fatal flaw as your mother: you care too much about your family."

Tipp cried out then, as Navok's blade dug deeper, the blood no longer a drop, but a smear.

"NO!" Kiva cried, rushing forward, but she stopped at the warning look in Navok's eyes.

"There are four people in this room who you care about enough to not want to see them dead," the king said. "We will go through each of them if we must. And if that doesn't work, we'll go after him." His gaze flicked to the window, and Kiva looked out, doing a double-take when she saw the gilded bridge that had been empty before, but was now covered with Gray Guards and anomalies, with only a handful of silver Royal Guards and black-leathered soldiers barely managing to hold them off. As she watched, a wall of water rose from the Serin and slammed into half of them, causing warriors from both Evalon and Mirraven to tumble straight over the railing, while others merely paused their attacks to brace, before continuing on with even more fervor.

All of that, Kiva took in within the space of a blink, because it was the person fighting at the center of it all who captured her horrified notice, right where Navok had indicated.

"Jaren," Oriel whimpered, seeing his brother for the first time in over three months.

Kiva had thought she couldn't feel any worse after seeing Tipp with a blade at his throat, after hearing that Caldon was —

No.

She slammed down on that thought, knowing she couldn't deal with it on top of everything else. For now, she had to live in denial. Caldor would be the first to tell her to concentrate on the challenge in front of her, and anything else could come later.

Her fear, her panic, her dread — that was what had to hold Kiva's attention right now, none of which she'd thought could possibly become worse.

Until she'd seen Jaren on that bridge.

Because at the eager look in Navok's eyes, Kiva knew exactly what he would do if she didn't obey.

One by one, she would be forced to watch everyone she loved suffer and die until she gave Navok and Galdric what they wanted. She would never survive the guilt, the heartache. But she also knew that if she *did* obey, if she used the Hand to give them magic, if she chose the people she cared about over the entire kingdom, the entire *continent* . . . nothing would be able to stop them.

And that would be her fault.

"It's all right, Kiva," Ariana said, barely a whisper. "Sarana knew this might happen one day. Everything will be all right."

Kiva only shook her head miserably, because Ariana was wrong — *nothing* about this was "all right." But when she turned to the queen, expecting to see a reflection of her own dismay, all she found was an unnatural calm in Ariana's eyes, almost like the queen was trying to send her a message, but Kiva couldn't understand what that message was.

With their gazes still locked, Ariana pulled the Signet off her finger and held it out.

Kiva stared at it like it was a snake.

"Take it," Galdric ordered, stepping closer.

Navok remained where he was, his hold on Tipp unyielding, his anomaly guards close at his sides.

Kiva didn't take the ring.

Couldn't take the ring.

But then Tipp cried out again, and the cut on his neck grew deeper, blood now dribbling slowly down his collar.

Kiva snatched up the ring.

“Wait, it needs her magic first,” Galdric remembered. To Ariana, he said, “You know what to do. But don’t think of trying anything else. Just the ring.”

The queen nodded and reached out to touch the band. There was no large gem like the others in Kiva’s palm; instead, the gold was stamped with the Vallentis crest — the identifying mark of the Royal Signet — and embedded with tiny blue sapphires that Kiva had never noticed before, all of which came alight with Ariana’s magic before they faded once more. The whole time, the queen continued to hold Kiva’s gaze, speaking to her without words.

But Kiva still didn’t know what she was saying.

Until Ariana’s gaze shifted, for the briefest of seconds. Barely a flicker of movement, not enough for anyone else to see, but enough for Kiva’s own eyes to widen.

Sarana knew this might happen one day.

Thoughts and memories and questions slammed into Kiva, Ariana’s words holding new meaning now, even if she hardly dared to believe, hardly dared to *hope*.

“You know what to do, Kiva,” Galdric said, his eyes gleaming with anticipation. “Put the rings on and push your magic into them — and then into me. That’s all it will take. As easy as breathing.”

Right now, Kiva was struggling to breathe at all, so his statement meant little. But she continued holding Ariana’s steady eyes, her reassurance strong and unyielding, causing Kiva’s confidence to grow even as her heart thundered behind her rib cage.

“If you don’t put those rings on in three seconds,” Navok drawled, “I’m going to need a new hostage.”

Kiva’s pulse skipped, and at Ariana’s quick nod, she put the rings on.

Ruby. Topaz. Emerald. Sapphire.

The Hand of the Gods.

“Incredible,” Galdric breathed, staring at her fingers.

He reached for her, and she recoiled, but he didn’t let her escape, taking her wrist and pressing her palm to his chest.

“Do it,” Galdric ordered.

Kiva resisted.

“Do it, or the boy dies,” Navok threatened.

But it was only when Ariana whispered, “Do it, darling,” that Kiva listened.

Praying she had read the queen right, that her own questions and suspicions from the last few weeks held merit, Kiva sucked in a breath — and summoned her magic.

The moment the golden light appeared in her hand, the rings came to life, the healing glow shining fiercely through them, creating a kaleidoscope of color — red, white, green, and blue. It was so bright that it lit the whole room, a rainbow blaze that Kiva had to shield her eyes from. Her fingers *burned*, the pain surprising and alarming. She would have yanked her arm back, if not for Galdric holding her palm forcibly against his chest, refusing to let her go.

And then it stopped.

The pain vanished, the colors disappeared, and Kiva carefully released her magic, the glow fading once more.

“Did it work?” Navok demanded.

“I — I don’t know,” Galdric said, his brow furrowing.

“Shouldn’t you feel it?” the Mirraven king asked. “Try summoning something. Fire, air, water, earth. *Do something.*”

But when Galdric concentrated, nothing happened.

He turned furious eyes on Kiva. “What did you do?”

“Exactly what you asked,” she said, her fear ratcheting up again at the murderous look on his face.

“You’re lying. You must have —” He broke off suddenly to glare at Queen Ariana. “You,” he spat. “You know something. Sarana was your ancestor — tell me how to make it work.”

Ariana looked terrified now — on the outside.

But Kiva could see the triumphant light in the queen’s eyes, something only visible because she was looking for it.

“Answer him,” Navok said, “or I’ll have my anomalies turn your children to dust.”

Ariana blanched, her expression making Kiva worry for a moment that she might have misread the queen earlier. But that same light was still in her eyes, the only reassurance Kiva had.

“You have to put the rings on,” Ariana told Galdric, her voice almost *too* shaky. “They needed to be imbued with both Vallentis and Corentine magic, but you have to physically wear them in order for her healing power

to transfer the elemental power into you. That's how the Hand works — *you* have to be the one wielding it.”

Galdric's zealous eyes returned to Kiva. “Give them to me.”

Kiva did so, praying, once again, that the queen knew what she was doing.

One, two, three, four, Galdric placed all the rings on his fingers, staring down at his hand before looking back at Ariana. “Now what?”

The queen immediately stopped shaking, her lips tipping up into a sharp, deadly smile as she said, almost sweetly, “Now you get to meet Sarana and Torvin.”

Galdric frowned and opened his mouth —

But the only thing that came out was a scream.

The rings had caught fire, the flames blazing up his arm to cover his entire body.

It lasted all of five seconds, the ancient magic powerful and near-instant, before both Galdric and the rings were nothing but ash.

Kiva stood there, staring down at the pile of gray on the carpet, certain she was going to vomit.

But she didn't have time, because Navok roared, “*WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?*”

And then all hell broke loose, since Flox decided *that* was the moment he was going to protect his charges, the silverbear leaping forward to sink his teeth into Navok's leg.

The Mirraven king yelped and automatically used his dagger to swipe at the creature — but in doing so, Tipp became free.

Which was what Ariana had been waiting for.

“*NOW!*” the queen yelled, and suddenly, water, wind, and earth were erupting in the room, with her own magic along with Mirryn's and Oriel's shooting straight for the anomalies.

Kiva acted instinctively, using the chaos to lunge forward and grab Tipp, hauling him backwards to duck behind the crystalline piano. From there, she peered out to see the anomalies returning fire on the Vallentis royals, ice spearing through the air, marble falling from the ceiling, wind tearing through the room. Xuru was throwing his flames with abandon, causing the carpet and couches to catch alight, the smoke cloying even after Ariana's water snuffed the blazes out.

All the while, Navok continued slashing uselessly at Flox, who was bounding between his legs and attacking with claws and teeth, the image of which would have been hilarious if the room hadn't been exploding around them.

Kiva realized then: the Vallentis royals had been biding their time until Tipp wasn't at risk of Navok's blade, and now they had been unleashed. Even against an overwhelming number of opponents, they were a force to be reckoned with, having trained their whole lives for a magical battle like this, just like —

Jaren, Kiva realized. She had to get to him. But first —

"Ariana!" Kiva cried, waving to the queen, who had been forced to the far side of the expansive room, where she was holding ground in front of the fireplace.

The monarch was surrounded though, too distracted to hear Kiva's call.

Oriel, however, was close enough to come running, and he dove behind the piano with them, wide-eyed but still sending his magic out to help his family.

Knowing what she had to do, Kiva looked at Tipp, holding his scared eyes as she ordered, "Don't move from this spot, do you hear me? Not until it's safe."

At his immediate nod, she looked to the young prince and begged, "Look after him."

"I will," Oriel promised solemnly, before lobbing a boulder at an anomaly who had noticed them hiding and was headed their way. The rock struck the man hard in the head, taking him off his feet — and he didn't get up again.

Kiva didn't linger, rising from her crouch and sprinting across the room. A gust of wind slammed into her, but it did nothing, the magic in her amulet protecting her. But then a wave of water came from one of Navok's anomalies, crashing against her and pushing her to the ground. Mirryn was there in an instant, tugging her up and throwing out a hand, sending the anomaly flying.

"All right?" the princess asked over the sounds of shattering glass and cracking walls.

"I need to get to your mother," Kiva choked out, drenched and coughing.

"I'll cover you," Mirryn said, propelling Kiva forward.

Running again, Kiva dodged as much of the magic as she could, aware that she couldn't risk the amulet becoming depleted. Not if it was what she thought it was.

Finally arriving across the room, she sought shelter behind a crimson chaise next to the fireplace where Ariana stood tall and proud, fighting anomaly after anomaly, even as more poured into the room from the hallway.

"It was never the rings, was it?" Kiva called to her, remembering the queen's words — *Sarana knew this might happen one day* — along with the single flick of Ariana's eyes, when her gaze had moved downward for the briefest of seconds.

Toward the amulet.

"It was, once," Ariana panted as she jumped over a whipping vine before slicing it in half with an ice blade. "But instead of giving them away, Sarana had replicas made, a dead-man's trap should anyone seek to use them. She melted the real rings down, keeping them in our family to protect us in other ways."

Kiva touched the amulet, her suspicions proving true: she'd been wearing the Hand of the Gods all along.

"Does it still work?" Kiva asked. She'd never once tried to push her magic into the Vallentis crest, had never even *considered* it. But if it wasn't the Vallentis crest, if it really was the *Hand* . . .

Ariana dodged a javelin of flames and threw a spear of water back, before kneeling beside Kiva and pressing her finger to the sapphire, the gem glowing blue as she sent her magic into it, completing the protective power of all four gemstones.

Still panting, the queen said, "It will work, but only once. Sarana knew melting the real rings down would mean diminishing the Hand's power, but she considered that safer than risking it falling into her enemy's hands." Ariana's eyes held Kiva's as she declared, "You have one chance. Make it count."

And then the queen was up again, meeting the attacks of two more anomalies.

Kiva didn't wait to see them fall — she was already running from the room.

You have one chance. Make it count.

The words echoed in Kiva's ears as she bolted out the doors and along the white and gold corridor, hearing Navok's thunderous shout as he bellowed her name. She nearly lost her footing when she realized he was chasing her, and peered over her shoulder just in time to see Xuru launch a fireball her way. It slammed into her from behind, her vision turning red and orange before the amulet sucked the flames harmlessly away.

Kiva didn't look back again. On she ran, never slowing, not even as the fire kept coming, along with water and wind and earth from more of Navok's personal guards. But the amulet protected her from every attack — their magic couldn't touch her.

That didn't mean she wasn't scared out of her mind. But still, she ran, the entrance to the bridge coming into sight, with it extending from the same floor as the queen's chambers, a straight shot across the river to the eastern palace.

And then there was Jaren.

Kiva could see him now, a blade in each of his hands as he held off the Gray Guards and anomalies at the highest point of the arched golden bridge. She couldn't see Veris or Eidran, and didn't recognize any of the other Royal Guards or black-leathered soldiers fighting alongside Jaren, though she did see Naari beyond him, nearer to the eastern palace, surrounded by a slew of gray-clad opponents.

Finally reaching the bridge, Kiva flung herself into the mess of bodies, avoiding not only the magic flying everywhere, but also the weapons. The amulet wouldn't protect her from a blade, but she couldn't think about that, running, running, *running* straight for Jaren.

And then a gap opened up, right in front of him. She screamed his name so he knew she was coming, unwilling to risk him thinking she was another attacker as she leapt through the air toward him. His eyes rounded as he caught her, stumbling backwards as her weight slammed into him, somehow managing not to stab her with either of his swords.

"Kiva — what —" he gasped.

She didn't give him the chance to finish, yanking the amulet from her neck and slamming it against his chest, summoning her magic and pushing it through the crest.

Light, blinding light assailed her eyes, so bright she had to shut them. Liquid warmth traveled down her arm, like syrup dripping in the sun, pouring from her fingertips straight into Jaren.

A second was all it took before she felt the amulet crack beneath her hand, the light fading enough for her to reopen her eyes and see the crest broken into four parts, one for each of the gems — one for each of the rings.

You have one chance. Make it count.

The amulet's power was gone, the Hand of the Gods no more.

But Jaren —

The gold in his eyes was blazing as he stared at her, as he realized what she'd done.

Then, with a wave of his hand, three Gray Guards that Kiva hadn't seen leaping for them went sailing over the side of the bridge.

Jaren looked down at his palm, the wonder on his face enough for a sob to leave her.

His magic was back.

And not a minute too soon, because Navok had reached the bridge, his personal guards parting the battling opponents, their combined magic aimed right for where Kiva and Jaren stood.

Time slowed down as Kiva watched a wall of flames speed toward them, as she saw a tornado whip the Serin into a bubbling fury that rose like a death wave, as the bridge cracked and groaned under their feet. All the while, she was acutely aware that the amulet could no longer protect her.

But she didn't need it. Because with another flick of Jaren's hand, the wall of fire went sizzling into the water tornado, the wave crashed harmlessly back into the river, and the marble beneath them stilled.

While the battle continued across the grounds, silence descended on the bridge as everyone in view — Mirravens *and* Evalonians — all reeled from Jaren's effortless defense against the powerful magic.

Only, it hadn't been effortless.

Kiva was close enough to hear his labored breathing, to feel him shaking with fatigue.

She realized then: his magic might be back, but after being so long without it, he wasn't at full strength. He needed time to build his power back up. What he'd just done had been instinctive, a reaction based on years of training, but he didn't have the energy to sustain that kind of magical desperation, especially after having fought nonstop since their arrival at the palace. He was exhausted, which meant both his magic and his body

wouldn't be able to hold out indefinitely. Another attack like the one they'd just endured . . .

Kiva knew Jaren would give everything to keep his people safe, to keep *her* safe. But she also knew there was a limit to what even he could give.

Navok seemed to be just as aware, because he signaled to Xuru and the rest of his personal guards to keep them from attacking again, then he stepped into the space they'd cleared. The warring on the bridge remained paused, as if everyone from both sides was holding their breaths, waiting to see what would happen next.

The Mirraven king walked slowly toward Kiva and Jaren, his hair like bronze flames atop his head, his eyes a storm of rage.

Jaren tried to push Kiva behind him, but she didn't budge. She was the reason for the fury on Navok's face, the reason he would never receive the magic he longed for, or grow his elemental army. The anomalies he had now were all he would ever have — and they were diminishing by the minute, a quick glance at the grounds revealing them being cut down by the Royal Guard, Ashlyn's soldiers, and Tor's rebels. If not for Navok's Gray Guards defending their magical brethren, the fight would nearly be over. But there were just too many warriors on Mirraven's side — and too few on Evalon's. Even with Ariana and Mirryn having now joined the fight, using their powers to defend and attack, their enemy was still too great.

"Do you see what's happening here?" Navok called to Jaren, stopping a careful distance away and gesturing toward the war-torn battleground. "It's only a matter of time before my army destroys yours. With or without the Hand of the Gods, I will take this city, this kingdom, this *continent*."

Kiva shivered against Jaren, not just from Navok's words, but from his *certainty*. There wasn't a trace of doubt in his eyes, as if their end was inevitable.

The king gestured again. "Look around," he said, his rage turning into arrogance. "*I* made this happen. I killed my own father when he was too weak and spineless to take action, and then I spent the last eight months sending my warriors out to the furthest reaches of Wenderall to build my army of anomalies. I've been planning for this day my whole *life*. And you —" Navok sneered at Jaren, then finished, "Even with your magic, you are but a single ember facing an inferno. You can't hope to defeat me."

Jaren's face was set with determination, but before he could respond, another voice beat him to it.

“He can’t. But I can.”

Kiva stilled at the words — and at the sight of their owner stepping onto the bridge.

It was Cresta.

At her side was Serafine, the princess’s face splotchy from crying, but there was a wide, radiant smile on her lips, as if she couldn’t contain her joy.

Seeing that smile, Kiva didn’t understand. Nor did she understand why Navok suddenly looked as if he was staring at a ghost.

Cresta’s hazel eyes locked with his as she murmured something to Serafine, causing the princess to nod and disappear back into the palace. Only then did the ex-quarrier step forward, no one stopping her as she approached the king, halting a few feet away.

Kiva looked between them, her heartbeat turning erratic as her eyes began to see what her thoughts struggled to comprehend:

Their identical sharp jawlines. Their long, straight noses. Their wild, rugged beauty.

It wasn’t possible. It *couldn’t* be possible.

Cresta just watched Navok, fierce and unflinching, waiting for him to speak.

When he did, his voice was strangled as he rasped out, “You’re supposed to be dead.”

A dangerous slash of teeth stretched across her mouth as she said, loud enough for them all to hear, “Hello to you too, brother.”

Chapter Thirty

Brother.

Navok Kildarion was Cresta's *brother*.

Kiva gaped at them, then turned to Jaren, seeing the stunned disbelief on his face. He hadn't known. *None* of them had known.

Things weren't good at home.

Cresta's voice sounded in Kiva's mind, a memory of the history she'd once shared. The father who had abused her — that was *King Arakkis*. That meant Serafine was the sister he had considered weak and worthless. But . . . Cresta had never mentioned a *brother*. Kiva would have remembered that, would have been *curious*. As it was, she couldn't believe she hadn't had the first suspicion about who Cresta was, even after all their time together.

It's easy to hide what you don't want others knowing, Cresta had said, weeks earlier. *You of all people should know that.*

All along, the truth had been right there, hidden among her lies.

Except, as Kiva strained her memory, she realized that, aside from withholding key details — like how she had a *brother* — Cresta had never outright lied. She'd claimed to have no family anymore, but she'd never once said they'd *died*. Kiva had been the one to read into her words and not ask questions, too caught up in her own troubles to consider looking deeper.

In one night, I lost everyone but my mother.

Kiva knew the story: that Arakkis's wife had been so afraid of him that she'd fled, abandoning her family, with it rumored that she'd been hunted and killed soon afterward. Only, the tale was wrong — she hadn't been killed, and she hadn't fled alone; she'd taken Cresta with her. They'd left everyone behind. Even Serafine.

Now that Kiva thought about it, she realized Cresta must have run from the entrance hall earlier not to find Navok, but to find her sister, having bolted off straight after Captain Veris had shared about the king locking Serafine in the library.

I was all my sister had.

Kiva still remembered the pain in Cresta's voice when she'd spoken those words — pain not because her sister was dead, as Kiva had assumed, but because they had been separated. Why, Kiva didn't know, but as she watched Navok and Cresta staring at each other, she waited with bated breath to find out.

“Father killed you that night,” Navok said, his voice still rippling with shock. “He told me he lost his temper, that Serafine tried to stop him, but by then, you were already broken beyond repair. That's why Mother fled. She couldn't stand to look at him after that.”

There was no hint of emotion on Cresta's face as she said, “I guess we were both lied to, because when I regained consciousness, Mother told me *Sera* was dead. That was why she took me from Blackmount, to keep us safe from him — and *you*.” She tilted her head. “Can you imagine how it felt when I finally learned the truth? That *Sera* was alive? That she'd been left alone with not one, but *two* monsters?” Cresta's gaze slitted. “I wanted to come back and rip you both apart, but unfortunately, I wasn't in a position to do so.”

Zalindov, Kiva realized, her heart hurting for her friend. Cresta must have found out about Serafine sometime during the five years she'd been locked away.

“Luckily for me,” Cresta went on, “you've already taken care of Father.” A feline grin touched her lips. “And now I'm going to take care of you. Mirraven has seen too many tyrant kings — it's time for that to change.”

Before anyone could process the threat in her words, Cresta declared in a loud, carrying voice, “By the laws of the country to which we were born, I, Crestoria Vossendi Kildarion, challenge you, Navok Arakkis Kildarion, to the blood duel.”

Waves of tension hit Kiva from all directions, with the gray-clad Mirravens on the bridge sucking in shocked breaths, and even Jaren turning solid beside her.

This time it was Queen Ariana's voice in Kiva's mind, words she'd spoken months earlier during the Royal Council meeting beneath the palace: *Mirraven law states that if anyone of royal blood challenges the ruling monarch and defeats them in combat, they can claim the throne as their own.*

Cresta had challenged Navok, just like he had once challenged his own father. If she triumphed over him —

She would become queen of Mirraven.

Kiva stared at her friend, recalling how obsessively she'd been training since leaving Zalindov.

There's always going to be someone stronger than you. It doesn't hurt to be prepared.

Cresta had been preparing herself — for *this*.

A laugh left Navok, dark and ugly. Kiva expected him to oppose the words, maybe even give Cresta a chance to rescind her challenge. But instead, he said, “You always were a brash, foolish child.” He returned her feline grin, his sharp and feral as he added, “I didn't mourn you the first time. I won't this time, either.”

And then he moved lightning-fast, pulling a dagger out of nowhere and flinging it straight at her.

Kiva screamed a warning, but there was no need, because Cresta had predicted the underhanded move. She pivoted to the side, the blade flying past her to sink deep into the chest of one of Navok's guards, making him cry out and stagger backwards into another, before collapsing to the ground.

Madness descended then, with Cresta unsheathing her blade and charging toward her brother just as he pulled out his own sword, the two meeting in a clash of steel. But they weren't the only ones — their attack had broken the spell on the bridge, and suddenly everyone leapt back into action.

Jaren grabbed Kiva and pressed her against the railing, yelling at her to keep down as he stood in front of her, using his swords and magic to fight off the Gray Guards and anomalies flinging everything they had at him. By unspoken agreement — or perhaps Mirraven's laws — none of them aimed their powers at Cresta, leaving her and Navok to their duel without interference. Kiva watched in amazement as the redhead — the *princess* — slashed and stabbed, blocked and ducked, jumped and lunged, meeting every one of Navok's attacks and returning her own. All the while, the bridge succumbed to mayhem, with Jaren pushing his magic to its limits to keep the anomalies from tearing it apart beneath them and sending them all into the river.

Kiva's ears rang with the crashes and groans of metal and bodies, her nose stung from the smell of sweat and blood, her eyes burned from the fire

and water flashing across her vision. Through the railing, she spotted Torell and Ashlyn, closer to the palace now, near to where Mirryn and Ariana were throwing their magic more slowly than they had in the queen's chambers, their fatigue catching up to them. Kiva prayed Oriel and Tipp were hiding safely inside, perhaps wherever Cresta had told her sister to run to when she'd sent her away from the fight. But not even the palace was safe. Because as Kiva watched, a crack formed at the base of the western residence, cleaving upward through the luminium-fortified surface, all the way to the highest tower. The bridge shook in response, the river roared, but then it stilled just as quickly when the anomaly responsible was brought down by a blood-splattered Rhessinda.

It was then that Kiva lost track of her friends and brother, the pandemonium on the grounds too difficult for her to keep up with, and the danger facing her too real to not be giving it her full attention. Because while Jaren was trying desperately to hold off their attackers, they were now coming at him from both sides, and his already strained magic was beginning to splutter into wisps and embers, before finally failing him completely. Even with the Royal Guards and Evalonian soldiers helping to beat back their opponents, he wouldn't be able to keep up his defense for much longer. And Kiva couldn't just keep hiding behind him like some pathetic damsel waiting for a rescue.

Ignoring his order to stay down, she lunged for the nearest body and claimed the fallen woman's sword. It was heavy in her hands, but that didn't stop Kiva from swinging it madly when a Gray Guard ran toward Jaren's unprotected side, her lack of technique irrelevant. An image of the golden warrior she'd killed in the arena came to her, along with Naari's words: *Kill or be killed*. Knowing this was the same, Kiva didn't hesitate to slash her blade toward the man, aiming low and slicing straight through his leather boot to sever his Achilles tendon. He roared and dropped his weapon to clutch at his leg, the sound causing Jaren to spin around with wide eyes — and then his eyes widened even more, but not in surprise at what she'd done.

In *fear*.

Kiva had just enough time to turn and see Xuru's flames heading for her, to feel dread pool in her stomach, to brace for her flesh to be seared off her bones — but that never happened. Because Jaren, no longer having

enough magic to combat the flames, jumped in front of her, shielding her with his body.

She still felt the heat of Xuru's attack, could smell her hair burning, even had to slap fire from her sleeve, despite being otherwise unharmed.

But Jaren —

She dropped her sword as he fell and wrapped her arms around him from behind, an agonized moan leaving him as she helped slow his descent until he rested on the ground.

"*No, no, no,*" she breathed as she saw the damage to his chest, his black leather armor disintegrated from his waist up, his exposed torso nothing but pulpy blood mixed with black ash and melted skin.

Kiva swallowed back bile and made herself look instead into his half-closed, pain-filled eyes. "This is f-fine. You're fine."

He wasn't fine. And neither was she, because they were still in the middle of a warring bridge, and Xuru was now walking toward them, a smirk on his face, his hands lit with more flames that he was readying to throw.

But he didn't get a chance, because his smirk transformed into a silent scream as a sword pierced his chest from behind.

Naari's sword.

The amber-eyed guard didn't wait for his body to crumple before she ripped out her blade and sprinted the remaining distance to Kiva and Jaren, swinging her weapon to defend them from a new wave of approaching warriors.

Kiva drew in a trembling breath and used Naari's cover to summon her magic. Her golden glow was blinding as it poured into Jaren, eliciting another moan, but one of relief this time.

Please, please, please, Kiva begged her magic, willing it to hurry.

She felt the weakness come over her again, just like when she'd awoken his family, but she pushed through it, coaxing her power to mend his flesh. It took only seconds, but in the midst of the battle, it felt like hours, until finally, *finally*, his chest was smooth, the skin pink and fresh, the burn completely healed.

Kiva's magic faded, leaving her lightheaded and swaying, with Jaren reaching out to steady her. There was a worried look on his face, as if he hadn't been the one to have half his torso melted away only moments ago.

“I’m all right,” she told him, but her voice sounded faint. She needed to rest. They *all* needed to rest. But Navok’s army was relentless — as was Navok himself. He and Cresta were still dueling fiercely, both now covered in bloody cuts and grazes, neither appearing to be making any headway.

But then they stopped.

Everyone stopped.

Because suddenly, out of nowhere, the bridge was covered in shadows.

No, Kiva thought as her limbs froze unnaturally in place, her terrified eyes meeting Jaren’s. Both of them were still on the ground, with her crouched beside him, but they had a view straight over to the eastern side of the bridge. The space there was much clearer now, with the western half and the midsection being the most congested. It meant Kiva had no trouble seeing around the small handful of inert warriors, her gaze settling on the person strolling unhurriedly between them.

Zuleeka.

Chapter Thirty-One

Kiva's dread was like a snake squeezing her chest as she watched her sister move slowly forward.

Zuleeka's black hair was braided over one shoulder, her moon-pale skin almost luminous against her dark armor and the shadows swirling all around her. With every step, she ignored the soldiers and guards and anomalies who were like statues, many of them having weapons raised mid-strike. She didn't even spare them a glance.

Not now, Kiva thought desperately, aware of how drained her power was. She'd been counting on Zuleeka remaining locked away, seeking to protect herself until the battle was over, just as Ashlyn had said. But here she was, her hawkish face tilted to the side, her honey-gold eyes shining even from a distance.

"I thought I saw your magic through my window," Zuleeka called across the bridge. "Have you come to play, little sister?"

The snake around Kiva's chest tightened as she realized Zuleeka had been drawn out by her own healing glow, the sight too tempting to resist. There was madness in her eyes, but Kiva didn't know if it was a result of the dark magic corrupting her blood, or if she'd finally realized that all the power in the world couldn't keep her in command of a kingdom. Regardless of who won the battle that day, Evalon was no longer hers.

But seeing that madness, Kiva knew Zuleeka didn't care. She wasn't going to surrender.

And there was only one person who could stop her.

Summoning her magic, Kiva freed herself from the shadows holding her. It was effortless now, her training having paid off, even if it cost her in strength. But she ignored the lightheadedness and stood. She also ignored the way Jaren was looking at her, his eyes pleading with her to free him, to not do this alone.

But this was one battle he couldn't protect her from, and she wouldn't risk Zuleeka using him against her.

Not this time.

“We don’t have to do this, Zuleeka,” Kiva said, walking slowly toward her sister. She knew the words would fall on deaf ears, but she was stalling, trying to give her magic a chance to replenish as much as it could. “Mother never wanted this for you. For either of us.”

Zuleeka bared her teeth. “You don’t know what she wanted.”

“I know more than you think,” Kiva said, passing a trio of Gray Guards, their eyes frightened. “For example, I know the reason she tried to free me from Zalindov was so I could save *you*.”

Scoffing, Zuleeka said, “I don’t need anyone to save me. Not when I can do this.”

With a wave of her hand, the two anomalies nearest to her were released, but new shadows speared toward them, causing them to clutch at their chests, gasping and choking, before they crumpled to the ground.

Dead.

Kiva tried not to react, but horror flooded her at her sister’s merciless attack. They hadn’t even been able to defend themselves. And Kiva — she could have stopped it. But she’d been too slow, hadn’t even *thought* of calling her own magic. It was a mistake she couldn’t afford to make again.

“Mother lost sight of our goals,” Zuleeka said, her eyes even more crazed now, as if every bit of magic she used darkened her soul further. “She couldn’t appreciate the true power we possess — Torvin’s deadly power, now ours to command. Mine and yours, Kiva.” She leaned forward, her face feverish. “You don’t need to save me, little sister — not when you can *join* me.”

Once again, Kiva was careful not to react, even as everything within her recoiled.

“Let go of your weak healing magic and embrace the shadows,” Zuleeka continued, her voice worshipful. She held out a hand, summoning a wisp of darkness and staring at it adoringly. “Together, we’ll be unstoppable — and we’ll take everything that belongs to us.”

Kiva tensed at the sight of the shadows, but steadied herself. *Wait*, urged a quiet voice in her mind.

“That’s the thing, Zulee,” Kiva said softly. “It *doesn’t* belong to us.” She looked toward the armies still battling on the grounds, with them having no idea that the bridge was facing an entirely different threat. “Those are your rebels down there, but they’re not fighting for you. That’s Tor leading them, having earned that right — having earned their *respect*. But even so, that

doesn't mean he's earned the kingdom. It's not ours; it was *never* ours. And I think Mother realized that. She was willing to give it up if it meant keeping you from destroying yourself." Whispering now, Kiva held out a hand and said, "Let me help you, Zulee. Just like Mother wanted."

For a moment, Kiva thought she might have been getting through to her sister.

But then Zuleeka's face darkened and she said, low and dangerous, "Mother never should have turned her back on our bloodline. She was a traitor — and so are you. If you won't join me, then you can join *her*."

With that, Zuleeka flung out her hand, her dark, deadly magic closing the distance between them. But Kiva was ready. Her heart ached as she thought about Caldon, how he'd made her practice over and over with his flames shooting toward her. He was the reason she was able to react fast enough now, sending her healing light forward to meet Zuleeka's shadows, dissolving them in the air.

The look of stunned surprise on her sister's face would have been satisfying at any other time.

"Looks like you've learned some new tricks," Zuleeka hissed, her honey-gold eyes flashing.

And then she attacked again.

Shadow after shadow speared toward Kiva, with her own power pouring out, keeping the death magic at bay — but only *just*. The assault was unending, causing sweat to drip down her brow, her hands to shake, her knees to weaken. But still, strike after strike, she continued to summon her light and hold her sister back.

Then, suddenly, Zuleeka loosed a frustrated roar and banished the darkness over the bridge, inviting the reawakened chaos. The soldiers and anomalies were disoriented for the briefest of moments before they launched back into their own attacks, with Cresta and Navok furiously renewing their duel. Kiva could see Jaren sprinting toward her, but he was waylaid by a group of Gray Guards, forced to engage or be skewered by their blades. And then she couldn't watch him anymore, her sister's shadows coming at her again, more viciously than ever before.

"Why — won't — you — just — *die!*" Zuleeka grunted between attacks, moving closer with every strike. Soon she was within spitting distance, and that was when she did something Kiva didn't expect — she touched a Royal Guard running past, her magic working too fast for Kiva to

keep the woman from death, after which Zuleeka snatched up her fallen sword and stabbed it forward.

Kiva jumped to the side and frantically scanned the ground for a weapon, but then Naari was there, leaping to intercept Zuleeka's blade.

Zuleeka roared again and fought back with a vengeance. Seeing them pivot around each other made Kiva remember the feud between them — how years ago, Zuleeka had taken Naari's hand, and just months ago, had forced her into a magical coma. Naari was out for blood now, but Zuleeka was a deadly opponent, her magic *and* her swordsmanship a lethal combination.

Kiva did everything she could to keep the shadows from touching Naari as she battled Zuleeka, remaining close enough to nullify her sister's dark power all while dodging the magical and mundane attacks occurring around them. Her own power began to splutter, but she reached deep within herself, begging for more, despite knowing she couldn't continue for much longer. What they were doing wasn't *working*. Even with Naari's help, Zuleeka wasn't weakening, and no one else was free to lend their strength against her. Jaren was still surrounded by guards, his magic fully depleted. Cresta was lost in her duel with Navok, her entire focus on her brother. Everyone else was out on the grounds, too far away to offer any aid. And Kiva's magic . . . what remained was like a candle flickering in the wind.

Love. She needs to focus on love.

Caldon's voice whispered across her mind, causing a sob to catch in her throat. She couldn't think about him now, or how one of the last things he'd said was that he wouldn't let her face Zuleeka alone: *We're in this together, Sunshine. You and me.*

Only, he *wasn't* there. And she *was* facing Zuleeka without him.

Kiva's heart cracked all over again.

But she now also knew what she had to do.

Love. She needs to focus on love.

Despite her training, all the magic she had left was currently being fueled by desperation — but it needed more than that. For light to grow, it needed *more* light.

I want you to think of a memory, Jaren had told her, weeks earlier, *a good one.*

A memory filled with love, Caldton had added.

Even in the midst of the battle, that wasn't difficult for Kiva — because all she had to do was think of *them*.

Jaren and Caldon.

Tipp and Naari.

Cresta and Torell and Ashlyn.

All the people so dear to her, who had fought with her — and for her. She thought of kissing Jaren on the mountaintop, of crying in Caldon's arms. Of Tipp's gap-toothed smile and Naari's fierce protection. Of Cresta's unexpected friendship, Torell's unflinching loyalty, and Ashlyn's unearned kindness.

They were her hope.

They were her strength.

They were the reason she would not give up.

Could not give up.

And when Zuleeka finally managed to get a lucky swipe in, slashing her blade across Naari's torso and sending her staggering to the ground, Kiva didn't hesitate. One arm shot out toward the guard, golden light stitching the wound back together, while her other arm pointed straight at Zuleeka, all the love and hope and strength she was feeling coming out of her in a blaze as bright as the sun, striking her sister in the chest.

Zuleeka dropped her sword and went down onto a knee, a shriek leaving her as she scrambled to summon her shadows.

Dark and light.

Light and dark.

Zuleeka continued resisting, and fear tried to overwhelm Kiva, but she wouldn't let it, thinking only of those she loved, of the strength that love gave her.

And then, suddenly, Zuleeka's shadows were gone.

Kiva tipped forward from the unexpected lack of resistance, nearly losing her footing.

The bridge battle continued around them, but it was as if they were in their own bubble as they stared at each other, chests heaving with exertion, emerald eyes locked on honey-gold.

Kiva's pulse was racing, the question of *Is it over?* flooding her mind. She was aware of Naari trying to get up but not yet able to, of Jaren finally being free of opponents and sprinting her way. But her gaze remained only

on Zuleeka, who was still kneeling in defeat, looking up at her with emotion-filled eyes.

Her shadows were gone.

Her death magic burned away.

Healed.

Kiva stood there, shaking, hardly daring to believe it, not even when Zuleeka opened her mouth, her voice a broken rasp of sound.

“Everything I did was for our family,” she whispered. “Everything I achieved — everything I *wanted* — was for us.”

Kiva swallowed. “It was never yours to want.”

Zuleeka didn’t hear her. Didn’t listen. Her tone changed, becoming as hard as steel as she hissed, “You tried to take that from me. So now I’ll take everything *you* want.”

A loud, pained cry made Kiva’s head whip to the side just in time to see Navok’s stunned face as Cresta pulled her blade from his chest, his hands clutching at the mortal wound before he stumbled backwards — right over the railing and into the river below.

Cresta had done it.

She had defeated Navok.

She was queen of Mirraven.

That meant she could call off the battle — *immediately*.

But then Kiva realized her own fatal mistake, and turned quickly back to Zuleeka, seeing what the distraction had cost her.

Because in her sister’s hands was a familiar dagger, something Kiva had forgotten about with all the dangers surrounding them, despite it being the one weapon they all should have taken care to remember.

The Eye of the Gods.

With a wicked, lethal grin on her face, Zuleeka threw the blade into the air.

But it wasn’t aimed at Kiva.

Now I’ll take everything you want.

Zuleeka’s words echoed in Kiva’s ears as she saw the trajectory of the blade, knowing she had a fraction of a second to make a decision.

She didn’t hesitate.

Because the Eye was aimed at Jaren. The one weapon that could take away his magic — *again* — and this time, there would be no hope of

getting it back. He wouldn't just lose his powers, he would lose his right to rule. And that was something Kiva couldn't accept, couldn't *allow*.

So she dived in the path of the blade.

Pain — burning, *blinding* pain lanced through her as she landed hard on the bridge, but it wasn't just the agony of the dagger lodging deep into her stomach; it was the ice cold feeling of her magic screaming in her veins. She could feel the Eye sucking it up — could feel it leaving her, being *stolen* from her.

And then it was gone. From one moment to the next, like it had never been.

A sob left Kiva, but she didn't have a chance to mourn what she'd just lost, nor to be concerned about the numbness spreading outward from her wound. Instead, it was fear she felt — because Jaren should have reached her by now. Naari should have scrambled over. Even Cresta should have come running.

But Kiva was alone, the bridge quiet and still —

And covered in shadows.

No, she gasped inwardly as Zuleeka approached, a triumphant, crazed smile on her lips.

She'd never been defeated; her death magic was as strong as ever.

Another sob left Kiva, this time not just from pain and loss, but also devastation.

Because she had failed.

And now, she didn't have anything left to give, her healing power gone forever.

Zuleeka stopped when she reached Kiva and crouched down beside her, trailing a gentle, mocking finger down her face.

Kiva couldn't move away, her body too weak, her pain too great. It took everything within her just to clutch at her stomach, trying to staunch her own blood.

“That was silly of you,” Zuleeka cooed. “Believe what you want, little sister, but I *am* sorry it's come to this. If only you'd joined me, none of this would have happened.”

Kiva coughed, and blood bubbled out of her mouth, dribbling down her chin.

She knew what that meant.

Knew she didn't have long.

. . . And knew what she had to do.

Turning her neck was all she could manage, but it was enough for Kiva to lock eyes with Jaren, seeing him frozen only a few feet away, Zuleeka's magic stopping him mid-sprint. His gaze was terrified, his face as white as a sheet, standing out in stark contrast to the fresh pink of his healed chest. She tried to speak to him silently, telling him how much she loved him, that he was worth what she'd just done, how sorry she was for what was about to happen. But then her sister continued speaking, and Kiva painstakingly looked back at her.

"Don't worry," Zuleeka said, her eyes amused as they flicked toward Jaren. "I won't make him suffer. Consider it my very last gift to you — a quick death for your beloved." She leaned down then, pressing her lips to Kiva's forehead, before whispering in her ear, "Goodbye, sister."

That was when Kiva spoke, managing to rasp only two words. "Goodbye, Zuleeka."

And before her sister could realize what she was doing, Kiva used the last of her strength to rip the dagger from her own stomach, the sudden pain of it worse than before, worse than anything she'd ever experienced, but she made herself slash upward, even as Zuleeka's eyes widened and she lurched away.

She was too slow, the blade swiping across her cheek.

It was a shallow wound, barely a scratch.

But it was enough.

An almighty scream roared from Zuleeka as she slapped her hand to her face, the shadows on the bridge instantly receding into her, like spilled ink being sucked back into its pot. Within the space of seconds, her power vanished without a trace, everyone it had held captive free again — and forever.

The next instant, Zuleeka was being tackled to the side by Naari, but she didn't fight this time, her body limp and unresisting.

It was over.

It was *done*.

And then, suddenly, Jaren was there.

"Kiva, sweetheart, look at me," he begged, cupping her face, his hands shaking. "Stay with me. Don't close your eyes."

He shouted then. Not at her — he shouted for help.

More hands were on her, Cresta's hands, pressing hard against her abdomen. She was yelling something, yelling at Kiva, but Kiva couldn't understand, her thoughts thick and sluggish. She knew she should feel pain, should have been in agony. But there was nothing.

Just blood.

Lots and lots of blood.

It was all Kiva could see.

Until her eyes closed.

And then —

Darkness.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Pain.

Blood.

Yelling.

Silence.

For seconds, minutes, hours, days, Kiva knew nothing, floating in a sea of oblivion, her eyelids fluttering open and closed, each time revealing someone different.

Jaren, Tipp, Cresta, Torell, Naari, Ashlyn.

They spoke with her, begged and pleaded, but she couldn't comprehend their words, couldn't return them. She wanted to feel relief that they were there, that they'd survived the battle. But she also wanted them to be quiet so she could fall back into her blissful nothingness, where there was no pain, no fighting, no fear.

Just peace.

Other faces hovered over her, unfamiliar people dressed in white robes and smelling too clean, coming and going while murmuring in low, worried voices. Only one she recognized, a dark-skinned elderly woman with a kind face behind wire-framed spectacles. Something about her was soothing, reassuring. But Kiva's dreamlike state meant she couldn't remember why.

A hand was holding hers.

Lips were touching her cheek.

Blue-gold eyes were staring down at her.

A broken voice was whispering in her ear, telling her how loved she was, telling her to hold on.

Jaren.

She wanted to comfort him. To wipe away his tears.

But the darkness claimed her again.

And this time, it kept her.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Kiva awakened slowly, her eyelids feeling weighted down. She fought to open them, blinking once, twice, three times until her blurry vision cleared enough for her to see where she was.

Silverthorn, whispered an exhausted part of her mind, the small window in her private room revealing the familiar garden sanctuary at the center of the healing campus.

Part of her wondered how she had come to be there, her weary thoughts attempting to fill in the blanks of her memory, all while making her aware of the muted ache in her middle. But the other part of her was more insistent, demanding that she focus on the person sitting in the chair beside her bed — the last person she expected to see there.

Because it was Caldon.

He was paler than a corpse, his golden hair a tousled mess, but his cobalt eyes were sparkling as he drawled, “I leave you alone for a few hours, and look what happens.”

Kiva stared at him.

Stared and stared and stared.

And then her face crumpled and she burst out crying.

He swore and leapt up from his seat, sliding onto her bed and carefully — so very carefully — drawing her into his arms.

“We talked about this,” he said into her ear, one hand moving soothingly up and down her arm, the other holding her close. “No tears while I’m hugging you. That’s our rule.”

“I th-th-thought you w-were d-d-dead,” Kiva blubbed, the muted pain in her middle becoming less muted as her body heaved, but she couldn’t hold back the tide of what she was feeling. Everything she’d repressed upon learning of Caldon’s death rose to the surface, fear and horror and anguish, all now overcome by relief so acute that she could barely breathe.

“I nearly was,” Caldon said quietly, using his voice and his touch to comfort her. “I’ll tell you what happened, but only if you calm down. Your

body needs to rest, and if you get too worked up, Healer Maddis is going to storm in here and yell at me again.”

“A-Again?” Kiva asked, hiccupping.

“I’m technically not supposed to be out of bed,” Caldon shared. “But Jaren was needed at an emergency Royal Council meeting, and I promised him you wouldn’t be alone, even if sitting here has been as entertaining as watching paint dry.” His eyes caught hers, mirth filling them as he said, “You drool in your sleep — did you know?”

Kiva didn’t have it in her to be embarrassed. But she was finally able to stop her tears and ask, her voice hoarse with disbelief, “How are you here? Galdric said —”

“Ah, yes, *Galdric*.” Caldon’s eyes darkened. “Aunt Ariana told us what the rings did to him. Couldn’t have happened to a nicer man.” His anger fled as quickly as it had arrived, and he answered, “I’m here because of Tipp. He saved my life.”

That wasn’t what Kiva had expected, especially since it was Tipp who had told her of Caldon’s demise. He hadn’t been acting — she’d seen the grief in his eyes, the tears streaming down his face.

“He didn’t *know* he’d saved me,” Caldon said, noting her confusion. “I think he cracked one of my ribs when they went to collect my body and found me breathing. For someone so small, he sure is strong. Like a leech.”

“But, *how*?” Kiva asked, still not understanding. “Galdric said he used necros venom. There’s no cure for that. He said — He said —” She strained her mind, feeling fatigue press in on her. “He said Tipp tried to give you *water*. There’s no way that —”

“It wasn’t water,” Caldon said. “Do you remember when we were at the Midnight Markets, how Tipp snuck away while you were getting the ring?”

Kiva wouldn’t forget that night in a hurry, and she nodded.

“Well, while you were off serenading the moon or whatever the hell you were doing, we ran around in a panic looking for him, only to find him back with the Mystican. Apparently, they enjoyed quite the conversation, which included her handing him a vial of liquid and telling him to put it in his waterskin ‘on the morning of the ninth day,’ and that he was to use it ‘when the snake strikes.’ Poor kid thought he was out of his mind and didn’t tell any of us, not wanting us to think he was crazy for listening to her. But he kept track of the days and followed her instructions, and then when Galdric got a lucky slice in” — Caldon lifted his shirt to reveal a white bandage just

beneath his rib cage — “and gloated about the venom, Tipp realized that was what he’d been warned about, and he tried to force the entire contents of his waterskin down my throat.” Caldon’s face shadowed. “That wasn’t pleasant, let me tell you. But I choked down a few mouthfuls before Galdric hauled him away.” He shrugged and finished, “And now, here I am.”

“But — But —” Kiva couldn’t wrap her head around the story, and settled on repeating, “There’s no cure for necros venom. Not in all of Wenderall.”

“Exactly,” Caldon said. “In *Wenderall*. But the Mystican isn’t *from* Wenderall, is she?”

Wonder filled Kiva as she thought about Zofia Sage and her uncanny mental magic, how she’d hailed from across the ocean. “Unbelievable,” she whispered.

“I’m sorry to say this, Sunshine,” Caldon said, “but Tipp has pushed you off the top of my ‘favorite people’ list. Don’t take it personally.”

Kiva leaned more of her weight against him and said, with feeling, “He’s up there on my list, too.”

Caldon’s eyes warmed, and he kissed the top of her head. “I still feel half dead, but you’re the one we were all really worried about. It was touch and go for a few days there.”

Kiva stilled. “*Days?*”

“You’ve been unconscious for the better part of a week,” Caldon revealed. “The blade ruptured your liver or your lungs or — something else in there. Internal bleeding, Maddis said. They worked around the clock to keep you with us.”

His words were light, but Kiva could hear the fear in his voice — the same fear she’d felt when she’d thought she’d lost him. She pressed her cheek to his chest, wincing at the renewed throb in her stomach. It was aching more now, aggravated by her crying attack, but even so —

“Are you sure there was internal bleeding? It hurts, but it doesn’t hurt *that* bad.”

Caldon grinned. “That’ll be the drugs. Not poppymilk,” he said quickly. “Cresta told them about your history with angeldust, and they decided it was best to avoid anything addictive. I don’t know what they gave you, just that it’s meant to dull the pain and make you drowsy. I’m honestly surprised you’ve managed to stay awake for this whole conversation.”

Kiva was feeling sleep tug at her, but Caldon had just reminded her of something else, and she forced her eyes to remain open.

“Cresta — she’s —”

“A Kildarion?” Caldon said, his grin widening. “*That* was a delicious little secret to keep, let me tell you.”

Kiva gaped at him. “You *knew*?”

He rolled his eyes. “When are you going to realize that I know *everything*?”

“But — *how*?” she spluttered. “And why didn’t you say something?”

“Firstly,” he said, “it wasn’t my secret to share.” His pointed look made Kiva bite her lip in acknowledgment of the secrets he’d kept for her. Then he went on, “And to be fair, I didn’t know at first. There was always something familiar about her, something I couldn’t put my finger on, but I only started piecing it together partway through our travels. The way she moved, the way she looked . . . How some of the foreign rulers reacted to seeing her, as if they couldn’t figure where they might have known her from, her family resemblance subtle but enough to trigger interest.” He snorted and added, “Never mind that she’s fluent in more languages than I am, and she fights like she was born with a blade in her hand.”

Now that he’d laid it all out, Kiva felt even more foolish for not realizing. She opened her mouth to ask a million questions, one of which was what Cresta’s royal status meant for Caldon personally, given the way their relationship had appeared to be slowly developing during their travels. But before she could get a word out, the door to her room opened and Healer Maddis appeared.

She paused at the entry, her gray eyebrows shooting together.

“Uh-oh,” Caldon muttered. “Caught.”

He didn’t move, though.

The Matron Healer sighed, long and loud, before walking over to them and saying, “You’re meant to be resting. *Both* of you.”

Caldon indicated their prone bodies. “How much more resting can we be?”

Maddis ignored him and looked at Kiva. “Good to see you awake, dear.”

“Thank you for taking care of me,” she replied quietly, almost shyly, her respect for the head of Silverthorn only growing each time they met.

The healer waved away her gratitude. “How are you feeling? Any pain?”

“A little,” Kiva answered honestly.

Maddis pulled a vial from her white robes. “Drink this. All of it.”

Knowing better than to argue, Kiva reached for it, alarmed by how weak her arm felt. How weak her entire *body* felt. That weakness didn’t fade when she swallowed the tonic, grimacing at the bitter, earthy taste, but she did feel near-instant pain relief, the throbbing in her stomach returning to a dull ache.

Her eyes began to close of their own accord, the medicine stealing her consciousness, but she fought to listen as Maddis said, “You’ll need to stay here under observation for a few more days, and then you’ll have to be very gentle with yourself for a while. But you should make a full recovery.”

“That’s good news,” Kiva said, her words coming out mumbled and slurred.

She wasn’t able to hold on to her awareness after that, with the last thing she heard being Maddis’s voice coming from far away as she said to Caldon, “Don’t make me tie you to your own bed, young man.”

Followed by his cheeky, “How scandalous.”

And then Kiva succumbed to sleep with a smile on her lips.

The next time Kiva woke, still tired and achy, it was dark outside her window. She thought she was alone, until a figure approached her bed, the faint luminium lights revealing a snake tattoo and a face speckled with partially healed cuts and bruises.

For a long moment, Kiva and Cresta just looked at each other.

And then Kiva said, “If you want me to bow, you’re going to have to help me up.”

Cresta’s relief was visible, with her slumping down into the chair beside the bed, a weighty breath leaving her as she said, “I think that terrifying healer woman will march in here and drag me out if you move so much as an inch.”

Kiva’s lips twitched at the thought of Cresta — fierce ex-quarrier, now-queen *Cresta* — being afraid of Healer Maddis.

“I think you can handle her,” she replied, shifting slightly, then wincing at the pain.

Another long pause fell between them, before Cresta sighed and said, “I wanted to tell you.” She pressed her lips together. “No, that’s a lie. I didn’t want anyone to know, because I never intended to do anything about it.” She pulled her tangled red locks away from her face and admitted, “I knew I wanted to save Serafine, to protect her — that was always my intention. But I didn’t have to challenge Navok to do that.”

“Then why did you?”

“It’s your fault,” Cresta said, suddenly scowling. “You and the stupid angeldust.”

Kiva’s eyebrows rose. “Excuse me?”

“In Ersa.” Cresta pitched her voice higher to mimic Kiva. “*You’re a good friend, Cresta. I’m sorry you lost your family, but I’m glad you’re a part of ours now.* I hated you for saying that, because you made me realize it was true. I’d tried to keep you all at a distance, but I’d failed.” Her scowl deepened. “Before that, I didn’t give a damn about the Vallentis family. Or Evalon, for that matter. But getting to know you all — you made it *impossible* for me not to care. And when I realized that my own brother was hellbent on using you and killing them, I knew I couldn’t just sit by and let that happen.” Her scowl faded into a guilty look as she confessed, “I didn’t know for sure until I saw him on the bridge, though. That was when I realized that even if I had no idea what I was doing, Mirraven would still be better off ruled by anyone but him.”

“For what it’s worth,” Kiva said quietly, “I think you’ll make a great queen.”

Cresta scrubbed a hand over her face. “I guess we’ll see.”

“Serafine will help you,” Kiva said, certain the compassionate princess wouldn’t leave her sister to the wolves.

“I’m counting on it, especially since one of the first things I’ll have to do is reach out to Caramor and fix the mess Nav created with them,” Cresta said, looking frustrated at the very thought.

Kiva’s eyes rounded. “You’re not going to make Sera marry —”

“Gods, of course not,” Cresta said quickly. “But she and Vosh have been friends since they were babes. If anyone can soothe Caramor’s ruffled feathers, it’s Sera. And Mirryn is going to help, too — she’s had a lifetime of scheming and politics, which will undoubtedly come in handy where we’re going, even if I’ll always have to watch my back around her.” In a mutter, she added, “Everworld knows what my sister sees in her.”

“Wait,” Kiva said. “Mirryn’s going with you?”

Cresta frowned. “Didn’t Jaren tell you?”

Kiva indicated her room, grimacing when the move tugged at her stomach again. “I haven’t seen him.”

Cresta looked hesitant, but shared, “The Royal Council charged Mirryn with treason.”

Kiva stilled. “But she —”

“They’re aware that she had a change of heart and tried to make amends, but they said they needed to set an example,” Cresta explained. “Serafine begged me to do something, so I suggested exile as the punishment.” She shrugged like it was nothing to her, and finished, “So yes, Mirryn is coming with us to Mirraven. And staying there.”

Relief hit Kiva — for Mirryn, but also for her family. The Royal Council could have sentenced the princess to death; exile wasn’t ideal, but at least she would still be breathing.

“Does that mean you’ll be open to frequent Vallentis guests?” Kiva asked, knowing Jaren and the others would still want to see Mirryn, regardless of her betrayal. But as soon as the words left her mouth, Kiva’s thoughts jumped away from the princess, and she couldn’t help cocking her head and adding, “Perhaps a certain handsome prince?”

Cresta brushed invisible lint off her shoulder. “I’ll maybe allow Jaren to visit, especially if you can be bothered to get off your lazy ass to come and see me.”

Kiva’s heart warmed as she read into Cresta’s comment, knowing it was her not-so-subtle way of saying that nothing about their friendship would change, even if they weren’t with each other every day. But she stayed on task to say, “I’m talking about a different handsome prince.”

Cresta wrinkled her nose. “Oriel is a bit young, don’t you think?”

Kiva huffed out a laugh, which she immediately regretted, pain flaring along her torso. She gritted her teeth through it, and said, “You know who I’m talking about.”

There was a pause, before Cresta answered, “I *suppose* Caldon can visit. Assuming his head will fit through the castle gates.”

Another laugh left Kiva against her will, and she had to bite back a whimper this time, before managing to say, “You two have such a strange relationship.”

“‘Relationship’ is a very strong word for what we have.” Cresta smirked wickedly. But then she said, almost in warning, “I don’t know what the future will bring for us. Things are more complicated now than before. But —” She looked down at the bed, before meeting Kiva’s eyes again and saying, her voice softer, “We’ll see.”

That was more than Kiva had expected her to admit, so she smiled and replied, “That’s good enough for me.”

Cresta just shook her head and looked to the ceiling, but then she leaned forward and grabbed something off the table beside Kiva’s bed, handing it over.

It was a vial, identical to the one Maddis had given Kiva earlier that day.

“Go on,” Cresta said, nudging her knee. “I saw you wince — you’re in pain. You need to sleep.”

“I’ve been sleeping for days,” Kiva grumbled, but she also knew she would heal faster if she rested, so she downed the bitter tonic. Once again, her pain dulled nearly instantly, but so too did her eyes begin to close. “You better not leave for Mirraven without saying goodbye,” she mumbled, sliding down in her bed.

“I won’t,” Cresta said, her voice fading out. “And besides, you and I still have unfinished business to attend to first.”

But Kiva didn’t get to ask what she was talking about before she drifted off again.

The early morning sunshine woke Kiva, and just like the last two times she’d regained consciousness, she wasn’t alone in her room. But this time there were two people with her, one on the chair — Tipp, who was snoring loudly — and one on the bed beside her, holding her close.

Kiva snuggled into Jaren, breathing in his fresh, elemental scent, her heart feeling full. He stirred when he felt her move, his eyes opening slowly before his chin dipped down to look at her.

In a sleep-husky voice, he said, quiet enough to keep from rousing Tipp, “You’re awake.”

Kiva smiled and teased, “Or maybe you’re dreaming.”

His fingers whispered across her cheekbone, his touch so incredibly tender as he said, “Oh, I’m definitely dreaming.” He pressed the softest of

kisses to her temple, before capturing her gaze and saying, “You scared me.”

Kiva felt the pain in his voice, the fear he couldn’t hide, and whispered, “I’m sorry.”

“What you did —”

“I’d do it again.”

He tensed against her.

“In a heartbeat,” she said, needing him to see how serious she was.

His eyes flashed with emotion — love, grief, terror, relief, and so much more. But then he said, so very carefully, as if he was worried she had forgotten, “Your magic . . .”

Kiva looked at her hands, knowing she would never again see the golden glow, trying to reconcile how that made her feel. For ten years, she had ignored her power, pushing it down as far as it would go. Then, when she’d finally released it, she’d spent months being afraid of it — not just her lack of control, but also the possibility of turning into a monster. It was only recently that she’d come to embrace it, to *cherish* it. And she couldn’t deny that a part of her would mourn its loss, especially knowing it was gone forever.

But there was a larger part of her that was relieved. Because now there was absolutely no chance that she would yield to the darker side of her bloodline. Nanna Delora had used the Eye of the Gods on herself to take away her own magic; she’d made that choice rather than risk the alternative. And while Kiva wished she’d been granted the same choice, she knew her sadness would pass.

In a whisper, Kiva shared all of that with Jaren, finishing quietly with, “I can live with not having magic. But I wouldn’t have been able to live with knowing you’d lost yours again — and everything you would have lost with it.”

The look in Jaren’s eyes caused the breath to catch in Kiva’s lungs. But she pushed through it to add, “And besides, my magic didn’t make me a healer, just as it won’t stop me from becoming a better one.”

Jaren understood her meaning immediately, and rasped out, “Does that mean you’re going to take Maddis up on her offer to study here?”

Kiva reached out to trace her fingers over his lips. “I have a few reasons to want to stay in Vallenia. I suppose that can be one of them.”

The uncertainty and worry faded from Jaren's expression, his eyes dancing as he said, "A few reasons, huh?"

Kiva leaned up and, ignoring the pinch of pain in her stomach, touched her mouth to his. "At least one."

He growled in the back of his throat and snaked a hand behind her neck, holding her to him and deepening the kiss, his tongue flicking out to tangle with hers, making her gasp.

But then her gasp turned from pleasure into pain when she tried to shift closer, her stomach screaming its protest.

Immediately, Jaren stilled, his eyes heated but apologetic as he eased her back into a resting position.

"No kissing until you're all better," he said in a firm voice.

Given how breathy he sounded, Kiva was absolutely confident she could change his mind. And she would — but maybe in a few days, when she didn't feel as if her insides were going to tear apart every time she moved.

In an attempt to help cool them both off, Kiva said, "I'm afraid to ask, but . . . what happened on the bridge? At the end, I mean. After I . . . fell unconscious."

Jaren knew what she really wanted to know, and he answered, his voice as gentle as possible, "Zuleeka is locked in the palace dungeons. She — I'm sorry, sweetheart, but she hasn't shown any remorse. Tor tried to speak with her, but she just screamed at him, calling him a traitor and shouting at him to go away."

Kiva closed her eyes and, this time, made herself ask, "What's going to happen to her?"

Jaren's arms tightened in comfort as he quietly said, "The Royal Council has sentenced her to Zalindov."

Deep down Kiva had already known the answer, but it was still distressing to hear. She burrowed her face into Jaren's chest, wishing things could have turned out differently, but knowing they had no other choice. Zuleeka had stolen a kingdom. She'd killed people, too many to count. She wasn't like Mirryn — they couldn't just exile her and expect her to go quietly. Even without magic, she was too dangerous, too volatile, and as Jaren had said, she was showing no remorse.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart," Jaren said again. "If there was any other way —"

“I know,” Kiva whispered, not needing an explanation. “I know.”

They fell silent after that, just lying there, holding each other. For the first time since waking at Silverthorn, Kiva didn't feel the lure of sleep, and she soon began murmuring more questions to Jaren. She asked about the battle, how many people they'd lost, how much damage the palace had sustained, and what the plans were to rebuild. She asked how the Evalonian citizens were feeling about having the Vallentis family back in power, and what his thoughts were on the unexpected new alliance with Mirraven. She asked about the Eye of the Gods and whether the dagger had been secured — to which he confirmed it was now safely in Vallentis possession. Question after question poured from her mouth, with him filling her in on everything she'd missed while unconscious. In the middle of it all, Tipp woke, and Jaren had to physically restrain him when he launched out of his chair to hug Kiva, reminding the young boy that she still needed time to heal.

They had more visitors then, with Caldon sneaking out of his own room and Cresta appearing suspiciously soon afterward. Then Ashlyn and Torell arrived, both visibly relieved to see Kiva awake — Tor especially, judging by the shuddering embrace he gave her and the way he said she was never to worry him like that again. At her request, he and Ashlyn recounted their side of the battle, and the lead-up to it from when they'd arrived in Vallenia, including Tor saying, with some embarrassment, how easy it had been for him to convince the rebels to fight. Kiva wasn't surprised — she still remembered her visit to the rebel camp outside Oakhollow, how everyone had worshipped him as their general.

Rhessinda appeared shortly after that, carrying a gift basket full of chocabuns that Kiva promptly began stuffing — *carefully* — into her mouth. They helped ease the sadness she felt when Torell shared that he and Rhess would be following Ashlyn back to the central army base at Highworth Keep once the palace clean-up was complete. He claimed it was so they could work together on a strategy to help the rebels assimilate into *not* being rebels, but Kiva knew it was more than that. She saw it in the way he and Ashlyn kept sneaking glances at each other — and she heard it in the comical way Rhess grumbled about being “that awkward third wheel.” But it was clear that she, too, was excited for their next adventure — and equally clear that she would follow Tor wherever he went, not for any romantic reasons, but purely out of loyalty.

More visitors arrived throughout the morning, with Naari popping in and out a few times to check on Kiva, and even Eidran dropping by once, not saying anything, just nodding and leaving again. Captain Veris also made a brief appearance, though he did so while escorting Queen Ariana and Oriel, who wanted to see for themselves that Kiva was well.

Unfortunately, Healer Maddis decided to check on her then, finding the room bursting with people, one of whom was an escaped patient. Worse, Oriel had brought Flox with him, and the silverbear was currently in the process of building a nest over Kiva's feet. Maddis took one look at the creature before turning her eyes on the rest of them, then simply pointed her finger at the door. Immediately, everyone began to scramble out of the room — even the queen.

Kiva would have laughed, if not for the sudden exhaustion that hit her in the wake of them leaving, something Healer Maddis tutted about as she forced the contents of another vial down Kiva's throat.

Before she could drift off, Kiva managed to slur out one last question, asking the Matron Healer if the offer was still open for her to become a student.

“As I told you once before,” Maddis said kindly, “you will always be welcome at Silverthorn.”

Hearing that, tears burned Kiva's eyes, a deep contentment filling her as she saw the future laid out for her. Just like her dream.

The next few days passed by in a blur of sleep and bitter tonics before Healer Maddis finally declared Kiva stable enough to be released. After that, it took a week for her to walk without wincing, and another two before she was able to commence light training with Caldon — who had returned to full strength much more quickly.

It was agonizing having to wait while her body healed itself, but given the alternative, Kiva was just grateful to be alive.

One month after her release from Silverthorn, Kiva stood in the courtyard of the winter palace, shifting nervously from foot to foot. Not even the picturesque backdrop of the Tanestra Mountains could calm her in the face of what she was about to do. But she knew it was time — she'd already put it off for too long.

“Ready?” Jaren asked, holding out his hand.

Kiva sighed and linked their fingers. “As I'll ever be.”

Together, they turned to their friends, all of whom were waiting patiently around the courtyard's fountain.

Caldon, Cresta, Tipp, Naari, Torell, Ashlyn, Eidran — their entire traveling party, minus Galdric, reunited for one final challenge.

Serafine had also ventured with them from Vallenia, as had Mirryn, with this being the Vallentis princess's last stop on her journey out of Evalon. From here, they — and Cresta — would be heading north to Zadria, but for today, the two princesses were staying put while Kiva and her friends saw to their task.

It wouldn't be a pleasant one, but it was something Kiva needed to do. Torell, too. Even Cresta and Tipp and Jaren and Naari — all of them for different reasons. Only Ashlyn, Caldon, and Eidran had come for moral support, their company grounding Kiva more than anything else.

"Are we doing this?" Caldon asked.

Kiva gathered her courage and nodded, looking to Ashlyn. The general returned the gesture, before waving her hand and summoning her magic.

Jaren had begun to learn the art of windfunneling from his cousin now that his powers were back, but she'd been practicing for longer, and the distance they had to travel today was something only she could manage. Her wind wrapped around them and lifted them into the air, sending them deeper into the mountains before finally delivering them to their destination.

Kiva stared up at the imposing iron gates and soulless limestone walls, noting that Zalindov Prison was no more welcoming now than it had ever been.

But she wasn't there to be welcomed.

She was there to say goodbye.

Zuleeka had traveled separately to them, her sentence mandating that she be transferred by prison wagon, just like all new inmates. It had been Kiva's idea for them to arrive at the same time, a thought spoken shyly to Jaren one night, as if fearing he would judge her for wanting to see her sister off. But he'd only kissed her softly and promised to make it happen.

As Kiva looked at the prison wagon halted in front of the gates, she wondered why she'd bothered. Zuleeka had refused to speak with Kiva every time she'd ventured down to the River Palace's dungeons, turning her back and ignoring her. Torell had argued that it was better than how she treated him, with cursing and screaming, but Kiva wasn't sure. Nor was she

sure if Zuleeka's behavior was because she considered them blood traitors, or because of the damage the death magic had caused her. But either way, it didn't matter anymore, especially not now as the iron gates opened and Warden Rooke appeared from within them, a group of black-uniformed guards at his heels.

Kiva's fingers tightened around Jaren's. She could hear Cresta grinding her teeth, could see Caldon placing a comforting arm around Tipp's shoulders. Kiva hadn't wanted the young boy to come today, but he'd insisted. He was there for his own closure, he'd said, and Kiva hadn't been able to deny him that.

"Your Majesties," Warden Rooke said, stopping to bow when he was a few feet away, looking as if he'd swallowed a lemon. "I received your missive. Are you ready to complete the transfer?"

Jaren turned to Kiva. She released his hand and stepped forward with Torell, the two of them approaching the prison wagon and peering through the bars. Zuleeka sat in the corner, her honey-gold eyes slitted. She wasn't ignoring Kiva now, wasn't screaming at Torell. Instead, she said, her voice bitter, "Is this the part where you make me beg?"

Tor moved closer to Kiva until their shoulders were brushing, telling her he was there, that they were in this together.

She might be our sister, but actions have consequences, and one day soon she's going to learn that.

He'd had said those words weeks ago.

Today they were coming true.

"No, Zulee," Tor said quietly. "This is the part where we say goodbye."

He looked at Kiva, but she and Zuleeka had already said their goodbyes — on the bridge between the River Palace. All that was left was for Kiva to hold her sister's angry eyes as Tor signaled to the transfer guards, and then keep holding them as the prison wagon rolled forward through the iron gates . . .

And disappeared from sight.

A shaky breath left Kiva as she turned to her brother. "Are you all right?"

"No," he answered. "Are you?"

"No," she whispered.

But they would be — eventually.

Slowly, they walked back to where their friends were waiting. Rooke seemed impatient for them to leave, but also aware that he was in the company of rulers from two kingdoms, and etiquette demanded that he wait before being dismissed.

That wasn't what happened, though.

Because when Kiva reached Jaren's side, ready to tell Ashlyn that she and Tor were good to go, Jaren stepped forward and handed a sealed letter to Rooke.

The Warden squinted at it before tearing it open and reading the contents, his dark face draining of color. "What is this?"

Kiva had never heard such a tone from him before — like he was *afraid*.

She looked at Jaren in question, but as she did so, she saw the smirk on Caldon's lips, the light in Naari's amber eyes, the satisfied expression on Ashlyn's face, the beaming smile Tipp wore.

And Cresta . . .

There was no way to describe her wicked glee.

"Alabastor Rooke," Jaren said, and Kiva stilled at his rarely heard princely voice, "you have been found guilty of crimes against humanity, including, but not limited to, mass genocide. You are hereby stripped of your position as Warden and sentenced to a life term at the very prison in which you committed those crimes."

Kiva's breathing turned shallow, disbelief thrumming through her veins.

At Jaren's signal, Rooke's own guards stepped forward, causing the Warden's eyes to flash and narrow.

"You can't do this," he spat. "I don't take orders from Evalon — I answer to all eight kingdoms. You don't have the power to —"

"He didn't," Cresta cut Rooke off, "but since we recently thwarted a tyrant's plans to conquer all of Wenderall, the rulers of the other kingdoms are, shall we say, *grateful*." Her wicked delight grew as she shared, "It was no trouble to ask them each for a favor." She nodded to the parchment Rooke was clenching in his fist. "All their signatures are there. You can see for yourself."

He didn't look down, having already read the page.

"You can't do this," he said again, but this time, his anger had reverted to fear.

"We can, and we have," Cresta said, enjoying herself way too much.

Kiva was still frozen, hardly daring to believe what was happening, that Rooke was finally going to see justice for what he'd done, for all the people he'd killed — including her father.

“There’s one more thing,” Jaren said casually. “Your crimes against humanity mean a life term at Zalindov, but your crimes against the crown prince of Evalon” — he indicated himself — “and the new queen of Mirraven” — he indicated Cresta, who gave a middle-fingered salute — “deserve something a little extra.”

“What are you talking about?” Rooke demanded, back to anger once more.

Jaren turned to Tipp. “Would you care to do the honors?”

The young boy grinned, the look unlike anything Kiva had ever seen on his face before, with it eerily similar to the expression Cresta wore. In a loud voice, he recited, “You are h-hereby sentenced to the T-Trial by Ordeal. Should y-y-you survive, you’ll be s-set free. But should y-you fail . . .” Tipp shrugged, his grin still in place. “You know h-how that ends.”

Kiva stood there, stunned, but she didn’t have a chance to process the words — and their almost definite death sentence — before Rooke lunged. His own guards stopped him, latching on to his arms and hauling him back as he screamed at them, shouting for them to release him, but their grip was unyielding.

Cresta ambled forward, a slow, unhurried approach, but once she was before Rooke, she struck as fast as a snake, yanking his left arm toward her while pulling a dagger from her belt. In the space of a blink, she managed to carve three short, sharp lines across the back of his hand, the blood welling instantly around the Z.

“Now you’ll fit right in,” she said over his furious — and now pained — roars. To the guards, she said, “Take him away.”

They didn’t hesitate, dragging him kicking and screaming through the iron gates until he, like Zuleeka, was out of sight.

Kiva turned woodenly toward her friends, a storm of emotion warring within her.

Jaren moved straight back to her side. “Was that all right? We didn’t want to tell you before, just in case —”

Kiva placed her fingers over his lips, tears welling as she whispered, “Thank you.” She glanced at the others. “All of you.”

“We didn’t do it just for you,” Cresta said, rolling her eyes.

Kiva knew that. Cresta had suffered just as much because of Rooke, if in different ways. Tipp, too, having been at Zalindov for three years. Even Jaren and Naari from their short but memorable stays. All of them damaged by the Warden, some of their scars visible, others hidden. But now no one else had to suffer under him, his reign of terror over.

“You h-have to tell her the r-r-rest,” Tipp said, bouncing on his feet.

“There’s more?” Kiva rasped.

It was Eidran who spoke, his voice a calming rumble as he revealed, “I’ll be taking up the post of interim Warden until we find a suitable replacement for Rooke. While I’m here, I’ll be weeding out any guards who have abused their power, making sure they’re held accountable.”

Bones and the Butcher, Kiva realized, her gaze shooting to Cresta. The redhead only grinned back, none of this being news to her.

“And not just that,” Ashlyn jumped in. “The other kingdoms have agreed — Zalindov needs to change. It’ll take time, but we’ll be implementing proper judicial systems, making sure the punishment fits the crime. Some people will never be allowed to leave” — she didn’t have to say Zuleeka’s name for Kiva to know her sister was in that category — “but for others, coming here will no longer be a death sentence. Soon prisoners will be able to earn their freedom.”

Freedom from Zalindov. Once upon a time, Kiva never could have imagined such a concept.

But now . . .

“I don’t know what to say,” she said, her voice cracking as she took in her friends, all of whom seemed pleased with her reaction.

Except for Cresta, who drawled, “To repeat, we didn’t do it just for you.”

The reason didn’t matter. For too many years, Zalindov had plagued Kiva’s thoughts and haunted her nightmares. Knowing future inmates might be spared the same suffering, that there could be life *after* Zalindov . . .

A weight lifted from Kiva’s shoulders, replaced by a sense of rightness, of *justice*.

But not just that. As she looked up at the limestone walls, she suddenly realized that, with or without the coming changes, Zalindov no longer held any power over her. It was in her past — and it would be remaining there.

She had survived.

Now it was time for her to *live*.

Feeling that settle somewhere deep within her, Kiva looked at Jaren, at her friends, at her brother, and asked, her voice thick with wonder, with *hope*, “What happens now?”

It was Jaren who answered, leaning in to whisper three perfect words right into her ear:

“Now, we dream.”

Acknowledgments

Wowza, I honestly can't believe I made it here. That we made it here. There was a moment before *The Prison Healer* came out, during the early days of the pandemic's horror and uncertainty, when I vividly remember wondering if the world would even be around by the time its release was due. (Don't act like you didn't have the same thought at least once!) And now, here we are—a full trilogy complete and in your hands!

I won't lie: this book was a challenge. I thought nothing would ever test me as much as everything with *The Gilded Cage*, but, oh boy, I should have knocked on wood or something after that one, because *The Blood Traitor* didn't just shift things into the next level of difficulty, but into an entirely new stratosphere.

And yet.

This book—guys, *this book*.

I just love it so much. (It has a quest!! What's not to love about a quest!! And Jaren = omigossssh, how can you NOT love him?! And don't get me started on Caldon! And Cresta! CRESTA! Total MVP right there. (Yes, I'm aware that I'm fangirling about my own characters right now—I JUST LOVE THEM, OKAY?)

But despite how delighted I am with how *The Blood Traitor* turned out, there were moments in the process that were so awful, I genuinely considered never writing another word again. (I'm not kidding—in my lowest points, I actually started researching new career paths.) Maybe it's because it took everything from me. That sounds so dramatic, but it's true. I gave every part of myself to this book/series while dealing with some really, *really* horrible personal and professional complications. Because of that, it's almost like it's even more precious to me, since, like Kiva, I *survived*. But I can say with certainty that I would not have done so without some very special people holding my hands through it all.

First off, I need to thank God for—quite literally—keeping me alive and (somewhat) sane during the craziness of this book/series. I also want to thank my family for doing what they could to help me, like offering beach

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Before the music starts playing and I get kicked out of writing my own acknowledgments, I want to say a huge thank-you to Bridey Morris for

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Last but definitely not least, I want to thank every single person who has ever read any of my books, and especially this series. I mentioned earlier that when I was in my darkest place, things were so bad that I considered never writing again. I'm happy to report that's no longer the case, partly because I love writing too much to ever truly give it up, but also largely because of you. You're the reason I get to do what I do—and *keep* doing it—and for that, I'm eternally grateful. Thank you for shouting about my books over social media and sharing your love for my stories and characters with other readers—it honestly means the world to me. *Worlds*, even. I hope you'll come with me on my next writing adventure, wherever it may lead. But for now?

Well, I think Jaren said it best:

Now, we dream.

About the Author



Photo by Lucy Bell

Australian author **LYNETTE NONI** studied journalism, academic writing, and human behavior at university before venturing into the world of fiction. She is now a full-time writer and the #1 bestselling and award-winning author of The Medoran Chronicles, the Whisper duology, and the Prison Healer series.

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