

The book cover features a dark, textured background with a decorative border of red flowers and silver, ornate scrollwork. The title is written in a large, elegant, silver serif font, centered on the page. The words are arranged in a vertical stack: 'A', 'REFLECTION', 'OF', 'SILVER', 'AND', 'CRIMSON'.

A
REFLECTION
OF
SILVER
AND
CRIMSON

LIANNE
KAY

A REFLECTION OF SILVER AND CRIMSON

A reflection of Silver and Crimson

Book 1

LIANNE KAY



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*To all the readers out there who read my books. You are
amazing.*

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THE SIX TRIBES OF TARROBANE

BLOODSTONE (DARK MAGIC)

CALCITE (AIR MAGIC)

CARNELIAN (WATER MAGIC)

HEMATITE (FIRE MAGIC) – *SILVER AND CRIMSON*

KYANITE (LIGHT MAGIC)

MALACHITE (EARTH MAGIC)

HEMATITES FROM HOUSE OF SILVER

ANNORA (AN NOR RUH)
ASHA (AU SHUH)
BEHTON (BEH TUN)
ELLERY (EL LER EE)
EMERIN (EM ER RIN)
HAKAN (HAK AN)
MAZALINE (MAY ZUH LEEN)
TAHIRA (TAEH HEER UH)

HEMATITES FROM HOUSE OF CRIMSON

ABEREM (ABE ER EM)
ALBAN (AL BAN)
ALEKSANDER (AU LEK SAN DER)
DANIKA (DAH NEE KA)
DINAH (DIE NUH)
GEEVA (GEE VUH)
HANAH (HAN UH)
JASCE (JASK)
JERROD (JEER ROD)
JUDE (J OO D)
LYRA (LIE RAH)
REEVE (R EE V)
SELINE (SEE LEEN)

TRISTAN (TRISS TAN)
WRENLEY (WREN LEE)
ZERAH (ZEER UH)

Chapter One



THIS IS THE WRONG BED.

Apprehension builds in my throat as I reach for my dagger, the one that is always sheathed by my side, but it's not there. My heart races, slamming against my ribs as I open my eyes, taking in the green bedcovers draping my body. *Silk*. I brush my fingertips against the fabric and resist the overwhelming urge to sigh. I have never touched silk before. Women like me aren't meant to wear silk. Women born to a rebel grandfather, who only thinks of conquering and not comfort.

The bedcovers fall to the floor as I rise to my feet and jerk my gaze around the opulent bedchamber.

This must be a dream.

I close my eyes, but the images are still engraved in my mind. The luxurious furniture. The marble fireplace. The sofa piled high with pillows. The large windows, allowing an unseemly amount of light to parade across the granite floor.

My long nightdress skims a fur rug as I rotate in a wide circle and try to remember the events leading to this point. Automatically, my hand moves to my arm, to where a thick bandage should be. Instead, I touch the soft fabric of my nightdress.

A gasp escapes me as I stare down at the material encasing my body. I pat my arm again, needing to feel the reassurance, the reminder that a terrible infection has been making me very ill.

Nothing.

In quick, jerky movements, I loosen the ribbons binding my bodice and allow the nightdress to drop to my feet. My arm trembles as I hold it out, expecting to see a wound or at least a scar, but there is no evidence that I was ever injured.

My mind screams for an explanation—anything that will make sense of this place and my lack of injury.

Think, Annora.

Think.

What is the last thing I remember?

I was weak from an infection and Asha, my older sister, had sent for a healer. Of that, I'm certain.

The rest...

I kneel and brush my fingers against the floor, as if grounding myself to this reality. The cool stone is a reassuring contrast to the strangeness of my situation.

My mind races, attempting to piece together the events that led me here. Yet, everything seems foggy, like the remnants of a dream upon waking. The more I try to focus on those remnants, the more they slip through my fingers, leaving me grasping at fragments.

"Asha," I cry out, needing my sister to show up, to tell me this is all a nightmare.

But she doesn't appear.

Nobody does.

Maybe if I scream her name loud enough, she'll hear me. She'll come running and explain this all away. Again and again, I call for Asha, but she doesn't answer me.

As I scream my sister's name again, the door finally creaks open, and a tall, dark-haired man fills the doorway. His impressive height and wide shoulders dominate the frame. If it wasn't for his distinctive attire—a black surcoat adorned with a crimson phoenix engraved in the center, in place of traditional armor—I might have mistaken him for a guard.

“If you keep yelling, everyone will think someone is trying to murder you,” he says, his voice deep, smooth, and infused with subtle vexation.

“Where is Asha?” I demand. “And why are you wearing a crimson phoenix and not silver?” I sweep my eyes over him again, needing to see silver, proof he’s one of us.

“Who is Asha?” His stare drops to my chemise and lingers on the thin material that reveals far too much.

Heat flares across my cheeks as I grab my nightdress, yank it over my head, and jerk the ribbons into place.

“Where am I?” I ask when I’m finished.

He arches a dark eyebrow. “In the Darhavva palace. Where else would you be?”

The Darhavva palace?

A House of Crimson palace?

Impossible!

“This isn’t amusing.” I crane my neck, trying to see past him into the hallway. “Tell Asha I want to go home.”

He shrugs. “I don’t know who Asha is.”

I let out a frustrated sigh. “Asha is my sister.”

“You don’t have any sisters.” He steps into the room and allows the door to slam shut.

Maybe I should back up or at least hunt for a weapon. Instead, I lift my chin, trying to be brave, *needing* to be brave as he crosses the bedchamber to a table and pours himself a goblet of wine.

“I have three sisters.” *Well, three that are living.*

I step closer to him, taking in as many details as possible. The dark hair. Brown eyes. Bronzed skin. The immaculate surcoat. And the polished, expensive boots. Even the sword attached to his hip. The hilt has a phoenix engraving, like every Hematite from House of Crimson.

“Y-your...” I lick my lips, hating the stammering, the sign of weakness Grandfather loathes so much.

“Only those with a twisted tongue stammer, Annora. Are you weak in mind?” His words pierce more than my ears. They pierce my heart.

The man arches his eyebrow again as he takes a long drink of his wine. There’s something so familiar about his arrogance. So distasteful.

Chills slip down my back as I lower my gaze to the signet ring on his thumb. I have seen that ring in sketches. The Hematite chieftain and his four sons wear them.

My heart slams against my chest as the reality of who this man is dawns on me “Your father is the Hematite’s chieftain. And you’re Jasce, his eldest son.” The second part is only a hunch.

Jasce’s smirk is enough to tell me I guessed correctly.

Don’t panic.

Please, don’t panic.

I slip my trembling fingers into my sleeves instead of following the urge to jump from the window.

“Count, Annora.” Mother’s encouraging voice whispers in my ears.

One.

Does he know I’m from House of Silver?

Two.

Does he know who I am?

Three.

Why am I here?

Four.

Mother’s trick isn’t working this time.

“Am I your prisoner?” I blurt out.

“Prisoner?” He yawns like our conversation bores him. “I didn’t know being my wife made you a prisoner.”

His wife?

His wife?

That’s ridiculous!

“I would never marry anyone from House of Crimson.” The words escape me before I can stop them. I slap my hand over my mouth, wishing I could stuff the declaration back inside.

Instead of anger, like I imagined Jasce would show, he stares at me, his expression blank.

Fantastic, indeed.

He’s one of *those* types—the dangerous kind that can hide what he’s thinking behind a stony façade.

Like Grandfather. He is a master at it.

Jasce walks past me and sets his goblet down on an ornate chest of drawers, with a large, polished looking glass suspended above it. “*You* are from House of Crimson, Lyra.”

“Who is—” The words die in my throat as my gaze catches on the image in the looking glass. My breath hitches, and I turn around, thinking there is someone behind me. But there is no one in the room except for Jasce and me.

I turn back to the looking glass, at the stranger staring back at me—a stranger with wavy, golden blonde hair instead of reddish brown and flawless skin instead of scars. With a shaky hand, I touch my cheek and feel that smooth, foreign skin.

Olah, what is happening to me?

The god of all Tarrobane doesn’t answer.

“You were saying?” Jasce asks, taunting me.

Instead of answering him, I stumble away from that false reflection.

“Lyra.” He steps closer to me, and my muscles tense. “Why don’t we stop the antics? You and I both know why we

married. So, let's not pretend.”

Lyra?

Who's Lyra?

My name is Annora.

“I'm not...”

What's happening?

Am I dreaming?

No, I am going insane!

“I warned you before I left,” he says, yanking my attention back to him.

What is he talking about?

“I don't—”

“—enough,” he snaps. “I'm tired of these games.”

I flinch, shrinking away from him.

I cannot tell him that I am not who his eyes tell him I am. He will think I am insane. Even *I* think I am insane.

And on the slim chance that he would believe me, what then? If I tell him the truth, he will deal with me as he does all his enemies—ruthlessly and mercilessly. His people hunt and kill my people—the rebels from House of Silver

My heart pounds as I edge closer to the looking glass, thinking the reflection will change and expose the woman with the scars, the one locked away by her grandfather.

But the reflection doesn't change.

Chapter Two



THESE AREN'T MY HANDS—THE nails are perfectly shaped, and dainty rings adorn almost every finger. I look at the palms. No calluses.

What kind of magic is this?

Jasce offers me a goblet of wine, and I gladly accept it, needing to settle my nerves.

“I will stay as long as it takes to conceive an heir. Then, I will return to the north.” His words pierce through me as I sink into a chair and shake my head in disbelief.

“No?” He pours himself another goblet of wine. “You are my wife.”

Never!

I glance at the door, then at the man who now casually sits on the sofa and rests his arm on the back. If I run, I may beat him to the door.

So, I set the goblet down and bolt for freedom. Unfortunately, my feet don't react as quickly as my thoughts.

Jasce easily catches me, wraps his arms around me, and pulls me against him. “Are you trying to make me chase you, Lyra?”

“Stop calling me that!”

“What else should I call you?”

He frees me, and I turn to face him. Well, I face his chest. I have to step back to meet his eyes. They stare coolly at me, as if I'm just another task for him to deal with before he goes off to war again. I probably am.

My gaze lowers to the sword attached to his hip. If I steal it, then maybe, I could escape this place. My insides quake as I reach for Jasce's sword—that chance to flee—that steel that would feel so good in my hands. He stops me with a bone crushing grip.

“What are you doing?” he growls.

“You're hurting me.”

He releases me and steps back, gaining distance. But his eyes... The glare that smolders from them is a stormy vortex, a whirlwind of emotions uniting in a singular point of focus: me.

I try to look away, but invisible threads bind my gaze to his—to the ferocity, the silent promise that if I test him, he will kill me.

“I asked you a question,” he says, his voice flat, emotionless, yet somehow sharp enough to impale me.

I rub my wrist, still not able to conjure the words he wants to hear.

Jasce folds his arms and stares at me again. “You're acting different.”

“Different?” Frustration seizes me as I scrub my impossibly soft skin and try to think of a way out of this precarious situation. If this is a palace occupied by House of Crimson, it means I'm deep in their territory, and I'm far away from my family.

“Yes. Did your mother tell you to act like this?”

I shake my head.

There's no way to explain this to him. Not without him locking me away and declaring me insane. He'd probably like that. He doesn't seem to care for Lyra.

How did I get here?

My mind races as I pace away from Jasce and toward the fireplace, needing space to think. Over the last few days, I had gotten sicker, and Asha took me to see a healer named Mazaline.

I rub my temples, trying to break through the fog of my memory. That face in the looking glass. I've seen it before. But where?

Brush strokes.

I remember thinking the tiny brush strokes made the woman's blue eyes look alive.

The painting!

The healer gave me a painting of Lyra.

Lyra's image etches into my thoughts. The perfect posture. The delicate features. The confident smile.

"I won't allow your antics to dissuade me this time," Jasce says.

I ignore him and continue pacing.

How did I wake up in the body of a woman I saw in a painting?

Magic?

But how?

And who?

Not a single Hematite with silver or crimson fire magic can do something like this. At least, not any Hematite I have ever heard about.

"Why?" I mutter, needing answers.

Jasce moves to stand in front of me. "You know why I am here, Lyra."

I blink, drawn back to Jasce and this moment. "I honestly don't."

“You will share my bed, and you will conceive an heir,” he says with enough candor and arrogance to make me feel bad for Lyra, whomever she may be.

Share his bed?

Does he mean...tonight?

Warmth rushes to my cheeks as I realize what he intends to do.

I lick my bottom lip and dart my gaze between the door and the man standing there, expecting to have his way with me. “I n-need you to w-wait.”

Please, wait.

His shoulders tense, conveying his impatience even before he speaks. “It’s been six months.”

“You want an heir? That takes time.” It took Asha a while to conceive her son after she married her husband. “It shouldn’t be rushed.”

“Fuck!” Jasce straightens abruptly.

“There is no need to get angry.” Asha would be proud of how calm I sound when facing a tall, muscular barbarian. *Especially*, when that barbarian just said he wants to put his child in my body.

His mouth curls in contempt. “You are toying with me.”

Nothing could be further from the truth. I would toy with a lion before I would dare to tangle with this man. “I am not.”

“When you asked me to wait, I waited. I gave you the space and time you asked for, but you promised me something in return.”

I curl my fingers into my sleeves and don’t speak.

Deep lines appear near his mouth as he frowns. “But you’re still refusing, still pushing me away. Why?”

Nerves slither in my chest as I slip my fingers higher and higher inside my sleeves.

“Lyra?”

“What do you want me to say?”

“I want you to answer my damn question.”

“I can’t,” I whisper, my words fragile, breakable.

“Why not?”

“Because...” How pathetic I sound.

Grandfather is right. I am weak in mind.

“Because?” Jasce’s eyebrow arches as he steps toward me, and I stumble back again, still desperately needing distance from him.

He’s Jasce, son of Jerrod.

He’s a murderer!

“Why are you afraid of me?” he asks.

“I’m not.”

“Yes, you are.”

A sudden idea strikes me, and I say the words in a rush. “I have my moonblood. So, we cannot share a bed.”

“That’s just an excuse to keep me from bedding you. That doesn’t explain why you keep cowering every time I get close to you.”

How could I explain any of this? I’m not used to men—especially, men like him.

“I’m not lying.” The lie scalds my tongue.

“What do you want?” he asks, clearly not believing I have my moonblood.

“I don’t want anything from you.”

He rolls his eyes. “I know you. You always want something. So, tell me what you want.”

I clench my hands together, trying to think of something to ask for that would make him go away.

“Do you want a new necklace?”

“I don’t wear a lot of jewelry,” I say before I realize he’s talking about Lyra and not me.

“If you wear anymore jewels, you would fall over from the weight,” he says, his voice thick with sarcasm. He jerks his gaze over me as he continues. “You must have left your rubies in your bedchamber.”

“I have a bedchamber?”

A muscle tics in his jaw. “Is that a rhetorical question?”

“No.” I cannot do this—pretend I’m someone I’m not. Especially, when I’m this bad at it. A hen would have better success convincing a rooster she’s a peacock.

“So, tell me?” Jasce asks, his voice thick with frustration. “What do you want?”

“Freedom,” I say, the truth ringing in my ears. “Let me leave this place.” The audacity of my request hangs in the air. Still, the very thought is intoxicating—the possibility of leaving without causing a fuss and reuniting with my family.

Especially Asha.

Jasce’s eyes narrow, his control fraying more and more as we speak. “Impossible.”

“Impossible is a word used by those lacking a vivid imagination.” The words escape me before I think of containing them. The quote is from my favorite book. I even wrote the saying on parchment and placed it by my bed.

He doesn’t seem pleased with my favorite quote as he closes the distance between us and meets my eyes, his stare piercing my soul. At least, it seems like he can do that—dive so deep, he sees my lies and my attempts to mask them.

I shrink away from him, cowering against the sofa.

He straightens and frowns. “What is wrong with you? You’re acting like a wounded fawn.”

“Maybe if you didn’t stomp around and glare at me,” I say, my voice soft, timid.

“You usually have something snarky to say, and you certainly don’t shrink from me.”

“I’m sorry.” The apology breaks from my lips, the words automatic by now. Grandfather has forced them enough.

“You’re sorry?” Something flickers behind Jasce’s gaze, something I cannot decipher as he studies me. “Have you been to the apothecary recently?”

I swallow hard.

I had been to an apothecary recently with Asha, but he’s not talking about that.

“No.”

“Did you drink any potions? Tonics?” When I stare blankly, his frown deepens. “You never apologize.”

My eyes drift to the door, to the key to my freedom. I already tried running.

What option remains?

Without a word, Jasce pours himself more wine and downs all of it. I watch him warily, my mind churning with a hundred different scenarios of how I would escape if I wasn’t trapped in this bedchamber with him.

“I don’t want to share your bed,” I say, needing him to know I have no intentions of even sleeping next to him.

He turns and removes his weapon belt. “Do you know what happened to the last person who defied my father’s orders?”

Jasce doesn’t have to tell me about his father’s cruelty. I have witnessed the chieftain’s destruction as it weaved its way across Tarrobane. Each of the five barbarian tribes has felt the devastation, but none more than House of Silver.

“Your father doesn’t need to know everything that happens here.”

“He will know when your body never swells with my child,” Jasce says, the weight of his words settling over me.

I'm sure the chieftain is used to getting his way, but I am not his vessel.

I shift on the sofa and stare up at the painting on the ceiling. "I need time." It's a lie. I have no intention of ever giving in, but if I have time, I can think of a way out of this palace.

"You have had six months."

"It's not enough. I need more."

Jasce folds his arms, and I brace for an explosion. But after a few tense moments, he surprises me by turning and walking to the door. He opens it, stands to the side. "I believe you can find your way to your bedchamber."

I doubt it, but I'm certainly not going to miss this opportunity.

As I hurry to the door, Jasce speaks in a flat voice. "I will return to the North soon. But Lyra...we will settle this matter before my departure."

I don't know if it's a warning or a promise, but there's no way I will stay around long enough to find out. Bile rises in my throat again as I hurry out the door which, thankfully, closes behind me.

Alone in the hallway, I contemplate which direction to go. I look between the guards at both ends of the corridor and decide I need a plan before I try to escape.

I eye the door next to Jasce's bedchamber. Surely, it belongs to Lyra. I practically run into the room and slam the door. Nerves drum inside me as I lean against the sturdy wood and reach for my necklace, squeezing my fingers around the hematite stone for solace.

Lyra's necklace is different from the one I usually wear. It's more elaborate, and the chain is made from gold. Still, it's hematite—the one thing that should unite us all. Yet it doesn't.

For as long as I can remember, the chieftain, his four sons, and their armies have hunted and slaughtered people from

House of Silver. I have never understood why they want to extinguish our gifts.

Well, not mine. I don't have any, of course. Mother never gave me my rune, and without it I cannot conjure any magic.

But others can use their hematite stones to conjure fire, and our house benefits from it. The silver flames enable some to heal and allow others to see the future. Once, I heard of a House of Silver warrior who could create a portal by placing smoldering runes. And I read a book a few summers ago that claimed there are silver magic wielders who can even counter crimson magic—though Asha said that is rare.

Crimson magic is almost always stronger, and the chieftain knows it. Instead of allowing us to live in peace, he calls on their flames to burn our villages and destroy our crops.

Now, here I am in one of their palaces.

Yesterday, I was Annora, the granddaughter of the leader of House of Silver.

Today, I am a stranger with a husband I do not want.

Chapter Three



I GLANCE around Lyra's bedchamber, taking in the massive bed and the three windows occupying the far wall. It's much larger than my bedchamber in Grandfather's fortress.

My hem trails the marble floor as I walk to the bed and run my hand over the velvet bedcover, marveling at how soft it feels. A small table sits next to the bed, with a decanter of red wine and two goblets. A fireplace dominates one wall, its warmth radiating throughout the room.

I shiver anyway and sit on the edge of the mattress, thinking about my sisters and what they would be doing right now. They would be saying their evening prayers to Olah, the god of every Tarrobane tribe. He doesn't care if we are Hematite, Bloodstone, Kyanite, Carnelian, Calcite, or Malachite. He hears every single one of our prayers.

Asha's words whisper in my ears. "*Prayers must be said every night.*"

Another sigh escapes me as I move to the shelf, grab a bottle of frankincense and place some of the resin into a brazier. As the smoky tendrils fill the air, I lift my eyes to the mosaic ceiling and whisper prayers.

"Olah, hear my humble plea. I beseech you to shower your blessings upon me, your devoted servant. May your light illuminate my path, and may your wisdom guide me. I implore you to extend your watchful gaze over my family. Please safeguard them from harm. Grant them health, happiness, and

harmony, and may the bonds that bind us grow stronger with each passing day.”

Pain swells inside me as I continue, my voice cracking. “Shield my sisters, Asha, Emerin, and Tahira. Grant them the strength to withstand the challenges that life may present.”

I sink to my knees and stare up at the ceiling as threads of pain wrap around my chest and squeeze. This shouldn’t have happened to me. I should be with them.

They need me, and I need them.

Chapter Four



THERE IS ONLY one thing I can do after waking in this body and finding myself married to my enemy—escape.

After a night with very little sleep, I'm ready to put my plan into action. I dress in a chemises, a long surcoat over pants, and a cloak, then I tentatively step into the corridor. The bright torches guide me through the palace and to the lower levels.

Thankfully, nobody questions my aimless wandering as I take more than one wrong turn before finding the kitchen. As I push open the door, the noise hits me. The hustle and bustle of the staff is in full swing. They chop vegetables, stir pots, and tend to the fires that line the walls. The smell of freshly baked bread fills my nose, and my stomach grumbles in response.

A group of maids rush past me with armfuls of vegetables and fruit. A cook with a bushy beard and sweat stains on his surcoat barks orders at his staff.

I walk to a long, narrow table in the center of the room. A woman with flour in her hair greets me with a smile, then she gestures for me to come closer.

“Welcome back to Darhavva, My Lady. I baked your favorite,” she says as she thrusts a wrapped bundle into my arms. “Take it before Lady Dinah catches you.”

Lady Dinah? One of the chieftain's wives?

I bring the bundle closer, smelling fresh bread and honey pastries.

Perfect.

“Thank you. Might I have something to drink to take on my walk too?”

“Of course.” She fills a flagon with water and hands it to me.

I thank her again and leave the kitchen behind.

As I continue through the palace with the food and flagon tucked under my arms, I think about how drastically my life has changed. Normally, I would be spending the day with my sisters, enjoying their warmth, friendship, and laughter. And I would be surrounded by nature, books, and seashells. My world was small, but we were relatively safe from the Hematite civil war, and I didn’t fear the unknown.

I reach the entrance of the palace, where two guards stand on either side of the ornate doors. They nod at me as I pass, and I return the gesture as my heart pounds in my chest.

What if they know what I am planning? Or worse, what if they drag me back to Jasce?

A shudder ripples down my spine as I press my bundle tighter to my chest. I can never go back to him. He’s too intimidating.

The bright sunlight greets me as I step outside and lift my face to the sky, allowing the fall breeze to tease my hair. I take my time as I tuck loose strands behind my ears and continue into the palace gardens. If I run, the guards may chase me and haul me back, but if I act like I’m taking a stroll, hopefully, they will ignore me.

Besides, I have always loved nature, and the gardens near the fortress I grew up in are vast. They are one of the only places I am allowed to wander.

A smile tugs at my mouth as I walk down the stone pathway, the sounds of my footsteps and my surcoat swishing against my legs echoing in the morning air. My smile builds into a grin as I step into the next courtyard, surrounded by tall shrubs, and discover flowers of every color and shape blooming in beds bordered by stone.

A fountain in the center of the garden spills water into a shallow pool. I inch closer to it and let my fingers pass beneath the water. As it cascades against my skin, I close my eyes, surrendering to the moment and allowing it to slow my racing heart.

I will escape, and when I return home, I will ask Grandfather for more freedom. I could buy a veil to hide my scars. Plenty of women wear them.

Shuffling footsteps echo against the stone pathway, disrupting the serenity. I snap my eyes open as a young woman approaches me, carrying a basket full of ripe apples.

“Welcome back to Darhavva, My Lady.” She curtsies. “Would you care for some fruit?”

Why does everyone keep saying welcome back?

“Yes, thank you.”

She hands me the apple, and I take a bite, savoring the sweetness and the way it crunches in my mouth.

I smile at her. “What’s your name?”

Her eyes widen as she darts her gaze around. “You wish to know *my* name?”

“Yes.”

“Danika, My Lady.”

“Well, Danika, thank you for the apple. It’s wonderful.”

She nods and curtsies again before scurrying away.

At home, we always have a lot of apples. Though, we never have any as juicy as this one. I enjoy the last bite before discarding the core into a nearby shrub.

With renewed energy, I continue walking, and as I turn a corner, a flicker of movement catches my eyes. I freeze in place, my heart pounding in my chest, but as I peer closer, I realize it’s nothing more than a rabbit darting between the bushes. I shake my head and continue.

The further I venture into the gardens, the less manicured they become. The carefully tended flower beds give way to wilder, more untamed foliage.

My excitement builds as I get closer to freedom. It drives me forward and to the palace gates, where a guard lifts the portcullis.

Inwardly, I cheer. Outwardly, I walk with purpose—taking back the part of my life that was stolen from me.

Except...

I lift my hand to my face, touching the smoothness. I can't return to Grandfather's fortress looking like the wife of the heir to House of Crimson. I'll have to find Mazaline and ask her about the painting. Maybe there's a way to reverse what has happened to me.

The deeper I move into the city, the more my heart races with excitement. This is the first time I have been in a city since the pot of soup fell on me.

Near the front of a stone building, a small child huddles next to an even smaller child. Their clothes are full of patches and holes, and their hair is matted and unkempt. The girl's sunken eyes contrast with her hollowed cheeks, and the little boy's legs resemble nothing more than twigs.

They raise their heads with a spark of hope in their eyes as people hurry past, their expressions a mixture of desperation and longing. I cannot keep walking and ignore them. So, I step closer and extend my hand, offering them my bundle of bread and pastries. They need it more than I do.

They eagerly tear open the wrapping, their hungry gazes feasting upon the sight of the fresh bread and sweet pastries.

They rip off chunks of bread and take greedy bites of the food. Crumbs fall from their mouths and scatter on the ground, but they pay no attention.

Sadness swells inside me as I watch them. They have nothing, and hunger is probably a relentless companion.

It shouldn't be this way. Not for them. Not for anyone.

As they finish the last of the food, their tiny hands clutch at the empty wrapping, as if they can't bear to let go.

My heart breaking, I hand them my flagon.

"Thank you," the older one says.

"Of course."

I continue my journey, but when I enter the heart of the city, I come to a halt, struck by ten metal cages suspended from sturdy brackets. Each one is occupied by a man wearing a silver phoenix on his surcoat.

One of them, a young man with dark blond hair and vivid blue eyes, catches my gaze, and my heart squeezes, knowing his Fate.

My lungs burn as I continue past them, their gaunt faces lingering through my mind. Their agony. Their lost hope.

I have heard grim tales of how House of Crimson imprisons men and women from House of Silver in cages and leaves them to wither away. I never wanted to believe it was true.

My legs tremble with the overpowering urge to turn and help them, to offer some semblance of hope, but reason prevails. Even if I were able to set them free, they would be too weak to run, and we would all be caught.

The gods help us all!

I push aside the haunting vision of those caged men and concentrate on my determination to escape this city. It's all I have right now.

As I pass by a group of rough-looking men loitering outside a shop, one of them calls out to me. "Hello, beautiful lady, why don't you come here?"

I ignore him and quicken my pace, but the men follow me.

"Where are you going in such a hurry?" one of the men asks as he grabs me and tightens his meaty fingers around my thin arm. "Stay and spend time with us."

Panic grips me as I try to pull away, but he's too strong. "Please," I say pathetically.

They only move closer, their bodies crowding me.

"There's no need to beg. We'll give you what you want."

What I want is to be free!

Anger courses through my veins as I recall my brother teaching me to defend myself. Summoning my strength, I twist my arm sharply, escaping the man's grasp. When he reaches for me again, I kick his shin. He howls in pain and stumbles backward.

I pivot and run, my heart pounding in my chest. Behind me, the men curse and shout, but I don't dare look back. Instead, I weave through the crowded streets, my every step a prayer to lose them.

The city's gates shimmer on the horizon, offering a beacon of hope, of freedom. My lungs burn as I sprint toward them.

A hand seizes the back of my cloak, yanking me backward with a sudden, brutal force. I stumble and fall to the unforgiving ground, the cobblestones scraping against my knees.

The men surround me, their leering faces making my skin crawl. My mind screams for refuge, for safety, but I do not find it.

"What's the matter?" one of them sneers. "Don't you want to get to know me?"

Dust kicks into the air as I grab a small rock and scramble to my feet. They close in on me, their cruel laughter piercing my ears.

"Get away from me!" I scream.

When the same man from earlier reaches for me, I hit him with the rock, striking him between the eyes. He sways and touches his forehead as I rock back on my heels. Fury radiates from him as he removes his hand, seeing the blood.

Before I can react, he pulls a rune imbued with fire magic from his cloak and throws it at me. It hits my legs, sending flames searing up my body with alarming speed. I gasp, horror seizing me as I stumble back from the heat. The flames follow me, its fiery tendrils leaping toward my face. I cough as the smoke fills my lungs.

This is not how I die!

A throwing knife slices through the air with deadly precision, striking the man wielding fire magic in the throat. His flames recede, and I jerk back, my heart pounding as I instinctively rub my skin, anticipating the searing pain that doesn't come. I rub again, expecting the agony of burns, but it's simply not there.

What's happening to me?

Frantically, I pat my face, dreading what I'll find.

Nothing.

A second knife pierces the air, finding its mark in the back of another attacker. As he crumbles to the ground, Jasce emerges through the smoke, his sword drawn, and his eyes locked on my remaining assailants.

Run!

I sprint away from the danger, pushing through the pain in my knee and the fear pounding in my chest. Trees and buildings blur together as I focus on my sole objective—escaping.

As I near the gate, a guard looks at me, but he doesn't lift the portcullis. Instead, he stares blankly, refusing to give me the freedom I crave.

“Lift it,” I say, my voice wobbly and not at all commanding.

He continues to stare, his eyes locked on mine.

“Please,” I add, desperate for freedom, for a life beyond Darhavva and the House of Crimson.

His gaze shifts, focusing beyond my shoulder, and my heart sinks to the cobbled street.

I was so close.

Chapter Five



I EXHALE as Jasce steps into my line of sight, holding a broadsword covered in blood. Nausea rises in my throat as he leans over and wipes the blade in the grass.

“Lyra.” As he straightens, he slips the sword into his weapon belt. “Why did you try to run away?”

My pulse races harder and harder. “Did you kill those men?”

Fierceness smolders in his honey-colored eyes. “Nobody touches my wife.”

I turn away from him and let out a ragged breath. “Just let me go.”

Please, let me go.

I don't belong here.

He moves to face me and lifts my jaw, tilting my face toward his and speaks in a voice smelted with steel. “If you run, I will chase you. If you hide, I will find you.”

Ice freezes my veins as I remember those men in the cages. “Please, Jasce. I don't belong here.”

“Yes, you do.”

Frustration builds inside me as I shove his hand away, but he grabs my arm, keeping it secure in his grip. “Let's go home.”

My resolve hardens, and I lift my chin. “No.”

His jaw tics, his patience fraying. “What has gotten into you? You’re my wife. It is your duty to return with me.”

I’m not your wife.

I’m not your anything.

Those words beg for a voice, but I dare not utter them. Not when those men in cages, especially the one with blue eyes, haunt me. I cannot end up like them—abandoned, left to die.

I allow Jasce to turn me back toward the palace, to the unknown and the game of pretend I never agreed to.

AS JASCE LEADS me to his bedchamber, I keep my hands tucked away so he won’t see the way they tremble. He opens the door, and I slip under his arm.

My skin burns as my nerves tighten and coil inside me. He could kill me for this. I have heard of men killing their wives for less.

A shudder ripples down my back as I stroll to the sofa and sink to the soft cushion. Too bad it cannot swallow me and take me away from this man and his withering stare.

Truly, this man’s scowl could make the mightiest of men crumble.

“I’m sorry,” I say in a rush.

He doesn’t speak.

“I’m really, really sorry.” Maybe if I apologize enough, he won’t throw me in a cage along with those men from House of Silver.

He visually stiffens, but he still doesn’t speak.

“Jasce,” I say, trying again. “I’m sor—”

“—stop!”

I flinch and slip my fingers higher into my sleeves.

Frustration sparks behind his eyes as he speaks. “I don’t need you to apologize. I need you to promise to never do something that foolhardy again.”

“I know how to take care of myself.”

“Do you?” He arches an eyebrow. “You were covered in flames when I found you.”

Instinctively, I run my fingertips against my skin. The fire hadn’t harmed me. Not even a little.

“Just because your magic protects you from fire doesn’t mean you should chase trouble. There are other dangers to worry about.”

Lyra is immune to fire?

Jasce widens his stance and crosses his arms, as though he’s fortifying his position and plans to stay for a while. “Why were you in the city?”

“I wanted t-to take a walk.”

He barely gives me time to finish before demanding. “Why did you run?”

“I was afraid,” I say honestly.

“I was there. You had no need to be afraid.”

Somehow that thought isn’t comforting, even if he did kill three men for me.

“I didn’t know what was going on.”

“So, you decided to run out of the gates?” He doesn’t wait for my answer. “Have you lost your mind?”

“No.” *Maybe.*

Loose black strands fall over Jasce’s forehead as he shakes his head. “You know what is beyond the Darhavva palace.”

Of course, I do. I’m not uneducated.

In fact, I’m very educated.

“The Giiiana desert,” I say after a moment.

I studied a map of the Giiana desert many summers ago. House of Crimson, with its much larger territory, sits above the desert, and House of Silver's territory is situated below it. The desert acts as a buffer—providing our smaller territory some protection from annihilation. It is the border towns and villages, in the areas where the desert narrows, that see the bulk of the fighting. And once every few seasons, House of Crimson will make a push to occupy land south of the Giiana desert.

Everyone knows this.

He really is irritating.

Poor Lyra. Is her every move questioned?

Maybe she's a prisoner in her own home too.

“I was headed there anyway,” I blurt out, then inwardly admonish myself when I realize my mistake. I'm obviously no good at subterfuge. Or maybe he's just better at interrogations.

He said Lyra never apologizes. So, before he can ask if I've lost my mind again—and I can tell he's going to—I decide to own my mistake. I cross my arms and lift my chin, mimicking his earlier stance.

“I think the desert is beautiful,” I state, as if that explains everything.

I stare at him for a few moments, challenging him to question me. He holds my gaze with ease as he sits in a chair opposite of me. He obviously has never doubted himself and is comfortable with someone staring at him, whereas my entire life has been the opposite. And so, for all my momentary false bravado, I back down first and look away.

Silence weighs between us as I fidget and inspect my fingernails. Then I hear soft, rhythmic tapping. When I look at Jasce, he is still sitting there, his empty goblet propped against his leg, and he is absentmindedly—annoyingly—tapping his thumb on the rim. Tap...tap...tap. That signet ring drums a slow, steady beat. His gaze travels down my body and comes to rest on my hands in my lap.

“Why would you risk walking in the Giiana desert without any provisions?” He continues tapping out a disjointed beat against the goblet. “You know how quickly the landscape can shift and how easy it is to get disoriented.”

“I had food,” I counter weakly. “I gave it away.”

“You gave it away?” He lifts his brow, as if challenging me, or waiting for me to crack.

“Yes. I gave my bread, pastries, and my flagon to two little children who were starving.”

His thumb stops tapping. But he doesn’t respond to my comment.

Seeing the opportunity to take the focus off me, I interrogate him. “Do you know you have starving children in your streets?”

“They aren’t my streets.”

I blink and shake my head. “Then, whose are they?”

“Every House of Crimson city belongs to Jerrod. You know that.”

“I don’t *know* that.”

“Jerrod is the chieftain. The cities belong to him. The rules, the taxes, the people—everything.”

“But you are his son. Surely, he listens—”

Jasce raises his hand, cutting me off. “I don’t want to talk about my father. I want to talk about you making me chase you all over Darhavva.”

I clench my teeth and stay silent.

His forehead creases as he studies me for several breaths. “What happened to you? Ever since I returned to Darhavva yesterday, you have been acting different.”

Instead of replying, I clench my teeth even harder, refusing to offer any explanation. He wouldn’t understand, and I refuse to be a rotting corpse in a cage.

“Lyra, look at me,” he commands.

Frustration grips me as I lift my chin to meet the storm churning in his eyes. "I'm just tired."

"Then you will stay here for the rest of the day. Do not leave this room."

"Are you punishing me?" I don't bother hiding my disbelief.

"Yes." He stands and leaves the bedchamber.

Fantastic, indeed!

Impulsively, I take off my shoe and launch it at the door, striking it dead center. I remove my other shoe and throw that one too. It strikes the same area as I fall back against the sofa and glare up at the ceiling.

At least I still have good aim.

A long sigh escapes me as I get up from the sofa and grab my shoes.

If I don't want to be another victim to House of Crimson, then I'll have to act like Lyra for a little while longer.

I look around the room, but I find no evidence a woman ever inhabited this space. How can I act like someone I don't know?

Maybe if I go through her possessions, I might understand her. First, I'll have to figure out a way to return to her bedchamber.

Maybe if I throw more shoes, Jasce will return. I smile as I think of launching shoes at his arrogant face.

I SPEND the entire day alone. I pace the room, braid and unbraided my hair, stare out the window, and sit on the sofa. The only area of the room I stay far away from is the bed. It's *his* bed.

The last thing I want is for him to find me asleep there. He may think it's an invitation for more. A shudder ripples down

my back at the mere thought.

Even if I didn't dislike him, I still wouldn't want to share his bed. He's probably forceful and quick. Didn't Asha say some men don't care about a woman's pleasure? I hadn't really been paying attention to her. I was too busy reading.

Jasce is probably like that, a taker and not a giver.

I have spent my entire life fearing this man, his family, and House of Crimson. As a child, I was told to never open the door to anyone wearing their coat of arms.

"They will use you. Or they will kill you," Mother would say.

What would she tell me to do now? Would she tell me to run or to stab him? Bile rises in my throat. I have never stabbed anyone, nor do I want to.

Another shudder ripples down my back as I glance at his bed again, taking in the mattress and the maroon bedding. It's too close to the color crimson.

Will he force me if I don't give in to him soon?

I raise my hand to my mouth, stifling the overwhelming urge to scream.

Four summers ago, when I was fourteen, I developed a friendship with one of the stable hands. I followed him everywhere, and soon, I started thinking about him romantically. One day, I grew bold enough to tell him how much I adored him, and he had stared at me with disgust smoldering in his eyes.

I ran away, and when I reached my bedchamber, I shattered every looking glass. There was no need for a reflection to tell me what I already knew. I could feel the scars, feel the wound they shaped inside my chest.

That's the closest I have ever gotten to kissing someone. The moment Izaak looked upon me with disgust, the urge vanished, and I vowed to never allow someone that close again.

Now, I'm stuck in Jasce's bedchamber.

I raise my hands to my flushed cheeks and let out a sigh.

The door swings open, and Jasce enters with a tray of food and more wine. I don't speak as he sets the items down on the table and turns to find me sitting on the sofa, my eyes locked on him.

"Come eat," he says, his tone crisp.

I stand and smooth my surcoat as he pours a goblet of wine and nods toward a chair. The fading sun skips through the window, casting amber shadows on the wall as I move to the table and sit.

I pick up a piece of bread, tear off a chunk, and eat. He takes a chair near me, but he doesn't touch the food as I continue to munch on the bread, roasted quail, and blackberries. When I finish the last of the food, I lean back against my chair and exhale. He stares at me, his expression unreadable.

"I have never seen you eat more than a few bites at a time," he says after a moment.

"Oh." I brush crumbs from the front of my surcoat. "I was very hungry."

"You always pick at your food."

"I was very very hungry," I offer like that explains everything.

Warmth scours my cheeks as he continues to look at me like he doesn't believe my explanation. Should I eat less? Is that what he expects?

"Would you prefer I don't eat as much?"

"You should eat as much as you would like and not care what I think."

"Mother says I eat too much," I say before I realize I am offering a piece of myself to him—a real piece that is not shrouded in this lie I was forced into.

Of course, Mother said it after she started consuming the crushed petals of a flower a shifty merchant sold her.

Everything changed after that. She slept more. Dark shadows appeared below her eyes, and she would disappear for days.

Asha tried everything to stop her. She even searched for the name of the flower so she could find an antidote, but she wasn't successful.

"Maybe that is why you usually pick at your food." Jasce glances between the empty plates and where I sit. "You shouldn't listen to your mother."

An exhale escapes me as I stare down at my hands.

"I want to talk about last night," he says.

Last night?

Nerves tighten in my throat as I grab my goblet and take a quick drink of wine. The last thing I want to talk about is last night.

He tilts his head to the side, studying me. "Did something happen while I was away?"

Golden strands fall against my cheeks as I shake my head.

"Then, what is it?"

"It's me," I say after a moment. "I'm not ready."

"When will you be ready?"

Never. "I don't know."

"You're not being honest with me."

"I don't know you, Jasce." Now, that's an honest answer. "And I feel like I should *know* you before..." Maybe if I stall him enough, I can think of a way out of this. All of it. The palace. Being intimate with him.

"You have known me for summers."

"Have I?" I ask, knowing he's probably been at war more than he's been home lately. Everyone knows the chieftain made warriors out of his sons. It's no secret. "When have we really had time to know each other?"

Jasce folds his arms and stares at me for several long beats. "You know enough."

“No.” I grit my teeth for what I’m about to say. “I want to know everything about you.”

I hope he starts at the beginning and talks very slowly. He seems arrogant enough that I could possibly buy several days of peace and time to plan.

When he remains silent, I press him. “Share something with me.”

Jasce raises both hands slightly, palms up. “Like what?”

“Anything. Tell me about your family.”

He sighs. “You know my family.”

“What do you like about each of them?” I try to smile and act interested, as if there is anything to like about this family of murderers.

“This is ridiculous,” he says with a frown.

Instead of allowing it to bother me, I offer a suggestion. “Start with your brothers and sisters.”

I know the names and ages of his siblings from things I have heard Grandfather say, but not much more.

To my astonishment, Jasce complies. “Reeve is intelligent, but sometimes reckless. Aleksander is confident. Jude...” Jasce pauses and smiles, and I’m amazed that his facial muscles even know how to react in such a way. “He makes me laugh.”

I’m at a loss for words, but apparently Jasce has found his.

“Women think he’s diverting too.” He leans in and shakes a finger. “Eventually that’s going to get him in trouble.”

Probably so.

Jasce continues, his tone softening as he speaks about his sister. “Wrenley is courageous and compassionate. My uncle used to call us the loud, tenacious twins. We were always in trouble.”

Jasce has a twin sister?

“And Zerah.” The lines near his mouth soften as he refers to his youngest sister. “She’s sweet and kind, and she knows no stranger.”

I hadn’t expected this. I’m not sure what I expected, but certainly not this. “What about your parents?”

He lifts one shoulder in a shrug, as if he cannot be bothered to lift both. But his jaw betrays him. He clenches and unclenches it several times before he speaks in a sharp tone. “You know all about them.”

“I want to know more.”

“No. You don’t.” Torchlight throws shadows across his face as he stands and crosses to the fireplace, his shoulders stiff.

I lace my fingers together and frown, hating that I asked the wrong question.

“You’re free to retire to your bedchamber.” When I don’t move, he says tersely over his shoulder. “Goodnight, Lyra.”

I hurry to my feet and leave his bedchamber, relieved to have escaped his bed for another night.

Chapter Six



SUNLIGHT FILTERING through the window wakes me. I squint my eyes at the golden light and yawn. Another night has passed, and I'm still stuck in the Darhavva palace.

I stand, cross the room to the armoire, and grab a dark purple cotehardie. As I pull on the gown, I think about my younger sisters, Emerin and Tahira. They would love these clothes. I smile as I step into the corridor, still thinking about them. I even twirl my gown a little bit, watching the way the silk swishes against my legs, but as I take my second turn in the corridor, a strange man moves into my path and throws his arms around me. I gasp as he pulls me close, squeezing me so tight I can only draw in half a breath.

“Lyra!”

I stay stiff as he holds me a moment longer before releasing me. My hem lashes my legs as I move back, gaining distance.

“It’s so good to see you again.” His eyes crinkle as he grins. “You look as beautiful as ever.”

I open and close my mouth.

The gods are my witness. I try to figure out who he could be. I take in his bronzed skin, his black hair, his friendly eyes. Then, my gaze drops to his hand where the signet ring occupies his thumb. He’s one of Jasce’s brothers. But which one?

His expression shifts to concern. “Has something happened? Are you all right?”

“No... I-I’m—”

“—in need of rescuing?” he interjects, his face suddenly solemn.

“What?” I say, shocked. “I’m—”

“— sorry you married my grumpy older brother instead of me?” He flashes the most brilliant, albeit lopsided, smile I have ever seen.

“Y-your...”

“Even more handsome than the last time you saw me?” Mirth glints in his amber eyes as he grins. “You do have a way with words, Lyra.”

I can’t help but laugh at his wit.

He glances around the empty corridor. “Where are we going?”

“I was looking for Jasce,” I lie, having no wish to tell him I was thinking of avoiding his brother for the entire day.

“Well, you’re in luck. I know exactly where to find him.” Boldy, he puts his arm around me and sweeps me down the hall.

Perfect...

Maybe later he can tell me where I can run off the edge of a cliff. It would be easier than facing Jasce again.

As we walk, Jasce’s brother tells me all about being in Karra, where his sister Wrenley lives. I marvel as he speaks of the Bloodstone tribe and living among them. Grandfather would never allow me to go to one of their cities. He hates the Bloodstone tribe almost as much as he hates House of Crimson. He says their magic is too dark.

Jasce’s brother only stops speaking when we reach a door, and voices drift to where we stand.

“Did you think I wouldn’t notice what you did, Jasce?” a woman asks.

“Of course not. You notice everything.”

“Your father will not be pleased that you gave all that grain to the people.”

Jasce’s brother grabs my hand and pulls me into the room before I can stop him. Jasce glances up from the table, where he sits next to an older woman who wears a black cotehardie and a silver coronet. Her amber eyes meet mine, her gaze sending an icy chill through my veins.

“What did you do now, Jasce?” his brother asks, still holding my hand.

When Jasce’s eyes narrow, his brother pulls free, and I run my fingers against my gown.

“He emptied the grainer and gave it to the people,” the woman says in a disapproving tone.

“Oh, you naughty boy,” he says with a grin.

“*Aleksander.*” A fierce frown tugs at her mouth. “This isn’t the time for your jesting.”

Aleksander, of course. He’s Jerrod’s second oldest son.

Jasce stands and moves to his brother. “Welcome to Darhavva.”

“Did you miss me?” Aleksander asks “I know our mother did.”

I glance between the woman and the two men, noticing the same bronzed skin and black hair.

“Of course,” Jasce says.

“He’s lying.” Aleksander looks at me. “Jude is his favorite.”

“Jude is everyone’s favorite,” his mother supplies. “He doesn’t test our nerves.”

Jasce takes my hand and squeezes his fingers around mine. My stomach tightens as I force myself to not pull away and

shun him in front of his family.

“We’re going for a walk,” he announces.

“So soon?” Aleksander asks with a fake pout planted across his mouth. “I wanted to ask Lyra about being in Sharhava.”

Lyra was in Sharhava? The House of Crimson’s capital city?

Jasce leads me from the room.

“Jasce,” I begin the moment we’re alone in the hallway. “I...”

“It’s just a walk, Lyra.” He continues through the palace and into the courtyard—the same one I had strolled through the day before.

I glance up at him, momentarily mesmerized by the sunlight glinting in his eyes. It reveals gold flecks that spark within the depths of his irises. “You gave grain to your people.”

He stares over at me but doesn’t speak.

“That was kind of you.”

Instead of replying, he leads me to the fountain I had admired the day before. I allow my fingers to pass beneath the water pouring from the top of the stone statue.

“If I had a garden, I could grow food for people who have none.” *Like I do at home.*

His brow lifts.

“I enjoy growing things.” I’m offering too much of myself again, but I cannot seem to stop.

“You never did before.”

“Maybe I have changed.”

Something flickers behind his stare as his brow lifts even higher. “In the six months since I last saw you?”

I blink and glance down at my feet.

He reaches for my other hand and pulls me against him. I suck in a quick breath as he gazes down at me, locking his brown eyes on mine. “Are you sure you haven’t been visiting the apothecary?”

“I haven’t.”

“You’re shivering.”

I am?

His grip tightens as he draws me even closer—close enough to feel his heat through my thin cotehardie. “You never did that before.”

He lifts his hand to my neck, touching the sensitive skin near my throat. Tingles spread through me, undeniable tingles that start from the tips of my fingers and travel all the way up my arms.

What kind of magic is this?

“I haven’t...” I clamp my mouth shut, not wanting to tell him about my lack of experience. If I talk about it, I’ll remember being rejected and shattering all my looking glasses.

Lightly, Jasce strokes my skin, his touch fleeting, yet still drawing warmth to my veins. He lifts my chin, and I freeze as he lowers his mouth.

No!

At the last minute, I turn my face, and his lips brush against my cheek. He stiffens and frees me as my heart thumps wildly against my ribcage.

Frustration flares in his eyes as I will myself to count, to calm the nerves twisting into tight knots inside me.

One.

Two.

It’s not enough, the counting. The nerves are still there, tightening and coiling, and the first man I have ever rejected is still standing here, his eyes understandably distant.

“I’m s-sorry,” I whisper.

A muscle jumps in his jaw as he slips his hands into his weapon belt.

“I really am sor—”

“—if you apologize again, I’ll pick you up and put you in the fountain.”

I glance between the fountain and the stiff man. “But Jasce, I—”

He picks me up, and I squeal as he lowers me into the fountain. The water instantly soaks through my clothes before I can scramble to the edge and climb over the side. Water droplets drip down my legs as I lean over and grab the wet fabric.

“That was a terrible thing to do,” I grumble, wringing the water from my cotehardie.

“I told you to stop apologizing all the time.”

“I cannot help it.” Chills slice through me as I continue squeezing and twisting my gown.

“Why?”

My throat turns dry as Grandfather’s face sears my vision, and a memory overcomes me.

“Do you know why our guest left, Annora?”

“No, Grandfather,” I say, my voice barely carrying over the sound of my pulse roaring in my ears.

“Because you didn’t listen to me. You didn’t stay hidden.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You’re sorry,” he mocks. “Is that all you have to offer?”

I blink, forcing away the memory. “Sometimes an apology is all I have.”

Jasce removes his cloak and places it around my shivering body. “Let’s go back.”

His heat engulfs me as I manage a nod and pull the edges of his cloak closer.

When we reach his bedchamber, he offers me a quick look and disappears down the corridor.

I wait until his footsteps fade, then I step toward Lyra's room. I hurry inside and change out of my soaking wet clothes.

Goosebumps form on my skin as I grab a cloth from a shelf and use it to dry my body. It's not enough to chase away the cold. My teeth chatter as I hurry into a clean chemise and then a clean gown.

"It's all Jasce's fault," I grumble under my breath as I step into the corridor.

"Lyra," a soft voice echoes through the air, and I freeze, my heart hammering inside my chest. "Come here."

I turn to find a thin, older woman with gray hair standing only a few feet from me.

"Come here," she repeats.

Nerves thrum at the base of my throat as I step toward her, and she grabs me, pulling me close. It's the second time today a stranger has embraced me. It's not any less odd, that feeling of unfamiliar arms holding me against them.

"My dear, dear Lyra," she murmurs as she draws me even closer to her frail body.

It takes everything in me to not pull away as she yanks me into Lyra's spacious bedchamber.

She pushes me to the mattress, but she doesn't sit. She stands in front of me, towering over me like a taskmaster.

"Tell your mother how things have been," she says, her tone carrying a blend of warmth and frostiness.

This woman is Lyra's mother?

"I..."

Her brow wrinkles as she studies me. "Tell them you hit your head when you were away."

"I d-don't understand."

Her expression shifts, turning hard as she kneels in front of me and grabs my arms, pinning them against my sides. “Tell them, Lyra.”

“That I hit my head?”

She nods. “Have you done your duties to your husband?”

I swallow hard.

A frown tugs at her mouth. “You must give him a child. Our position will only be strengthened here when you give House of Crimson an heir.”

“But I barely know him,” I say, needing a friendly face, someone to confide in like my sisters.

Unfortunately, I do not find it with her.

Her eyes narrow as her frown deepens. “You don’t need to know him to spread your legs for him.”

My chest tightens at those words. Mother said something similar to Asha on her wedding day. She didn’t know I was listening, but I heard every word, every hushed whisper, all the things I wasn’t supposed to hear. When Asha left with a pale face, I followed her, wanting to comfort her, but she was beyond comforting.

The next morning, I asked her if she was all right, but she didn’t answer. She had sat there stone faced, her skin still pale, her lips pressed closely together.

“Lyra, are you listening to me?”

I blink, dragging my attention back to Lyra’s mother. “Yes.”

“Good, then return to your husband’s bedchamber. Do your duty to your family.”

My heart swells with empathy for Lyra. We’re more alike than I first thought. We’re both threaded to a Fate we cannot sever. She’s expected to strengthen the House of Crimson and her family by giving them an heir. And I’m caged inside a fortress and forced to hide when Grandfather entertains.

Neither of us is given a choice. At least, that's the way I have interpreted Lyra's life.

I stand and smooth my cotehardie as Lyra's mother hands me a silk pouch. "You left this."

I take it and leave the room.

Thankfully, Lyra's mother doesn't follow me as I slip into Jasce's bedchamber. I carry the pouch to the table and empty the contents. A brush, ruby necklace, and a folded piece of parchment hit the wooden surface. The brush still has golden strands stuck in the bristles. I touch my hair, feeling the softness.

Lyra's hair isn't like my reddish-brown strands that always want to curl, especially if the weather is unusually hot.

I pick up the folded piece of parchment, open it, and read.

*I will tell him everything if you do not give my family the coin
you promised.*

THERE IS NO NAME, no address. I shake my head. Obviously, Lyra is trying to blackmail someone, but who? And why?

I lift the necklace, feeling its weight. I could feed an entire orphanage with what this is worth.

Sunlight glistens off the gems as I stare at the gaudy thing for a breath, before lowering it back to the table. I would feel ridiculous wearing this. But, if Lyra were here, she would probably wear it with grace.

For the first time since waking up in Lyra's body, I wonder what has happened to her.

If I am here, where is she?

Chapter Seven



A FIRE CRACKLES in the hearth, and moonlight tumbles through the tall windows when Jasce returns to his bedchamber. I stand, my long cotehardie swaying against my legs as he closes the door and turns to face me.

My heart races as he scans my body. Despite the heavy fabric of my gown, my skin tingles under his intense scrutiny.

“Remove your cotehardie,” he commands, his voice impatient, as if he’s grown tired of me holding him at an arm’s length.

My breath catches, and I draw my hands into my sleeves. If only I were brave like Asha or fierce like Emerin. They would never allow a man to speak to them in this manner.

“N-no.”

“Remove it,” he says, his voice flat, emotionless.

Shivers of alarm race along my spine as I stumble back a step and try to think of something to say, some way to diffuse the situation. Unfortunately, and regrettably, my mind is left blank.

What has happened?

He has been demanding before now, but not like this.

Jasce takes a step toward me, closing some of the space I created. “Do not disobey me. You are my wife, and you will do as I say.”

Be brave.

Do not allow him to make you tremble.

“Or what?” Anger floods my veins and fuels me. “What will you do, Jasce? Will you take me outside, tie me to a post, and have me whipped?” Now, those are words Asha would have uttered.

As Jasce stands stiffly, staring at me like he would like to punish me, I move back to the sofa and sink to the soft cushion.

A muscle tics in his jaw as he remains in the center of the room, his eyes glinting with frustration. “Do you think this is a game?”

“I k-know it’s not a game.” Asha’s pale face after her wedding night invades my vision. “But I will not be forced to lie with you. Not by you or by my *mother*.”

“Your mother?”

I stare down at my lap.

“Did your mother speak to you?”

I nod.

“What did she say?”

Nerves tighten in my throat as I force the words. “She thinks that if I give you an heir, it will increase her social status.” I see no reason to withhold the truth.

“Your mother has always fought to better herself.”

Instead of answering him, I pull my fingers into my sleeves.

He watches me for several breaths, his gaze as intense as the mid-day sun. “That habit of pulling your fingers into your sleeve. You never did that before.”

I swallow and pull my fingers even higher. “I fell, hit my head.” The lie escapes my lips in a rush.

“And you woke up timid, with the urge to garden and feed the poor? What are you not telling me?”

I tighten my lips together and remain silent. The truth would only result in one of two Fates: he would declare me insane and lock me away, or—doubtful but possible—he would believe me and kill me. He would have no choice.

“You will not speak?” he asks.

I shake my head.

His jaw hardens as he turns away from me and removes his weapon belt, then his surcoat. My eyes widen as I tell myself to look away.

But I don't.

His muscles bulge and twitch as he moves, revealing a body that is not just strikingly toned, but also rippled with the kind of power that only comes from summers of intense physical training.

My gaze is bound to him as he leans down to remove his boots. I have flipped through books with sketches of naked men, but those drawings do not compare to *seeing* a man.

Torchlight illuminates him, drawing my eyes back to him over and over. Especially, the orange and red flame covering the right side of his chest. The edges are defined by dark, almost black, ink-like pigmentation, which makes the birthmark appear, as if it's leaping from his chest.

Mother's voice whispers in my ears. “*Every Hematite who has magic is born with a flame birthmark somewhere on their body.*”

I should have known Jasce would have crimson fire magic.

He straightens and smirks, clearly enjoying the effect he has on me. I swallow down the lump in my throat.

“Do I impress you?”

“N-no.” *Stop stammering, you fool.*

“You lie so convincingly.”

“Maybe I am convincing because I am not lying.”

“Maybe you don’t recognize sarcasm.” He moves to the left side of the bed. “Come to the bed, Lyra.”

I shake my head.

“I won’t touch you.”

“I like the sofa.” Determined to stay away from him, I tap the cushioned back. “It’s very comfortable.”

“This is ridiculous.” He stands, crosses the bedchamber, and leans down, scooping me into his arms.

A gasp escapes me as his heat seeps through my clothes, and his scent invades my senses, a mixture of leather, cherry wood, and smoke.

My heart races as I struggle to free myself. He only strengthens his grip, holding me closer to his chest.

“Put me down.” I squirm in his arms, needing space, needing to not think about his muscular arms wrapped around my body or the way his right hand rests beneath my bottom.

This is Jasce. Heir to House of Crimson.

He ignores me and carries me to the bed, where he drops me on the right side of the mattress. “I want my wife next to me when I sleep.”

My first thought is to leap to the floor and hurry back to my sofa, but he would likely just pick me up again. And I do not want his arms around me. So, as he settles on the opposite side of the bed, I sink into the soft mattress and decide to concede. But only to this.

However, I slide to the edge, keeping as much distance between myself and the man I have no business sharing a bed with.

“Do you think I bite?” he asks dryly.

“You might.”

“Only if you ask me to.”

I gasp and roll over to face him. He smiles, and my stomach flips.

I immediately frown. The last thing I want is for him to smile at me.

He's roguishly handsome when he smiles. I think I read that word in one of my favorite books. Roguish.

Perhaps it is the way his black hair falls over his forehead, giving him an uncharacteristic air of carefree charm. Or maybe it's the way his eyes crinkle at the corners when he smiles, as if they hold a treasure trove of secrets. They probably do.

The kind of secrets a woman like me shouldn't wonder about, but I do. Especially at night when I'm all alone. I think about those heroes in the books I read, and I wonder what it would be like to have someone want to touch me, kiss me, or bed me.

Of course, I always scold myself when the sun returns, and I'm reminded of who I am. Heroes do not want scarred heroines.

I blink, taking in Jasce, lying too close to me.

His words replay through my thoughts. *"Only if you ask me to."*

"Why would I want you to bite me?"

"Because you would like what I would do next." When I stare wide-eyed at him, he continues in a low, sensual voice. "I always kiss and lick every area I bite."

"T-hat's..." Warmth rushes to my cheeks as I jerk my bedcovers to my chin.

"I could bite you and show you."

My mouth falls open as merriment twinkles in his eyes.

"I'm jesting with you. Well...sort of."

I inch even further away from him...and promptly fall off the bed. My cotehardie billows around me as I land in a pitiful heap on the marble.

His laughter brings fire to my cheeks as I hurry to my feet and glare at him.

“It’s not funny. I could have been hurt.”

His mouth twitches, as if he’s resisting the urge to smile again. “But you’re not.”

“How would you know?” I frown and rub my hip.

“Would you like me to kiss it and make it all better?”

A huff escapes me as I lie back on the edge of the mattress. “Laugh all you want, and when you fall asleep, I will push you off.”

“I look forward to it.”

I roll onto my back, pinning my focus to the ceiling.

Impossible man!

There’s no way I am going to survive being his pretend wife.

Chapter Eight



THE FOLLOWING MORNING, I'm relieved to wake to an empty bed. I roll to my back and stare up at the painting on the ceiling. It depicts the battle of the houses. After the historic war between House of Crimson and House of Silver a century ago, the houses split apart.

Why would Jasce choose this painting? The two houses were united before that war. Now, they're further apart than the desert that separates them.

The door creaks open, and a young woman enters Jasce's bedchamber and curtsies. "Come quickly, My Lady. Lady Dinah wishes to see you."

Confusion muddles my thoughts, but there's no time for contemplation before the young woman pulls me from the bed and helps me smooth my creased cotehardie and tidy my hair.

The woman ushers me through the corridor and into a grand study. At its center sits a wide table, where Jasce's mother sits wearing black again.

The young woman curtsies before Lady Dinah. "I have brought Lyra to you, as you requested."

Lady Dinah dismisses the woman with a wave of her hand, then gestures for me to sit in the chair near her. Apprehension nestles deep in my chest as I obey her.

Her cool gaze flickers over me, from the top of my head to the tips of my toes. I mimic her pose and try to think of something calming, like a meadow full of flowers or rain

pattering against a roof. Unfortunately, the images refuse to conjure and take me away from this woman and her scrutiny.

She tilts her head, still staring, still condemning me with her eyes. “You’re tiny. You should eat more.” With a dismissive wave of her hand, she adds, “You will fatten up inside the Darhavva palace. Our cooks are the finest in all Tarrobane.”

It’s impossible to be offended when she’s talking about a body that doesn’t belong to me.

But it’s true. Lyra is on the slimmer side and her breasts do not fill a gown the way mine do, but that is no reason for this woman to insult Lyra.

“Do you know why I asked you to meet with me?” Lady Dinah asks after several moments of insufferable silence.

“No.”

“Because you’re failing my son.”

Does this woman have anything kind to say about her son’s wife?

I sigh and force myself to play this game. “How am I failing him?”

“You should already be with child.”

Poor Lyra.

First, she’s too skinny. Now, she’s expected to be a broodmare.

“It’s only been six months.” At least, that’s what Jasce said. I have no way of knowing how long he has been married to Lyra.

“Six months would have been ample time had you not allowed your husband to leave on your wedding night.” Lady Dinah crushes a bundle of dried lavender against the table. “Do you know what this is?”

“Lavender?” I answer, uncertain of where this is leading.

“It’s death. It was once alive, and now it is not. Is that what you desire for my son and his legacy?”

My unease deepens, my gaze dropping to the crushed lavender. How do I respond to a woman like her?

“Do you know what became of Jasce’s first wife?”

Jasce had another wife?

“No.”

Lady Dinah brushes her fingers over the dried lavender, her touch almost tender. Though, I suspect a woman like her is incapable of being tender. “She defied my wishes, and now she’s dead.”

My breath hitches as I slip my hands into my sleeves.

“*Count, Annora.*”

Mother’s voice calms me as I count to five before answering. “I have no intention of defying your wishes.”

“Good, then you will not force me to use any of them.” Lady Dinah rises to her feet, grabs my arm, and pulls me to the window.

In the courtyard below, I spot at least ten women. They are beautiful, young, and have flawless skin. One of them sits away from the rest on a stone bench. Sunlight shimmers off her black hair and bronzed skin as she reads a book with a small dog on her lap.

“How will you use them?” The question escapes my lips before I think of reining it in.

“If you cannot provide my son with an heir within the next summer, he will lie with them, one by one, until they conceive. Those who cannot carry a child will meet their end.”

My gaze locks on the young women, the burden of their Fate heavy in my chest. They remind me of myself, locked in a world they cannot escape and tied to a Fate they cannot rewrite.

“That will not be necessary.” Somehow, my words come out brave and defiant in the face of Lady Dinah’s dire

ultimatum. The kind of ultimatum no one should ever utter.

Lady Dinah's eyes narrow. I imagine this is the kind of woman who devours those who show any weakness. So, I keep my back straight and my gaze locked firmly ahead.

Her stare remains fixed on me for a moment before she speaks. "I hope, for your sake and for theirs, that your words hold true."

Words are all I have ever known.

"You do not have looks, Annora," Grandfather would say. *"So, you will improve your mind."*

But I am no longer the obedient granddaughter, nor am I the sheltered sister kept from the world. For some reason, my Fate has become a negotiation, a precarious balance between my desires and the demands of being Jasce's wife.

Well...his pretend wife.

As Lady Dinah turns from the window, she speaks. "Jasce is my son," she says. "And his future and his legacy are intertwined with yours."

"I understand," I say because that is what she expects.

"I don't make threats lightly. The future of our people rests on your shoulders."

That's a horrifying thought.

"I understand the weight, My Lady."

She studies me, as if assessing the depth of my resolve. "Then prove it."

Without another word, she walks away, leaving me in the study to dwell on everything she said and the potential consequences.

I must leave here and find the healer. And I must do it soon. If not...

I press my hand to the middle of my chest in an attempt to keep my racing heart from bursting.

If I obey Lady Dinah's wishes, my future is one of duty and sacrifice. But I don't want to obey her. I want to find my way home, to me—the *real* me.

More importantly, I need to be with my sisters. Everything makes sense when I am near them.

Right now, nothing makes sense—how I got here, why I am here, or how to make this all go away.

My life has not been perfect, and there are things I would wish to change, if I could. But up until now, it has at least been *my* life.

A horrifying thought strikes me as I stare out over the courtyard again. Maybe my Fate isn't within my control. Maybe it's shaped by a river that flows through the lives of those around me. Maybe that's what Mazaline, the healer, wanted when she gave that painting to me.

Everything here reflects silver and crimson. Right and wrong. Past and present. Darkness and light.

The choices I make from this point forward will mold my Fate and determine the chapters of my story that have yet to be written.

Chapter Nine



AS I WALK AWAY from the study, it takes monumental restraint not to run. Because there's only one sensible thing to do after conversing with a woman like Lady Dinah: run.

I would do nearly anything to feel the wind in my hair, the thrill of my feet pounding against the stone floor, the exhilaration of escaping impending doom. But alas, here I am, trapped within this body as incapable of flight as a terracotta swan.

Even if I could fly, I imagine Jasce would sprout wings and catch me. He made himself perfectly clear. He will chase me if I run and find me if I try to hide.

Fantastic, indeed.

Now, a dangerous barbarian is determined to cage me.

Trapped or not, I still require food. Asha says feasting is the balm for everything, an opinion I wholeheartedly endorse, and so, I venture toward the kitchen.

As I walk into the kitchen and sit at the table, a young, red-haired woman serves me wheat bread, aged cheese, and a platter full of fruit. She reminds me of my younger sisters, Tahira and Emerin. They have the same color hair and the same freckles peppered across their noses.

While I savor the bread and plop grapes in my mouth, I think about Lyra and the items her mother gave me. They don't tell me much. Only that Lyra enjoys expensive jewels,

and she may be trying to blackmail someone. But who is her target?

“Get out of here!” I jump at the shrill voice and glance up as a short woman shoos a child and his dog—a very dirty child and dog—out the back door. “Go! Look at you. What in Hades have you two gotten into? Go wash before you step foot in this kitchen.” The door closes, and the woman yanks it open again. “And the dog stays outside. You know the rules.”

When she turns back around, she wears a smile, mutters something about biscuits, and resumes her task at a nearby table.

The hum of conversation returns to the room as the kitchen staff does their practiced dance, preparing for the next meal, circling each other but never colliding. They each know what is expected of them and what they must do, step-by-step, to complete their tasks.

I need to focus on getting back to my own life.

And I need a better plan.

There’s a mystery to be unraveled, memories to be reclaimed, and a path home to be found. They’re all pieces of the same puzzle.

The thought brings a quick smile to my lips as I continue to feast on the food the red-haired woman provided.

I’m good at puzzles.

First, I must find Mazaline.

“There you are,” the same young woman from earlier says to me as she breezes into the kitchen. “You are supposed to come with me.”

“To where?” I manage, all while mentally scheming potential escape routes involving baskets, ropes, and a healthy dose of boldness.

“The apothecary. Lady Dinah wishes for your womb to be blessed.”

My mouth gapes open before I snap it closed.

What does that even mean...a blessed womb?

Nerves tighten inside me as I stand, brush my hands against a cloth, and face this newest development.

“Lead the way, dear guide,” I say with false enthusiasm.

The young woman rolls her eyes. “I have a name.”

“What is it?” I ask before I remember I should probably know the answer.

She clicks her tongue at me. “You have known me for a while.” When I stare blankly at her, she adds, “Hanah.”

“That’s a lovely name,” I say with sincerity.

Unfortunately, Hanah seems unconvinced of my genuineness as she rolls her eyes and scurries from the kitchen.

I follow her to the apothecary, where apparently, my womb’s future awaits its blessing.

Chapter Ten



STEPPING into the apothecary is like entering a realm where nature has exploded. Shelves teem with vials, tinctures, and dried herbs. Apparently, they hold the secret to breeding more offspring than rabbits.

A lone healer, a woman with silver hair and green eyes, smiles as we enter.

“Hello,” she greets me warmly, as if we’re gathering for tea. “We meet again,” she adds with enough sincerity to make me question if we have met for tea.

Except we haven’t. Though, it is likely she has met Lyra for tea.

“Hello.” I slip my hands into my sleeves as I glance around, taking in the shelves lined with glass bottles.

The healer retrieves a bottle from the nearby table. “Drink this.”

No.

My heart screams that word, yet my mind reminds me that Lyra would consume this. To endure in this place, I must act as Lyra would.

Annora, granddaughter of Hakan, would face certain death.

The healer holds the bottle closer. I take it from her and wrinkle my nose at the aroma of grass and leather that wafts

from the vial. Nothing says *womb blessing* quite like a potion that smells like a meadow and a cobbler's shop.

"What is it?" I ask.

"It will help you conceive."

Hanah gives me an encouraging nod, and I consider handing the bottle to her and telling her to drink it and conceive Jasce's child. Knowing Lyra would probably not do that, I raise the vial to my lips. The moment the bitter tasting mixture slips down my throat, I keenly regret drinking it. My eyes water as I finish the last drop and hand the bottle to the healer.

Her eyes remain fixed on me, her anticipation palpable. She would probably be offended if she knew I have no intentions of taking the next steps needed to conceive a child.

"Am I supposed to feel different?" I ask, hoping the tincture doesn't actually bless my womb.

How would I explain that to Asha...or Grandfather? He would spit with rage if I returned carrying the seed of his enemy.

"Some women do. Some don't." The healer's eyes hold a depth of understanding as she continues. "You are on a journey. Not all journeys are chosen willingly, but they often lead us to places we never imagined."

But I don't want this journey.

A dizzy sensation builds behind my eyes as the healer's words strike a chord in me. "*Not all journeys are chosen willingly, but they often lead us to places we never imagined.*"

Over and over those words repeat, threading together the strands of my past with the life Lyra built here.

She is not me, yet I am her.

I leave the apothecary and allow the winding corridors to lead me to Lyra's bedchamber.

Thankfully, it's empty.

Chapter Eleven



THE PEACE DOESN'T last long before my breezy friend Hanah steps into Lyra's bedchamber and tells me I must dress for dinner. A lightness takes over my body as she helps me into a silk cotehardie—the type of gown I would never wear if I was at home. It's too tight. Too thin. Too elaborate for a woman like me.

Grandfather has plenty of gold, but he doesn't waste it on lavish things. "*We live comfortably,*" he would say.

And it is true. Emerin and Tahira hate the plain gowns and the lack of jewels. Asha and I take it in stride.

Hanah even places those ridiculous rubies around my neck. They hang heavy against my breasts. Torchlight glimmers off the jewels as I run my fingers against them. They're lovely, but not what I would choose. If I were given a choice, I would pick a simple hematite stone set in silver.

I sway back and forth as Hanah braids my hair and ties the end with a silk ribbon. Our gazes meet in the looking glass as she smiles.

"You look lovely, Lyra."

"Thank you," I gush, my tone too loud, too jovial.

I scrub my fingers against my forehead as the lightness increases.

I'm floating.

A smile pulls at my mouth as Hanah leads me from the bedchamber, down the long corridor, and to a door.

I brush my hand against her arm. “Did you know I’m air?” Her brow lifts as I continue.

“And I can float?”

“Oh, My Lady.” Hanah shakes her head and grabs my arm, as if she intends to keep me from walking into the room.

I pull away and dance into the dining hall. The room is not the grand spectacle I had envisioned, but rather an intimate space with an enormous table that dominates the center. At least fifty high-back chairs line either side, each occupied by a man wearing a crimson phoenix on his surcoat—the phoenix that holds the Fate of all Hematites firmly within its grasp.

Grandfather would like to think he can rewrite Fate, but I have always believed there is no rewriting what is already written in blood. Especially, when he cannot accept that House of Silver was defeated decades ago. He still leads his rebel armies against House of Crimson, hoping to reclaim what he believes was stolen from him.

“*It is my birthright,*” he has often muttered as he stares at a map of Hematite land.

I draw my attention to the man at the head of the table. Jasce leans back against his chair with his fingers steepled in front of his lips. His gaze moves to me as the lightness takes over my body.

I twirl, allowing my cotehardie to spin around my body. “I’m air,” I announce.

“Oh, a dance. How spectacular,” Aleksander says from his place next to Jasce. He raises his goblet, saluting the air.

Jasce doesn’t budge, nor does he unstack his hands. They remain against his mouth, and his gaze stays locked on me.

The rest of the men stare, their eyes caught on me as I spin and spin and spin.

“Enough!” Jasce commands, but I’m not finished.

I dance my fingers in front of my face and sway my hips, caught up with the beat only I hear. How it drums. How it lures me on.

There's something freeing about this dance. Something carefree and endless.

I sway my hips more, wiggling them the way the dancers did for Grandfather. He never saw me when I attended the dinners he didn't invite me to. I was behind the thick curtain—hidden away, but I saw how those women moved. It made the men stare.

So, I copy those movements, swaying my hips, thrusting out my breasts. Surprisingly, Lyra's body reacts perfectly, as if she has done this type of dancing before.

Suddenly, strong hands reach out, grabbing me, stopping my mindless spinning. I gasp as Jasce brings me into his arms and throws me over his shoulder. Another gasp escapes me when he carries me from the room.

"No." I squirm, trying to get away from him. "I need to keep dancing."

"Hanah," he bellows as he carries me kicking and squirming down the corridor.

She appears from a nearby room and curtsies. "My Lord."

"What happened to Lyra?"

She blinks and glances at me, still struggling to free myself, then quickly lowers her eyes to the floor.

"Tell me." He commands.

"I-it was Lady Dinah, My Lord. She had her visit Geeva at the apothecary."

"And then," he asks as I beat my hands against his hard back.

"She gave her *the* tincture."

Jasce stalks past the maid, down the long hallway, and to a study. He shoves the door open, and Lady Dinah stands at his sudden entrance.

“Don’t you ever drug my wife again,” he roars, his tone positively feral.

“J-Jasce...” she stammers, her voice small, feeble in the face of his anger.

Without another word, he leaves the room. I thrash in his arms as he strolls down the hallway and to his bedchamber. He pushes open the door and lowers me to my feet.

I sink to my bottom on the marble and sway my hands in front of my face. “It was a womb blessing,” I say in a sing-song voice.

A wobbly smile spreads across my mouth as I hum the words.

“Stop it!” he demands.

I hum even louder.

He crosses the room, pours water into a goblet, and brings it to me.

When I don’t take it from him, he kneels in front of me and forces some between my lips. I swallow and push it away.

“More.” Determination burns in his eyes as he raises it to my mouth again, and I dutifully take a few sips.

He brings it to my lips again and again until there is no water left.

Torchlight flares with the heat in his eyes as he rises to his feet and carries the goblet to the table. I remain frozen on the marble floor, my mind still hazy, yet alert enough to be mortified.

I hunch in half, remembering dancing in a room full of men.

Did I really tell them I was air?

“I don’t understand,” I say after a while, my stare locked on the veins in the marble.

Jasce sits on the sofa as I push to my feet and walk to the washing stand, where I quickly wet my heated skin.

“Dinah knows you haven’t shared my bed. She was trying to weaken your resistance by giving you that tincture.”

“How would she know?”

“I don’t know.”

“Maybe you told her.” I rub my index finger against my throbbing temple.

“It is none of her business,” he snaps.

“Maybe you even conspired with her,” I say unfairly, considering everything he did for me.

He doesn’t respond.

I take a deep breath. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that.”

“I know.”

“I want to go to sleep now,” I whisper, still mortified by the way I acted in front of a bunch of strange men.

Jasce nods. “Stay here. I will fetch you a nightdress.”

With those words, he leaves his bedchamber. I sit numbly, my mind whirling with humiliation and anger. Anger for Lady Dinah because of what she did. Anger for myself for being so gullible.

Jasce steps back into his bedchamber and hands me a clean nightdress. I clutch it to my chest and hurry behind a screen.

When I emerge a few moments later, Jasce still sits on the sofa. I climb on the right side of the bed and slide to the edge of the mattress.

How could this have happened?

How could I have allowed it to happen?

I just wanted to do the things everyone would expect Lyra to do. Then, maybe I could survive here until I find Mazaline. Then, I wouldn’t end up like those men in cages. I wouldn’t die.

The moon climbs high in the night sky before Jasce joins me in bed. He stays on the opposite side, giving me that

distance I need right now—that space Lyra probably wouldn't need.

He feels the difference. I know he does.

Otherwise, he wouldn't keep staring at me and questioning me.

How long can I last before he knows I'm not Lyra?

How long before he kills me?

Chapter Twelve



LONELINESS GRIPS me as I sit near the window in Jasce's bedchamber and stare out over the courtyard. Today is Asha's birthday. She's twenty-three, and I'm not there to celebrate with her.

She needs me as much as I need her. I'm her river. I keep everything flowing, everything moving. At least, that's what she always tells me.

My heart aches as I stand and look around the room. Nothing here is mine. Not the clothes, the jewelry, or the husband.

It doesn't matter that I resigned myself to never marry. I had found contentment in my life. It was mine!

Everything here is Lyra's.

I don't want any of it. I just want to go home.

A frustrated sigh escapes me as I hurry to the desk and grab a piece of charcoal resting on top of a stack of parchment. My mind floods with the memories of the life I was torn from. Everything I long for—my sisters, my mother, the libraries full of books, the seashells...

Unconsciously, I draw seashells on the parchment, etching them back into my life. They may not be like the ones Mother gave me, but they are a start, a piece of me surrounded by so much crimson.

I continue drawing until I fill every parchment with seashells. When I step back, a grin tugs at my lips.

There.

A part of me is here now.

Chapter Thirteen



CHARCOAL STAINS my fingers as I walk to Lyra's bedchamber and step inside. I eye her looking glass. It's much larger than Jasce's, and it will offer me a better view of this body that doesn't belong to me.

Hastily, I remove all my clothes, then rotate to get a better view of her birthmark on my shoulder. The flame is about the size of a coin, and it sits on the outer edge of my shoulder.

Lyra's magic.

I turn again, not expecting to see the tiny flame on my hip. But the bright orange and red birthmark is unmistakable. A gasp escapes me as I trace the raised skin, feeling the warmth, the undeniable heat.

It's here, my mark, the part of me that is still Annora.

I hurry into a chemise, covering the flames. It doesn't matter if my mark is here or not. I still don't know how to use it. Mother never gave me my rune, and without it, I cannot cast magic.

Sadly, I'm one of the few who requires a rune to cast magic. Though, Mother has assured me I'm better off without my gifts.

I grab the first cotehardie I find in the armoire, pull it over my head, and yank the ribbons into place. My legs tremble as I leave the bedchamber, needing an escape, a refuge away from the confusion.

Nothing makes sense anymore.

Why am I trapped in Lyra's body, yet *my* flame is still on my hip? Everything else is her...

The hair. The skin. The eyes.

The question torments me as I hurry out of the palace and into the garden. Birds chirp in a wide willow tree as I walk through a courtyard full of marble statues and lush greenery. The soft rustling of leaves and the gentle murmur of the nearby fountain create a soothing lullaby. I take in the sunlight filtering through the maple trees and the statues depicting various figures from mythology and history.

As I turn, I spot something out of the corner of my eye—a stone bench tucked away in an alcove. A young woman sits on the bench with a book and a small tan dog. I recognize her as one of the young women in the courtyard the day before.

“Hello,” I say warmly.

She glances up, her dark eyes meeting mine. “Lyra, you have to read this book.”

She knows Lyra?

I should have known.

My footfalls echo against the stone path as I edge closer to her and tilt my head to the side to read the title. “I have. The poetry is some of the best I have ever read.”

The young woman arches an eyebrow. “You told me you never read.”

Lyra did?

Instead of replying, I sit on the bench and think about Lady Dinah's ultimatum. This young woman cannot be any older than seventeen, yet the chieftain's wife would force her to be with Jasce if I don't give him an heir.

“Do you know about Lady Dinah's proclamation?” I ask, needing to know.

The woman lowers her book and stares at me for several long breaths before finding her voice. “Lady Dinah?”

“Yes.” I take a deep breath.

“Are you feeling all right, Lyra?”

“No.” At least it’s an honest answer.

The young woman’s brow knits together as she speaks. “Every day I hide in this spot to escape my mother. You know this. So, why are *we* talking about her?”

My eyes widen. “Your mother?”

Then, this must be Zerah, Jasce’s younger sister.

She presses her hand to my forehead. “No fever.” She tsks beneath her breath and shakes her head at me.

“I don’t understand. Sh-she said...”

“What did she say to you?”

When I stare down at my hands, she leans closer to me. “Lyra, what did she say?”

“She threatened me. Said if I don’t give Jasce an heir within a summer, she would force other women to have his children,” I say, the words escaping me in a painful rush.

She shakes her head. “My mother is a pathological liar, and she will say anything to bend others to her will.”

“So, she won’t force Jasce to bed those women?”

“Have you met my brother? No one can force him to do anything he doesn’t want to do.”

A relieved breath whooshes from my lungs as I rock back against the bench. “I thought...I feared...”

Zerah squeezes my hand. “She has that effect on people.”

I grip my necklace and let out a sigh as the weight from that conversation with Lady Dinah eases.

I eye the book again, longing for the written word to sweep me away. “Can we go to the library?” I ask instead of saying, “*Do you know where the library is?*”

She nods, sets her dog down, and stands. “Of course. I will need something else to read to endure Mother’s inevitable

lecture later.”

Zerah leads the way, her dog wagging its tail happily. I follow her down the winding path, surrounded by the tranquility of the courtyard.

We enter the palace and walk to the library. The grand double doors creak open, revealing rows upon rows of shelves adorned with leather-bound books, each containing the promise of new stories and discoveries.

My heart dances, skipping inside my chest as I move closer, drawn to the scent of aged paper and leather. It’s such a nostalgic smell—that mixture—that memory of home, of happy days.

Zerah joins me, her eyes scanning the titles. “Look for something that captures your interest,” she says. “Let the book speak to you.”

I nod and explore the shelves, my fingers lightly tracing the spines. Eventually, a book calls out to me, its title intriguing and its cover adorned with an elaborate design.

With the book in my hands, I make my way to a cozy reading spot near a window. As I settle on the sofa, the dog curls up at my feet. I smile as Zerah sits next to me and opens a thick book.

“Spark likes you.” She nods toward her dog.

I lean down, petting the dog’s soft fur. “He’s gorgeous.”

“Jasce gave him to me for my birthday last summer.”

“That was thoughtful of him.”

Zerah nods. “He’s usually the only one who remembers my birthday.”

My chest tightens as I think of how many birthdays Grandfather has forgotten.

Zerah stares down at her book as she thumbs through the pages. “Let’s read.”

Anticipation springs to life inside me as I open my choice, a story about a woman who travels the sea to find her father.

Time slips away as I immerse myself in my book. It's the escape my heart has longed for. The balm to the nerves Jasce destroyed the moment he dragged me back to this palace.

The door opens, and an older woman with silver hair steps in and approaches the sofa where we sit. "Lady Dinah wishes to see you, Zerah."

Zerah sighs, clutches her book tight, and stands. "Very well." She clicks her tongue, and Spark follows her from the room.

When the door shuts behind them, I run my fingertips against the book and resume my reading. The woman's struggle unfolds before me, her determination unbroken as she searches for her father on a boat in the middle of the ocean. The words continue weaving through my thoughts until I smell the salty sea air, and the warm sun bathes my face.

Perhaps I can be like her, unbroken and whole, a piece of pottery refusing to shatter, even in Jasce's hands.

I turn page after page until the light fades, the door opens, and my nemesis steps inside the library. Well, he isn't exactly my nemesis. I'm not sure I even have a nemesis, but if I had one, he would be it.

Jasce crosses the library and sits opposite me. "You missed dinner."

"I wasn't hungry." I shrug and glance back down at my book.

"I didn't know you enjoy reading."

Determined to stonewall him, I flip the page. "Now you do."

"Let's do something diverting."

I have no wish to know what Jasce thinks is diverting. "I want to read."

"I promise it will be worth your while. Come with me." He takes my book, places it on the table next to me, and grabs my hand, pulling me out of the library, through the corridors, and into the courtyard.

The moon hovers over us as Jasce leads me to a small, hidden garden at the edge of the palace grounds. Torches brighten the area where someone placed a blanket and basket.

I glance between Jasce and the basket. “What is this?”

“Dinner.”

“But you said I missed dinner.”

“You did.” His eyes twinkle as he smiles. “I thought we could have a feast out here.”

Jasce wants to eat with me? I thought all he wanted to do was order me around and bed me.

As we sit on the blanket, Jasce removes a jug of wine from the basket and two goblets. He pours us each a glass. I pick mine up and take a long sip, feeling the warmth spread through my body.

“Would you like to play a game?” he asks, drawing my attention to him.

My heart thuds against my ribs as I try to anticipate what sort of game he has in mind. “What kind of game?”

“It’s called Trust. We take turns asking each other a question, but we have to answer truthfully.”

If I deny him, he’ll probably insist. Either way, I’m stuck with him.

“All right.” I take another sip of wine to steady my nerves.

Jasce picks up a piece of cherry wood from the blanket and pulls a dagger from his weapon belt. His brow furrows as he whittles the stick, his gaze intense. The sweet scent fills the air, reminding me of my brother, Behton. He enjoyed whittling, especially after long conversations with Grandfather.

“What is the one thing you’ve always wanted to do but have been too afraid to try?” Jasce asks as he continues shaping the wood.

That’s easy. I didn’t expect such a benign question.

“I have always wanted to ride a horse, but I’ve never had the opportunity.” I have stared at countless sketches of them, and I have watched other people riding them from the windows. But I was never allowed to ride on one. Maybe Grandfather thought I would spook the horses with my scars.

Jasce’s brow lifts as he pauses his whittling and glances up at me. “You have never ridden a horse before?”

“No.”

“Hmm.” He scrapes the knife against the wood, sharpening it to a fine point. “I have ridden a horse next to you, and you travel a lot.”

Lyra has ridden a horse with him. *I haven’t.*

Repeatedly, he chisels at that wood, his movements quick.

There’s a part of me that wants to spill everything to him. Then, I would no longer have the burden of keeping my secret, and I would no longer have to wait for the tree to fall and crush me.

But the memory of the men in those cages sears my mind, blinding me with the cold, hard truth. Jasce wouldn’t allow me to live if he knew I was Hakan’s granddaughter.

“I wondered why you didn’t steal one from the stables when you tried to run from me.” He glances up as he severs the tip of the stick, and my mouth turns dryer than the dirt beneath me. “Who are you?”

“I am L-Lyra.” The lie curdles inside me.

He grabs my hand and pulls me until I’m practically sitting on his lap. The golden flecks in his eyes come alive, dancing like flickering flames as he stares, his gaze so intense, a shiver slips down my back.

“Are you possessed? Or is this another one of your games?” When my mouth parts, his grip tightens. “It is, isn’t it? This is one of your games, *Lyra*. Well, I’m not amused.”

As quickly as he grabbed me, he lets go. I straighten and rub my arm as he reaches for his knife and a new stick and resumes whittling.

“It is your turn now. Ask me a question,” he says.

I swallow and glance down at the ground.

“*Ask* me a question,” he insists, his words fringed with frustration.

“I want to go back to my book.”

“And *I* want you to stay here.”

Anger grips my chest as I shift away from him, fold my arms across my body, and stare at the torches shimmering across the courtyard.

“Ask me a question, Lyra.”

“Why should I?”

He looks up, his eyes locking on mine again, his anger burning like a flame between us. A flame I’m sure he’d like to ignite. A flame I’m sure he can ignite.

Why didn’t I think about that before?

He probably has powerful fire magic, and he could burn down this entire courtyard if he wanted to. No, he could probably burn down this entire city.

I have heard about his family—how some of them have powerful crimson magic.

Does he?

I saw the flame on his chest when he removed his surcoat the other night, but it doesn’t tell me how strong his magic is.

It could be as simple as being able to use a rune with fire, or it could be strong enough to conjure a flame from nothing.

He stands, and I scramble to my feet next to him. The torches skim his taut features as he stares down at me for several breaths before turning heel and walking away. I follow him, trailing behind him as he stalks through the courtyard and into the palace.

Our footsteps echo across the marble as he leads me into his bedchamber. I hurry to the sofa and sit as he stands in the center of the room, his gaze caught on me.

“What are you keeping from me?” he asks, his tone surprisingly gentle.

Nerves tighten in my chest as I fiddle with a loose thread on my sleeve.

“Whatever it is, you can tell me.”

He’s wrong. So very wrong.

“No, I can’t.”

“So, there is something going on.” He steps closer to me and sits next to me on the sofa. “Tell me.”

“I hit my head.” The lie sticks to the top of my mouth.

His brow lifts.

“Hard,” I add.

Torchlight glints in his eyes as he studies me for so long, I think of confessing everything. Maybe if I did, he’d stop looking at me so intensely.

“I know you’re lying, and I’m both angry and intrigued.”

“W-what?” *Stop stammering, you fool!*

“I like this timid, shy version that blushes every time you think I want to fuck you.”

Heat springs to my cheeks as I look away.

He lifts my chin, forcing my eyes back to him. “Shall we play another game?”

“No,” I say, my reply quick.

He ignores me. “You keep pretending that nothing has changed, and I will keep thinking about all the ways I’m going to unravel your lies.”

Chapter Fourteen



“I WILL KEEP THINKING of all the ways I’m going to unravel your lies.”

Jasce’s words haunt me as I walk through the palace the following day with new determination. Everything changed after Mazaline gave me that painting. If I can find her, then maybe I could go back to *my* life.

I doubt she is in Darhavva, but maybe, since this city borders the desert, someone has seen her before. They might even have information about her that would help me.

She was unique with a tattoo beneath her mouth. I have never met anyone else with one like hers.

My purple cotehardie swishes against my legs as I hurry toward the front of the palace. No one says anything to me as I step through the door a few moments later, but I only manage three steps before a burly man moves into place next to me. I steal a glance at him. His weathered face and worn armor suggest experience.

“May I help you?” I ask when he continues walking next to me.

His sharp, attentive eyes sweep our surroundings. “No, My Lady.”

“Well, I don’t require your help,” I say. “So, you may go.”

A smile touches his mouth as he glances over at me. “I am your guard, My Lady.”

My guard?

Fantastic, indeed.

Maybe Jasce will send me a nursemaid next.

“What is your name?”

“Alban,” he says as he follows me into the city.

I take in the people of all shapes and sizes roaming the streets, then the buildings ranging from simple mud huts to towering stone structures.

It’s all so magnificent. So alive!

As I weave my way through the people, I search for signs of Mazaline. I even ask vendors and merchants walking by, but no one knows anyone matching her description. After hours of searching, my hope wilts even though I knew I probably wouldn’t find out anything in a crimson city. But I had to do something.

My stomach growls with hunger, and my legs ache with exhaustion as I stop in front of an alehouse. My guard stands behind me, his alert eyes scanning the alehouse’s interior.

The smell of roasted meat wafts toward me, as if welcoming me to come inside. So, I do.

The heat hits me first, followed by the din of voices and the clatter of plates and goblets. With the dim lighting, it’s hard to see in the crowded space. So, I push my way through the crush of bodies, scanning each one for any sign of familiarity.

Unfortunately, I do not find it.

Someone bumps into me, causing me to stumble and nearly fall. Strong hands grab my arms, steadying me.

“Apologies, Milady,” a deep voice says from behind me.

I turn to face a man with kind hazel eyes and a rugged jawline. His blond hair falls around his angular face, and he wears a plain surcoat that fits him perfectly. The only jewelry he wears is a simple pendant with a wolf.

“It’s all right,” I say.

He flashes me a smile, revealing white teeth. “Are you searching for someone?” He quickly adds, “I saw you looking around.”

I hesitate for a moment before deciding to confide in him. He might have heard of Mazaline. “Yes, a healer with raven colored hair and a mark beneath her mouth. It looks like a tattoo.”

“I’m afraid it has been a while since I last saw her.”

My heart leaps. “You know her? When did you see her? Where—”

He holds up both hands to stop my bombardment of questions and shakes his head. “I do not know her. But I have seen her a few times on my travels to various cities. Mainly border towns, if I remember correctly. But, as I said, it has been a while.”

I let out a sigh of defeat as the weight of the past few days bears down on me. If I don’t find Mazaline, I won’t be able to find my way back to my family. Nor will I be able to escape Jasce’s terrifying mother.

“Do you know what tribe Mazaline is from?” I ask, curious for any details that might help me locate her.

The man shrugs.

“Thank you for your help,” I say, unable to disguise the defeat in my voice.

“You look tired and hungry,” he says. “Why don’t you join me for a meal?”

The idea of a warm meal and good company is too tempting to pass up. “All right.”

He heads toward a table in a corner of the tavern and motions for me to follow him.

Alban puts his arm out in front of me, blocking my path. “Lord Jasce would not like this, My Lady.”

“Lord Jasce is not here, Alban, and I am tired and hungry. Surely, he would not be upset if I have a bite to eat,” I say and join the man at his table.

We order food and drink, and for the first time since I woke up as Lyra in Jasce’s bedchamber, I relax.

Alban stands to the side, scowling at me as the man introduces himself as Tristan. He tells me stories of his travels and the various people he has met on his journey. The more he speaks, the more he reminds me of my brother. Behton’s eyes always lit up when he spoke, just like Tristan’s.

My stare drifts to the table near mine, where a young man wearing armor sits next to a slender woman with fiery red hair. But it’s not her hair that keeps my attention, it’s the gold threads weaved around her right wrist and around his left.

As I sip my ale, my gaze keeps drifting to those threads.

Shadows from the torches skip across Tristan’s face as he leans closer to me. “They’re bound.”

Bound?

What does that mean?

He smirks. “It’s actually quite genius, binding them.”

“I don’t understand,” I say softly, not wishing for the couple to hear me.

Tristan shrugs. “He has crimson magic. She has silver. By binding her to him, he can control her and her magic.”

My insides quake as I take in those gold threads again. Especially, the way they wrap around her wrist and somehow keep her tied to him. Then, my attention shifts to him. He has shoulder length dark brown hair and vibrant blue eyes. A lengthy scar etches a path across his right cheek and ends at his jaw.

“Are they married?”

Tristan shakes his head. “No. She would probably murder him in his sleep if not for the spell placed on every silver.”

“What spell?”

“You really don’t know?”

“No.”

Tristan leans close again and drops his voice. “If he dies, she will die too.”

How awful.

A wave of empathy wells up inside me for her, but as I study her, she doesn’t seem like she needs my compassion. She keeps her back straight and her eyes alert as she eats in silence.

My gaze drifts to Alban next. He doesn’t budge from his place next to me, nor does his hand stray far from the hilt of his sword.

Is he worried about something?

As the night wears on, the couple leaves, and the tavern empties until only a few patrons remain. Tristan and I stay, lost in conversation.

Well, I *would* be completely lost in conversation with Tristan if not for my guard standing nearby, eyeing me. Probably thinking of ways to pull me from this tavern and force me back to the palace.

But I don’t want to go back.

I want to be free!

The door slams open, and Jasce strides into the tavern, his gaze locking onto me. My mouth parts at the sight of the tall barbarian stalking toward me, his steps determined, his mouth pressed into a thin line of frustration—frustration he aims right at me.

My chair falls over as I rush to my feet and scrub my fingers against my cotehardie. “Jasce—”

“—I have been looking for you,” he snaps.

“I was here,” I say, as if that explains everything.

It doesn’t.

His dark, smoldering eyes narrow. “You didn’t have my permission to leave.”

“Y-your permission?” Frustration loosens my tongue. “Am I your servant?”

“No! You are my wife. *Mine*, Lyra.”

“I’m not your possession.” I’m not anyone’s possession!

His icy gaze lands on my companion, who still sits at the table. “Who are you?”

“Tristan.”

“Well, *Tristan*, I will give you until the count of ten to run.”

“But I...I...” Tristan stammers.

“One,” Jasce says.

“Jasce.” I hurry to stand in front of the angry barbarian. “None of this is necessary.”

Jasce’s eyes flash. “Two.”

The legs of Tristan’s chair scrape against the wooden floor as Tristan scrambles to his feet and jerks his stare between Jasce and me.

“Three.”

My heart roars in my ears as Tristan stumbles backward, looking like a mouse caught between a lion and a cliff.

“Four,” Jasce says, his voice growing colder.

“Stop!” I step closer to Jasce, needing him to hear me. “Tristan is just a friend.”

Jasce glares at me. “A friend? Is that why you sneaked out of the palace? To spend time with this commoner?”

Red scorches my vision. “You’re not my father. I can go wherever I want and speak to whomever I want.”

“Five.”

“This is ridiculous.”

“Six,” he says, ignoring me.

Alarm floods through me as I turn to Tristan. “Run.”

Tristan obeys, dashing toward the door, as if a lion really chases him. Although, a lion might show him more mercy than this furious warrior.

“Seven.”

Anger blazes from me and lashes from my voice like a whip. “You are treating me like a child. I am a grown woman, and I can make my own decisions.”

“Eight.” His hand moves to the hilt of his sword as his eyes lock on the fleeing Tristan.

Tristan shoves open the door and hurries into the night.

“Nine.”

Desperation lurches inside me as I reach for Jasce’s hand.

He pulls away as his mouth tightens into a hard, unflinching line. “Ten.”

Much to my horror and utter dismay, Jasce follows Tristan. But he doesn’t run. He walks in long, purposeful strides.

Naturally, I race after him with my guard on my heels. As soon as I step into the street, the atmosphere shifts. The air turns into a suffocating layer of smoke, heavy and dense with an acrid odor that numbs my throat.

“Jasce,” I cry out, wanting him to be nearby and not responsible for this acrid odor.

The air thickens as someone thrusts a blanket over my body, covering my face like a web. I let out a ragged whimper and fight with everything in me. My elbow connects with a solid mass, and the material tightens around my body.

Asha.

Inwardly, I scream for her, plead for her to appear and stop this person.

She will not rescue you.

No one will.

I struggle against the grip as the person picks me up and carries me like I'm a child. Enraged, I fight harder, kicking my legs and screaming against the muffled barrier of the blanket.

I open my mouth to scream again when the person plops me down on something soft and rips the blanket from my face. Frantically, I glance around, taking in the empty room in an unfamiliar building and Jasce standing there—his gaze locked on me.

Anger sears through my veins as I glare at him. “How dare you?”

“I had no other choice,” he says in a frustratingly calm voice. “The smoke would have killed you.”

His words confirm what I feared. The smoke was magic, and it was used to kill Tristan.

I ask the question anyway. “Did you kill Tristan?”

Jasce doesn't reply.

“Answer me,” I lash out. “Did you kill him?”

Jasce folds his arms, his posture far too relaxed for someone who has just murdered an innocent person. “Yes.”

I recoil, my heart racing furiously against my chest. “Why? Why did you have to kill him?”

“He was a threat, and I *always* extinguish threats.”

Chills slice through me at the finality of Jasce's words.

“Threat?” I scoff, disbelief coloring my tone. “He was a kind person who showed me compassion.” *And he reminded me of Behton, my brave, kind, compassionate brother.*

Cruelly, Jasce took that thread from me, that tapestry weaving a bond between my heart and Behton. It didn't matter that the thread was small. It was mine, and I found it here among House of Crimson.

“He was meddling in affairs that didn't concern him,” Jasce says, his words pulling apart more and more of those threads.

“You had no right to kill him.”

“I have every right,” Jasce says. “It is my duty to do whatever it takes to keep you safe.”

“Being my husband doesn’t give you the authority to kill anyone who is kind to me.”

“I didn’t like the way he looked at you.” Fierceness frames Jasce’s words. If I had a dagger, I would carve it away—piece by piece—fragment by fragment.

“You’re a monster, just like your father.” My heart burns at that reality.

Jasce is like his father.

A murderer.

A thief.

“Maybe I am,” Jasce says with enough coldness to freeze this entire city. “Don’t leave the palace again without my permission.”

I scoff again. “I will not be your prisoner.”

“You may go anywhere you want as long as I’m next to you.” How casually he speaks. How infuriatingly.

Bitterness burns my tongue in a way that is so foreign to me. When I was a child, I promised myself I wouldn’t allow it to consume me the way it did Grandfather. Now, here it is—thriving inside my veins.

“I would rather rot in this very spot than ever go anywhere with you,” I announce with a lift of my chin.

“I’m very tempted to allow you to rot, Lyra, but alas, you’re my wife. So, let’s return to the palace, feign politeness, and enjoy the masquerade in honor of your birthday.”

My birthday?

Chapter Fifteen



HOW DID I forget it is my birthday? My real birthday.

The irony isn't lost on me as I step into the ballroom—the fact that I share a birthday with Lyra.

I imagine Mother's voice whispering in my ears. "*You're nineteen today, Annora.*"

If only she were here right now. If only that vile flower wasn't destroying her.

Stop.

Don't think about it right now.

As I step further into the ballroom, I look around, taking in the opulence. Marble pillars soar up from the floor, each one carved with elaborate designs. Fabric drapes the walls in crimson, gold, purple, and blue, while magnificent chandeliers cascade onto the crowd below.

I take a deep breath, trying to calm my frayed nerves after what Jasce did. It would do me no good to dwell on it right now. Not if I'm going to have the presence of mind to get through tonight without tripping up and making a mistake. I cannot afford for anyone to know I'm not Lyra.

One.

Two.

Mentally, I shake my head and push aside the thought of counting. It reminds me of Jasce, and the last thing I want is to

think about is *that* man.

So, I take another deep breath and tilt my head back, allowing the music to calm me. The melody is soothing. The notes dance on the air. And the familiar thrumming of the lute is a balm to my soul.

Not everything in this world is ugly.

I brush my fingers against my elaborate cottehardie, feeling the silk, the soft whisper of the fabric against my skin. As I glance to my left, I spot my hovering guard. It seems Alban is a permanent fixture now.

As I navigate through the ballroom, I'm struck by the arrogance that emanates from the guests. It's as if they're all trying to outdo one another in terms of wealth, power, and prestige. They flaunt their expensive jewelry and their luxurious clothing. Even their masks are ostentatious, with feathers and jewels adorning them.

Fortunately, I was able to pick my simple, silver mask. It suits me.

I spot Jasce across the room, engaged in conversation with the man from the tavern, the one bound to the woman with silver magic. She stands next to him, her hair even brighter in the torchlight.

Jasce wears a fitted surcoat that accentuates his muscular frame. His gold mask, though simple, exudes elegance.

As much as I hate to admit it, he looks striking. The play of shadows and light only serves to enhance his commanding presence. However, his looks cannot change the undeniable fact that he's a killer, a man who has stained his hands with blood.

He strides toward me, effortlessly cutting through the crowd with purpose. Each step seems deliberate, every movement calculated. Knots tighten in my chest as I scramble for an excuse to leave the room, my mind racing like a trapped animal desperate to escape the hunter's snare.

"Lyra," he says as he stops in front of me. "Dance with me."

No!

I glance over his shoulder and find Lady Dinah and Lyra's mother watching us.

"Very well." I sigh and offer him my hand.

He takes my hand and guides me to the dance floor. The strains of music fill the air, its joyous melody at odds with my anger.

I follow him through the rhythm of the dance as my thoughts shift to my sisters. They're the only people I have ever danced with. My heart lightens as I remember practicing the steps with them. Our laughter echoed through the halls as we dreamed of the day we would grace a grand ballroom like this one.

A nearby couple bumps into me, disrupting the flow of the dance. Instinctively, Jasce pulls me closer, and I stiffen as the hard lines of his body press against me. Desperation bubbles inside me as I think of stepping away and regaining control, but the dance continues, keeping me captive in this charade.

Jasce has all the power, and he knows it. I'm simply the pawn. *His* pawn.

"Everyone in this room can feel the weight of your frown," he says.

I look over his shoulders, catching the stares of his people. Their eyes stab through me like sharp knives. I shudder as I imagine them cutting my veneer away and seeing the truth.

My truth.

The truth of my terrible scars, the cruel reminder etched across the left side of my face. Those raised lines are my painful testament to the accident that has shaped my existence.

Jasce would thrust me away from his body if he saw what I really looked like. Not that I would mind him thrusting me away from him right now.

His words hum through my thoughts. "*Everyone in this room can feel the weight of your frown, Lyra.*"

“Should I hide my unhappiness?” I ask.

“Yes.”

“I’m not a puppet.”

“Perhaps not, but you know how to pretend. So, pretend.”

Frustration grips me as I lift my eyes to his, staring into their dark void. “How does a spark ignite inside a thunderstorm?”

His brow lifts.

“It doesn’t,” I say, answering my rhetorical question. “There’s no spark, no chance for a tiny flicker of light to grow into something more.”

Jasce leans closer to me. “I asked you to pretend to be happy, Lyra. That doesn’t require a spark. It takes a cinder. So be a damn cinder.”

I hold his gaze, the challenge in his eyes igniting the dormant flame within me. “Is it fire you want?” I ask, my voice steady. “Because I can be a roaring fire. I can devour you with those flames.”

The threat may be empty, a mere play of words, but in this moment, it unlocks something inside me—something always caged and suppressed.

Jasce smirks. “There’s the temper. I was wondering when it would appear.”

I frown and look away from him. That’s not the reaction I thought I would receive. Not even close.

“Lyra,” Jasce says, pulling my attention back to him. “Despite what you may think of me, I was protecting you.”

I pull away enough to create distance between my body and his. “You killed Tristan without hesitation or remorse.”

Jasce’s mouth twists into a scowl. “Why should I have shown him remorse?”

“To prove you have some humanity inside you.”

“Oh, but you forget, I am a monster,” he says, his voice heavy with sarcasm. “Remember? Monsters don’t show humanity.”

I open my mouth to argue, but I am interrupted by the start of a new dance. Jasce steps back and bows. I curtsy and move to the edges of the crowd to think and breathe without Jasce nearby.

His words still pierce my ears. *“Oh, but you forget, I am a monster. Remember? Monsters don’t show humanity.”*

Icy claws dig at my chest—claws slicing deeper and deeper into my soul. If I stay here, he’ll rip me to shreds. I have never been more certain of anything in my entire life.

In the corner of the room, I spot Zerah, engrossed in her reading, with Spark lying near her feet. Zerah appears completely detached from the dancing couples and her mother’s presence.

A smile tugs at my lips as I observe her for several moments. She doesn’t seem to care about what is expected of her. How liberating that must be.

I leave the ballroom and navigate the complex corridors, eventually stumbling upon Lyra’s bedchamber.

I hurry inside, push the door shut with my foot, and unlace the ribbons at the front of my bodice. The moment they’re loosened, I allow the fabric to drop to my feet. I shrug out of the silk chemise next. It’s all so foreign, so Lyra.

It’s not me.

I don’t want her clothes.

Her duties.

Or her damn husband!

A sigh escapes my lips as I pour clean water into the basin and run the herbs across my skin, needing them to wash away more than the grime. If only it were that simple, using a cloth to wipe away all my frustrations.

The door creaks, and I freeze with the cloth against my breasts.

“Lyra.” Jasce’s familiar voice sends alarm flooding through me as I manage an unladylike shriek.

“Don’t look at me.” Embarrassment floods through me as I hurry behind a sofa, but it only conceals me from the waist down. I sink to my bottom. “Go away, Jasce!”

Chapter Sixteen



UNFORTUNATELY, he doesn't listen.

His footsteps echo across the floor as he moves to stare down at me crouched behind the sofa. "We have a bathhouse."

I slam my legs together and hunch my shoulders over my body, shielding myself. "Stop looking at me."

He turns, moves to the armoire, and pulls out a silk dressing gown. "Put this on."

I eye him suspiciously as he walks to where I sit and places the gown in my arms. Then, he does something I don't expect. He turns his back to me, giving me the privacy I crave.

Nerves tighten in my throat as I stand and pull my dressing gown on. When I'm finished, he turns and grabs my arm, leaving me with no choice but to follow him from the room. He leads me through the dimly lit corridors, his grip on my arm firm but not uncomfortable.

The shadows play across his sharp features, highlighting the intensity in his eyes. A shudder runs through me at that intensity—at the hint of danger running like a fault line beneath the surface.

He's an earthquake, Annora.

He will destroy you!

I clear my throat, attempting to break the silence. "Where are we going?"

He doesn't answer me but instead pushes open a large door, revealing a bathhouse that takes my breath away. It is even grander than I imagined, with four pools of water surrounded by elaborate stonework.

"Get in." He nods toward the nearest pool.

"In front of you?"

He rolls his eyes.

"Turn your back."

To my surprise, he obeys, giving me privacy again.

I take advantage of the moment, stripping off the dressing gown and stepping into the heated water.

As I close my eyes and lean back, the water envelopes me, melting away the tension. The water lapping against the sides of the pool adds to the calming effect.

I sigh, letting the tension melt away as I stretch my arms out. As I relax, a shift in the air prickles my senses, alerting me to a presence behind me. I tense and pivot, my heart racing, only to discover Jasce submerged in the water.

My mouth falls open as I tell myself to not stare. I do anyway, taking in his bronzed, sculpted chest, and the way the water drips down his skin.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

"Enjoying the water."

"Was this your plan all along? To get me naked with you?"

Merriment twinkles in his eyes. "No, but I *am* enjoying the view."

Embarrassment floods my face when I look down to see my breasts hovering near the surface of the water. I move to cover them with my arms, but he catches my wrists and pulls them away.

"Don't hide from me," he says in a husky voice.

"Jasce, *please*," I whisper, my vulnerability laid bare.

Something shifts in his expression, a softening as he releases me and allows me to sink to my shoulders. “You are driving me to my breaking point.”

“Sometimes, shattering is how strength is forged,” I say weakly as he lowers his eyes to my mouth.

He lifts my chin and runs his calloused thumb along my lower lip. “Then forge me,” he murmurs, a challenge and an invitation woven into his words.

I’m no fool, someone who would overlook another person’s actions just because of a handsome face.

I pull away from him.

“Why are you doing this?” he asks, his tone low, frustrated.

“I refuse to be a simple woman who falls to your feet and forgets you took the life of a man because you were jealous.”

Jasce scowls. “You think that’s why I killed him? Because I was jealous?”

“Yes.”

“Tristan was part of a group that has tried to harm your family for summers. You know to stay away from men like him. Didn’t you see the wolf pendant around his neck?”

I saw the pendant. It meant nothing to me, but obviously Lyra would have reacted differently.

“If he had gotten you alone, he wouldn’t have hesitated to kill you.”

My chest tightens as I recall the conversation I had with Tristan and how much he reminded me of my brother.

“Why didn’t my guard do anything, then?”

“He wouldn’t have killed Tristan in front of people unless he attacked you. Trust me, if he felt you were threatened, he would have ended Tristan himself.”

“But you...” The words die as I remember everything that happened.

“I killed Tristan before he could try to harm you.” Jasce runs his hands through his damp hair. “Trust me, Lyra. He would have tried to meet with you again.”

Sadness twists inside me at how foolish and blind I had been. I only wanted a friend...and well, an escape.

“I know what it is like to be betrayed,” Jasce says, his voice oddly comforting. “And I know what it is like to have your trust shattered into a million pieces.”

I stay silent, allowing him to continue.

“All I want is for you to trust me. I want to protect you and keep you safe,” Jasce says, as though he’s trying to weave a protective cloak around me.

But I don’t want anything Jasce offers.

Not now. Not ever.

Chapter Seventeen



JASCE DOESN'T STOP me as I move away from him and climb from the heated water. Nor does he speak as I dry myself and pull my dressing gown over my body. It's not cold, yet my body shivers like it's inexplicably freezing.

He climbs out of the pool, and my breath catches at the sight of him—every glorious inch of him on full display before me. I drink in his presence, from the way his broad shoulders taper down to a slender waist, to the sinewy muscles that coil like cords around his arms.

I refuse to analyze what is below his waist. The last thing I would want is for him to catch me staring at his cock.

Though, it's not just his body that captures my attention. There's a raw intensity behind his gaze, flaming an unspoken fire within him. There's a mystery there—all the things he hides from me, from others, and from himself.

Does he even know what he hides? Maybe not.

He moves to the shelf, pulls a drying cloth down, and snaps it around his waist. I watch him warily, wondering what tonight will hold.

Will he sleep next to me again?

Without a word, he moves to the door, holds it open, and looks at me. I hesitate for only a moment before stepping into the corridor. As we walk, I steal glances at him. Even though he doesn't look at me, a smirk pulls at his lips, assuring me he knows exactly what I'm doing. Staring at him. Analyzing him.

We walk in silence through the palace halls until we reach his bedchamber. As he pulls the door open, a warm glow spills into the hallway. Jasce gestures for me to enter, and I step inside.

Silence stretches between us as I move to the table where I left a clean nightdress and turn with it in hand. He ignores me as he strips off his drying cloth, folds it, and places it on the table. Then, he has the audacity to lie on the bed without any clothing.

“I will not sleep next to you like that,” I announce with a frown.

His brow lifts. “Do you plan to dress me?”

Warmth spreads across my face as I pivot away from him, shrug out of my dressing gown, and yank on my nightdress. “I am not jesting, Jasce. Put on clothes.”

As I turn to face him again, I find him still lying on the bed, his arms resting beneath his head, his chest rising and falling with each breath. He doesn’t say anything as he stares at me like he’s peeling away my nightdress with his eyes. I swallow hard and push aside the stirring in me I don’t understand. I’m not sure I even want to understand it.

“Jasce.” I sit on my side of the bed. “Please put some clothes on.”

Amusement plays across his face as he grins. “Why? Are you afraid you won’t be able to control yourself if I’m naked?”

I roll my eyes. “I don’t want to be distracted by your... state of undress.”

He arches an eyebrow, the grin never leaving his face. “Oh, so you admire my body?”

I let out a huff of annoyance. “Don’t flatter yourself.”

But even as I say the words, I know they’re a lie. Because the truth is, I’ve been admiring Jasce’s body since he climbed from the pool in the bathhouse.

“I have a present for you,” he says. “Look at the table next to you.”

I steel myself and rise enough to find a small bundle on the table. Apprehension builds inside me as I take it and unravel the cloth. Has he given Lyra another gaudy necklace? Would she fawn over it? Inwardly I groan.

When I peel the last of the cloth away, my eyes widen at the sight of two delicate seashells. One of them has a swirling pattern reminiscent of the ocean's currents, while the other showcases a mesmerizing iridescence that plays with the light.

"They are beautiful," I whisper with awe, turning them and inspecting each one.

How does he know I like seashells?

Does Lyra like seashells?

I run my fingers against the delicate treasures before tucking them away again. I look at him, sure that all my questions are evident on my face.

"You drew shells all over my parchment," he says, a hint of amusement in his tone.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I like your sketches."

"I don't usually draw." I add in a soft voice, "Asha does all the drawing. She's so talented."

"Asha?"

I swallow and squeeze my eyes shut as my sister's face lingers in my thoughts. She must be frantic with worry for me.

"You never told me you like shells. Is that new too?" A smile tugs at the corners of his mouth again as he points to my head. "From when you hit your head...hard?"

His quip pulls a tiny smile from me before I press my lips together to keep it from spreading.

He's teasing *me*.

I shake that thought free. It does me no good to be charmed by the heir to House of Crimson.

"Tomorrow, I'll show you your other present," he says.

There's more?

“You don't have to—”

“—yes, I do.”

I allow the silence to envelop us as I shift to lie on my side again. It's not far enough away from him. His warmth still soaks through my nightdress. I try to slow my breathing in an attempt to clear my mind, but it's impossible. Every inch of me is aware of Jasce lying naked next to me.

It's only when his breathing evens that I finally relax. My body sinks into the mattress, and my eyelids grow heavy as I allow sleep to take me.

Chapter Eighteen



NERVES TIGHTEN in my throat as I follow Jasce into the stable the following morning. Sunlight filters through the open door and illuminates the ten stalls, all full of the most beautiful horses I have ever seen. Their glossy, muscular bodies gleam in the light, and their long tails sweep the straw-covered floor. Each one is unique, from the stark white mare to the stallion with the spotted coat.

I reach out to stroke the nose of a nearby mare, and she nudges me playfully with her head. Delicate white lines crisscross her neck. The scars might be seen as imperfections by others, but to me, she's perfect.

Jasce catches my gaze and follows it to the mare. "This is Scarlet. I picked her for you."

"What happened to her?" I ask, my voice a breathless whisper.

Gently, he runs his fingertips against her neck. "She was wounded in battle. But our stable master nursed her back to health, and now she's one of our finest horses."

"I think she's perfect."

The horse neighs as if she agrees with me.

"You can ride her soon, but first..." he rotates me around to observe the other nine horses, "... these are all yours."

"Mine?" I gasp as my throat thickens with emotion. Nobody has ever given me so much before. My sisters made

gifts for my birthday. Grandfather usually forgot.

Jasce nods.

A genuine smile stretches across my mouth. “Thank you.”

“Of course.”

He moves to one of the stalls and opens the door. Inside, a mare with a deep black coat stands calmly, her eyes fixed on us.

“This is Midnight.” Jasce beckons me closer. “She’s stubborn, but she’s fiercely loyal. She’ll take you anywhere you want to go.”

I step forward and reach out to stroke the mare’s nose. She snorts, then nuzzles my hand. If she could speak, I imagine she would say, “*Let’s go on an adventure together.*”

Sunlight streaming through the open door plays across Jasce’s face as he talks. “I knew you’d feel a connection to her. She’s strong-willed, but she needs someone who can match her spirit. And I think that’s you.”

I’m not strong willed.

But I *would* like to ride Midnight soon. Maybe she would give me some of the strength I’m lacking.

Jasce leads me to the next stall, where a stallion stands proud and regal. His coat shines like polished marble in the sunlight. “This is Copper.”

“He’s magnificent.”

Jasce nods. “He’s one of our best stallions. He’s powerful and fast, but he’s also temperamental. He needs a rider with a firm hand.”

Excitement sends a thrill through me as I step closer to the stallion. The muscles in his neck ripple as he snorts and paws at the ground.

Jasce watches me as I reach out to stroke Copper’s nose. The stallion snorts again and shakes his head, but he doesn’t pull away.

“He’s difficult to handle,” Jasce says. “But with my help, I’ll have you riding him in no time.”

I nod, my heart pounding with excitement. The thought of riding such a magnificent creature makes my skin tingle with anticipation.

Jasce leads me through the rest of the stalls, introducing me to each horse and telling me about their unique qualities. By the time we finish, I think about riding every one of them.

“Now.” Jasce takes my hand, leading me toward Scarlet’s stall. “It’s time for you to ride.”

Nerves tighten and coil inside me as we approach the mare. She’s even more beautiful up close. Her coat is a rich chestnut color, and she has a white blaze on her forehead.

Sadness thrums through me for the mare. She has been through so much, and yet here she is, ready to carry me on her back.

“Go ahead.” Jasce nods at the horse.

I stare up at her saddle, wondering how I’m supposed to get from the ground to way up there. Jasce watches me as I try pitifully to place my right foot in the stirrup. Over and over again, I try to put my foot in the stirrup, and I fail.

“Put your left foot in the stirrup,” he says, offering the first bit of help.

I do as he said, placing my left foot in the stirrup, and then I try to propel myself up, but I don’t get far. He grabs my waist and hauls me up until I’m resting in her saddle. I take a deep breath and try to relax. It’s a lot higher off the ground than I imagined it might be.

The horse sways sideways, and I gasp and grip the saddle until my fingers ache.

“Jasce.” My voice trembles, betraying my fear.

A frown tugs at the corners of his mouth. “Scoot forward.”

“What?”

“Scoot forward.” Nerves thrum in my throat as I obey him, sliding forward enough for him to mount the horse behind me.

I brace myself, trying to ignore the feeling of his body so close to mine. Especially his thighs. They cradle me and make me picture things I have no business picturing.

“Are you ready?” he asks with his mouth near my ear.

Ready?

How can I possibly be ready with him so close?

He pulls me closer until his chest is snug against my back. “Relax,” he murmurs. “Let the horse do the work. Trust her.”

I manage a nod as Scarlet moves forward. The synchrony of her steps resonates through the saddle and into my bones. It’s everything I have ever imagined, this synchrony, this movement, the feeling of raw power beneath me.

As we emerge from the dim stables and into the open courtyard, Jasce’s arms graze my hips. Every time his body brushes mine, excitement and trepidation spark through my veins.

This is Jasce.

Jasce!

I lean forward, craving distance, or at least enough space to think clearly.

He hauls me closer, tucking me back against his chest. “Stay here. That way you feel my movements as I guide Scarlet.”

Feel him?

The last thing I want to do is *feel* him.

Scarlet’s rhythm entangles with the tempo of my racing pulse as I try to not think too much, to not feel too much, to not want too much. But unfortunately, with every brush of his body against mine, I’m reminded of the way he looked as he slept naked next to me last night.

Stop!

Don't think about Jasce's naked body.

My traitorous mind refuses to obey. I think about every inch of his bronzed, chiseled body.

Stop it!

As if sensing my thoughts, Jasce's grip tightens against me, but he doesn't speak. Instead, he continues leading Scarlet around the courtyard. I pay attention to the way he moves the reins and the way the mare responds, putting everything to memory for the next time.

Hopefully, the next time will not include a confusing barbarian warrior.

Chapter Nineteen



WHEN WE RETURN to the stables, Jasce helps me dismount from the mare and leads me into the shadows of the barn. My breath catches at the warmth glinting behind his brown eyes.

“Jasce,” I say, my voice too wobbly, too revealing of my momentary attraction to him.

He hooks his arms around my hips and pulls me flush against him, the heat emanating from his body making me ache between my legs. It’s a strange sensation, this ache.

“You’re shaking again.” Lightly, he caresses my arm—right where the goosebumps formed the moment he pulled me close.

“Maybe if you weren’t so...” The words die against my lips.

“So?”

“Big.” Inwardly, I groan. Did I really just call him big?

“I’m big?”

“I meant...” I lick my lower lip. “You’re...tall.”

He pulls back and smirks. “Tall? Is that all you’re going to offer?”

I can’t stop the blush that rises from my chest, travels up my neck, and settles in my cheeks.

Jasce, of course, notices.

“Do you like my body?” He trails his fingers from the curve of my elbow to my shoulder blade and back down.

Yes. “No.”

“You even lie differently.”

“I don’t.”

“Your voice raises an octave.” He traces down my arm, stroking, caressing.

“It doesn’t.”

His hand travels over my shoulder, and tangles in my hair. He pulls, tilting my head back and exposing my neck.

I know I should push him away, but I like this foreign feeling, this pulsing between my legs, this heat emitting between us, this dream where I am a woman desired by a man.

If I wake up from this illusion, I’ll be the woman with the scars again. Repulsive again. Suppressed again.

The warmth of his breath whispers against my skin as he leans closer and presses his mouth against my throat.

Jasce’s lips move up my neck until they find mine, crushing them with an intensity that leaves me breathless. I kiss him back, giving into an urge I have never surrendered to before. That urge to kiss a man, to feel his mouth against mine, to taste him, to feel him against me.

His tongue plunges inside my mouth, and I moan as tingles shoot through my veins. I rise on tiptoes and curl my fingers into his hair, touching the soft strands. *Touching Jasce.*

He is forbidden, Annora.

I slam my hand against his chest, shoving with all my strength. He breaks free, his breathing ragged.

“You’re Jasce,” I say, as if that explains everything.

His brow lifts. “And you’re—”

I press my fingers to his lips, stopping his words. Even though I know it’s wrong, I don’t want to hear another woman’s name on his lips right now.

Jasce pulls my hand away. “You’re a contradiction.”

“A contradiction?” My hand trembles as I shove my hair behind my ears.

“You kiss me back with fervor and then push me away. What I cannot figure out is why.”

I slip my hands into my sleeves, needing a moment to think, to breathe, to contemplate why I allowed him to kiss me at all. Maybe it’s simply because I have never kissed a man until now.

My first kiss!

And what a kiss it was.

There is no doubt it was not his first. Has he kissed Lyra? Of course, he has. It’s part of the Hematite binding ceremony. I can’t help but wonder how intimate they may have been. It should not matter. He is not mine. For a moment, I allow myself to wonder if he could be.

Would he kiss me? The real me?

No one would kiss you.

I wince at the ferocity of my own thoughts, the cruelty.

“I don’t...” I press my lips together again, not even sure what I could possibly say.

Thankfully, Zerah steps into the stables, drawing Jasce’s attention.

She grins, as if it’s perfectly normal to find us standing in the shadows. I take a step back as Jasce frowns.

“Can I steal Lyra from you?” Zerah asks.

He nods and heads toward the door. “I am going to go find a lake.”

“It’s too chilly out to swim,” she says.

“I’m counting on it,” he says as he disappears through the door.

She jerks her attention to me standing there, my skin still heated. “What did you do to him?”

I clutch my fingers together. “Nothing.”

A knowing smile pulls at her mouth as she grabs my hand and yanks me out of the stables. “Jasce only gets that look on his face after he has spoken to you. Well, the new you.”

“The new me?”

She sends me another look. “You’re different since you returned from Sharhavva.”

Fantastic, indeed.

I’m as transparent as a pane of glass.

“I hit my head,” I say, offering the same pathetic lie Lyra’s mother told me to say.

The wind teases Zerah’s hair as she purses her lips together, studying me. “I like you more.” She leans close. “I especially like the way you dress now. It’s much simpler.”

I run my fingers against my silk gown.

“Nobody needs to wear enough jewels to buy a small city.”

“Perhaps not,” I say with a smile.

She pulls me into the courtyard and to the bench, where I had found her a few days ago. As she settles next to me, she speaks. “Mother thinks you are odd, but I don’t.”

I stay quiet, allowing Zerah to speak.

“Then again, Mother thinks everyone is odd. She thinks Aleksander is odd because he refuses to marry. Jude is odd because he would rather stay in Karra than visit us. Mother says that too...a lot.”

“Why does she think I’m odd?” I ask after a moment.

“Because you don’t seem keen on giving Jasce an heir.”

I sigh.

“I know.” Zerah throws her hands wide. “Mother thinks our only duty is to give men babies. I loathe the idea of only being good for one thing. I enjoy reading, archery, and breeding war horses. Why should I be stuck in a house with some bastard and forced to give him an army of children?”

I open my mouth to reply, but she keeps talking.

“Though, you should probably give Jasce at least one child, so Mother will leave Darhavva. You wouldn’t have to deal with her lectures anymore. I wouldn’t either. I cannot wait until she leaves.” The wind ruffles the hem of Zerah’s cotehardie as she continues. “You should hurry, or she won’t leave, and she’ll force me to marry some obtuse, arrogant bastard.”

Zerah continues. “Jasce is a bastard too, but he’s the best of them.”

Jasce *is* a bastard—a bastard that stuck his tongue in my mouth.

And you liked it.

“Them?” I ask, needing to distract myself from my thoughts.

She nods her head. “Jasce is the best of them. Better than Father, Aleksander, Jude, and Reeve.”

“Your brothers,” I say, even though I’m fully aware of their names.

She nods.

“So...” Zerah pats my leg, “...are you going to hurry and help rid us of my disapproving mother?”

“Yes,” I say, even though I still have no intentions of allowing Jasce to bed me. But Zerah doesn’t have to know that. None of them do.

“Oh, thank Olah.” Dramatically, Zerah clutches her hands to her chest. “I was beginning to fear she’d never leave.” A smile spreads across Zerah’s mouth as she leans close to me. “Jasce will be relieved when he finds out he doesn’t need to go on so many cold swims.”

“Why would he swim in a cold lake when we have heated baths?”

Zerah’s eyes widen as she stares at me like I asked her to jump from the top of the castle walls.

“What did I say?” I scrub my hands against my gown.

“Are you just being facetious? You do know why he takes those swims?”

I shake my head.

She pats my leg again. “Because of you, you goose.”

“But I would never tell him to swim in a cold lake.”

Zerah rolls her eyes upward. “If you *share* his bed, Lyra, he’ll stop swimming in cold lakes.”

“Oh.” Warmth spreads across my face as I look away, fastening my stare to the nearby maple tree swaying in the breeze.

“I have seen you with men,” she says.

My gaze snaps to her as she throws up her hands.

“I’m not accusing you of anything. This was before you married Jasce. But I saw you. You knew things I only read about. Did things I only dreamed about. Yet now, you seem more innocent than I am.”

Nerves tighten in my chest as I swallow. “Things changed after I hit my head.”

“There’s one of them right now.” The sun moves behind the clouds as she points to a guard patrolling the courtyard. He’s young with brown hair and a thin frame. “I saw you with him at least five times.”

I swipe my fingers across the sweat on my brow. “Of course.”

Zerah’s eyes narrow. “You would never dally with a guard, Lyra.”

“But you said...”

“I was testing your memory.”

“It is lacking.” *Very, very lacking.*

Needing a change of scenery, I stand and smooth my cotehardie. “Would you like to go to the library?”

She nods and follows me into the palace and down the corridor. The entire time, she never stops talking.

“You didn’t have any favorites. They all seemed like they were your favorites. They gave you such expensive jewelry. I was surprised when Father chose you as Jasce’s wife. Jasce was surprised too, even if he didn’t say it. I *knew*. We all knew he didn’t like you.”

I open the door and step into the library, and Zerah follows me, still talking.

“You flirted with him, and he always just stood there so stiffly. But not anymore. Now, he’s interested.” Zerah grabs my arm and leads me to the sofa, where we both sit. “So, it’s probably a very good thing you hit your head. He likes you more. I like you more.”

“Well,” I say when she finally gives me a chance to speak. “I’m glad you like me. I have needed a friend.” So very much.

A grin pulls at her mouth. “I’m an excellent friend, and I’m quiet when I’m around the court, so I observe a lot. I could *observe* for you.”

“I’d like that.”

She leans back against the cushioned sofa. “This is fantastic. I won’t have to marry, and now you and I are friends.”

I smile as she continues talking and talking. Maybe she needed someone to speak to, someone that got her away from her books and her dog, even if only for a bit.

That night when I join Jasce in his bedchamber, I think about Zerah a lot. How bubbly she had been. How honest. She reminds me of Emerin.

“Thank you for the horses,” I say as he settles on the bed next to me.

He shifts to his back. “Of course.”

“It was far too generous, but I love them already.”

“You were right,” he says after a moment.

“About what?”

“You had never ridden a horse before today,” he says, his words straight-forward.

I rub my sweaty palms against my nightdress and try to think my way out of this, but there’s no way out.

Earlier, I had been myself. I had been Annora. I couldn’t have faked riding a horse. It was too thrilling and too nerve-wracking. Scarlet was so tall, and I had been so high in the air.

“Scarlet was spectacular,” I say instead of offering an excuse or another lie.

He doesn’t speak.

I ball my fingers into fists and hold them tightly against my body.

He knows you’re not Lyra.

GOLDEN LIGHT FILTERS into the room, waking me from sleep. I freeze when I feel the weight against my stomach. My gaze shifts to the muscular arm thrown possessively across my body.

Great...

I try to move a little, but his grip tightens, keeping me close.

“Stay here,” he says, his voice heavy with sleep.

“Jasce...” I lick my bottom lip. “I need—”

“—to stay right here.”

I sigh and close my eyes. How did I get myself into this mess?

For most of my life, I knew I would never marry. Now, I’m lying here with Jerrod’s son pinning me against him.

Jasce rolls, taking me with him until I’m on my back and he’s straddling me with a smirk pulling against his lips. I try to

not breathe too deeply, to not smell his scent of leather, smoke, and cherry wood.

I press my shaky palms against his chest.

Something sparks in his dark eyes as he leans close. “I wanted to see what you look like beneath me.”

I open and close my mouth, the words as frozen as my heart. Truly, if it doesn’t start again, I’m going to die in this man’s arms.

“Jasce.” His name escapes me, as if it’s the only thing I can say right now.

“Every fiber of my being wants you.” His words dance along my skin like a caress as he continues. “But I will not take what you don’t freely offer.”

As quickly as he rolled me over, he shifts away from me and stands. I lick my lips as he stretches lazily, then crosses the room, thrusts the door open, and steps into the corridor.

The door clicking shut reverberates through me as I clutch the bedcovers to my chest.

What just happened?

Chapter Twenty



A SMILE PULLS at my mouth as I walk through the courtyard, picking red, pink, and white roses to brighten the bedchamber I share with Jasce. I would place them in Lyra's room, but over the last three days, I have barely spent any time there.

Jasce even had some of Lyra's clothes brought to his bedchamber. As I sat, watching Hanah sort and put away Lyra's things, I thought of my gowns and the items I left behind. Like Mother's seashells and Asha's sketches.

Today, I needed to escape the palace, and I needed to do something with my hands. I lift my gaze, watching the butterflies and the moths flying from rose to rose.

If I had wings, I would fly home.

Would Jasce miss me?

I shake the thought free and keep cutting roses and adding them to the basket dangling from my arm. Alban stands nearby, watching, his eyes keen, his mouth thin. Truly, this man lacks the ability to smile.

"I think it will rain later." I cut another rose and add it to my collection.

He simply stares.

"When I was younger, I ran through the rain with my sisters. Do you have family, Alban?"

He nods.

“Children? A wife?”

The wind tousles his light brown hair as he nods again.

“Tell me about them?”

“I have a son and a daughter.”

“How old are they? What are their names?” I ask, wishing to know more about him.

Pride lingers in his tone as he speaks. “Aberem is three, and Seline is five.”

I glance up from the rosebush and smile at him. “And your wife?”

“She died.” Pain glints in his gray eyes, and his mouth tightens as he looks away for a breath.

“I’m sorry,” I say, hating that life is so cruel.

Shadows skim his solemn features as he slips his hands into his weapon belt and doesn’t speak.

Raindrops splatter the top of my head, bringing an abrupt end to my rose gathering. I hurry into the palace and toward Jasce’s bedchamber. Alban trails me, then remains outside the door as I step inside, fill a vase with water, and plop the roses inside it.

There, now the room smells nice, and it brightens the space. Hopefully, Jasce doesn’t disagree.

As I turn to leave, Jasce fills the doorway and my mouth parts at the sight of him bare chested.

“Come with me.”

“But...” I pivot and wave my hand toward the roses. “I picked roses.”

His brow lifts as he pushes the door wider. “Let’s go.”

“Are you at least going to tell me where you’re taking me?”

“No.”

I sigh and follow him from the room and down the corridor. Occasionally, I look over at him, wondering why he's not wearing his surcoat. Did he get too hot? Or maybe he took it off so I would keep looking at him.

When I can no longer handle not knowing, I voice the question. "Where is your surcoat?"

"Outside."

My brow lifts. "Why are you not wearing it?"

He guides me around two maids dusting tapestries. "You ask a lot of questions."

"At least I'm not walking through the corridors practically naked."

Those dark eyes stare over at me and trace my body. "I wish you would."

"What?" I gasp out.

He winks. "You could start with your cotehardie."

I shake my head at him. "I'm not taking off my clothes, Jasce."

"What a shame." He grins, and my stomach flutters. Despite his reputation as a dangerous, ruthless warrior, I am drawn to him. The way his dark hair falls in loose waves around his forehead, and the torchlight skims his chiseled jawline.

But it is his honey-brown eyes that fully captivate me. Especially those gold flecks. They lure me to him, like a moth to flame. I blink and look away, not wanting to be lured.

He tugs on my arm and pulls me out a side door and into a small courtyard with tall hedges bordering the perimeter. A gentle wind follows us as he leads me to a weapon rack and yanks free two wooden swords.

He turns to me and offers me one of the weapons. "I want to train you."

My brow lifts. "Why?"

“I believe every woman should know how to defend herself.”

Behton’s handsome face flashes through my thoughts as I take a sword from Jasce. Behton said those words to me summers ago. He wanted to make sure I knew how to fight. Of course, my skills are limited, since he never got to spend as much time as he wanted training me. He was too busy fighting Grandfather’s wars, and in the end, it had taken his life.

I swallow through the pain, the sadness, the grief.

“Face me,” Jasce says.

I plant my feet, my heart beating in anticipation. Jasce lifts his sword in a fluid motion, and I mimic the movement, feeling a sense of power coursing through my veins. As he approaches, I hold my ground as my muscles tense, and my focus sharpens.

He swings his sword, and I block it, the impact sending a jolt through my arms. We continue, our swords clashing and ringing out through the empty courtyard.

“You have done this before,” he says.

“Yes.” I see no point in denying it.

“You are full of surprises lately.”

I deflect his quick swipe.

“Good.” Jasce accelerates his strikes, and I struggle to keep up.

“Jasce,” I pant out when he sends me backward with each move until my back is against a post.

“Never allow your enemy to get the upper hand.” He lands a powerful blow against my weapon, and it flies from my hand.

A fierce frown pulls at my mouth as he nods at the weapon.

“Pick it up.”

I shove sticky strands behind my ears. “You’re not being fair.”

“Do you think your enemies will be fair to you?” He nods at the practice sword again. “Pick it up.”

A sigh escapes me as I move to the weapon and pluck it from the ground, but before I can set my feet, he strikes again. I pivot and lose my balance. Dirt kicks into the air as I land in a pitiful heap, and the weapon flies out of my hand. Again.

Something glints behind his stare as he stands over me. “Get your weapon.”

“I could get it if you would stop attacking me.”

He doesn’t speak as I grumble about annoying barbarians and grab the sword. This time when I stand with it in hand, he waits, watching me.

“Why are you so intense?” I shove more sticky strands behind my ears.

He ignores me. “Attack me.”

I tighten my fingers around the hilt and shake my head.

“Attack me, Lyra.”

A growl escapes my lips as I lunge toward him. He moves sideways, and I stumble to the ground.

“Again,” he says, his voice annoying.

I lurch to my feet and pivot toward him, aiming my sword at his face. He quickly knocks my weapon away with his hand.

Another growl escapes me as I attack again and again, but he keeps blocking me. Or he simply moves, and I swing at air.

“You’re so infuriating.” I arch my weapon toward him, but he dodges it easily.

Then, he grabs my shoulder with his free hand and jerks me against him, our swords caught between us. “And you’re so damn beautiful.”

“What?” I gasp out, my eyes still flashing with anger.

“You have fire in you. Use it as fuel, but don’t allow it to consume you.”

I try to push him away, but he tightens his grip.

“Use it. Wield it in your favor,” he says, his voice low, husky, and chipping away at my anger.

Sunlight mingles with the heat in his eyes as he leans down and kisses me. I gasp as he pulls away and grins at me.

“Y-you.” I back up and raise my sword.

His brow lifts. “Are you going to lob off my head now?”

“I might.”

Mirth skips in his eyes as he waves his weapon back and forth. I lurch toward him, and he grabs me, spinning me around until my back is pressed against his chest.

“I thought you were going to lob off my head?” he teases.

“I will as soon as you release me.” I tighten my grip around the hilt of the practice sword, not willing to concede to him.

“Then, I better not let go.” He allows his weapon to fall to the ground, then turns me to him.

I know I should back up—probably even run away, but I don’t. Instead, I allow him to take my sword and drop it too.

“I thought we were training,” I whisper.

“We are.” His gaze lowers to my mouth. “Kiss me.”

I lift my chin, needing to be defiant. “No.”

The flecks spark in his eyes as he frames my face and lifts my chin. “Kiss me.”

I stare up at him, wanting to deny him, needing to deny him, but there’s something about the way he looks at me. Something captivating. Something real, as if in this moment, he’s just a man who needs this. Who needs me.

It’s empowering, being needed.

So, I do something I have never done before. I lift my mouth to his, initiating the kiss. His lips are warm, inviting, provoking my boldness. I wrap my arms around his neck as he deepens the kiss.

I want more. It's there every day now, this all-consuming want. I try to ignore it when I sleep next to him, but there's no ignoring it. Only surviving until he takes me over the edge.

Shamelessly, I run my hands through his hair, pulling him closer to me as our tongues dance together. His hands move from my back to my hips, gripping me tightly as he grinds against me. I gasp at that sensation, that hardness, that need.

His hand slips between us, stroking me through the fabric of my cotehardie.

The gods help me!

I don't want it to end, but I should make it end. This isn't right. None of this is right, yet I want more.

"Yes," I whisper, urging him on.

"Fuck!" he says through his teeth as he shoves my cotehardie up enough to touch my bare skin, to run his fingers up my thighs.

"Jasce."

I freeze at the sound of Aleksander's voice. Too close. Too abrupt.

Jasce stiffens and holds me against him as he turns enough to probably see his brother. "What do you want?"

"The scouts returned. You're wanted in the throne room immediately."

When Aleksander's footfalls fade, Jasce turns back to me. I stare up at him, seeing the flame of desire still burning in his eyes.

He traces my jawline with his knuckles. "I have to go."

"I know." I try to muster a smile. It falls short.

He stares at me a moment longer before walking away. When he steps through the door into the palace, I slap my hands against my mouth.

The gods help me! How am I ever going to avoid this man?

I'm not. Not unless I find Mazaline. She holds the answers to what happened to me. I know she does.

Maybe then I could escape and return to my family.

Otherwise, I'm going to end up doing something very foolish.

THAT NIGHT when Jasce joins me in bed, I pretend to be asleep. It's cowardly, but I'm not ready to face him after I encouraged him earlier.

The mattress dips as he slides closer to me and brings me against him. I allow it, but keep my body stiff, refusing to melt against him.

"I know you're awake," he says, his tone raspy.

I raise my hand to my mouth, stifling the urge to speak.

He grips my hip and pulls me until I'm flush against him. His heat seeps through my thin nightdress as I bite the inside of my lip. It's not enough to stave off the uncontrollable need burning in my center again.

How can he do that? Touch me and make me want him?

"One day," he begins in that same raspy voice. "You will be so desperate for my touch, you will beg."

I squeeze my eyes shut as the urge to concede consumes me. It would be easy to forget who I am. Who he is.

But I can't.

He grabs the bedcovers and pulls them over both of us. I remain in the same spot, refusing to budge. Maybe I like the

way his muscular arms cradle me. It's safe here. Comforting here. There's no need to hide my scars.

The truth stabs me. There's no need to hide when I'm in Lyra's body. Yet, this isn't my life.

Don't think about it right now.

Please.

I sink against Jasce, allowing the moment to continue a little longer. Tomorrow, I can wake up and search for Mazaline.

Chapter Twenty-One



AS I WAKE the following morning, I stretch and turn to find the bed empty. A faint rustling on the other side of the room draws my attention to Jasce sitting on a chair near the fireplace. He keeps his shoulders stiff and his attention fixed on the flames.

I sit up, rubbing the sleep from my eyes. He shifts enough to observe me as I climb from the bed. I hastily don a cotehardie as Jasce looks away from me. A feeling of unease creeps up on me as I watch him, wondering what could be on his mind.

I walk across the room and stand behind him to see what he's looking at. A small, intricately carved wooden box sits on the mantel.

"Jasce," I say softly. "I need to go into the city again." *Then, I can look for Mazaline.*

"We cannot go anywhere," he says, his stare still trained on that wooden box.

Disappointment lances through me. "You said you would escort me wherever I need to go."

He stands and rotates to face me. "That was before."

"Before?" I lift my brow, waiting for his answer.

"Hakan has camped his army outside our city gates."

Grandfather is here?

My feet tingle with the urge to dash to the window and peer outside, as if my mere gaze could conjure his presence.

I know Grandfather well. He won't lower his banner to House of Crimson, not while his heart beats to be chieftain.

"There will be no truce." The painful reality emerges from my numb lips.

A muscle twitches in Jasce's jaw. "I'm aware."

I hate death, the finality of it, the pain, the grief. My twin sisters went first. They were only babies when the runaway wagon they were sitting in veered off a cliff. My brother, Behton, was the last one to die. His passing ripped my heart out of my chest.

I force myself to focus on Jasce. "Your father—"

"—isn't here," he says, his tone abrupt, brisk.

I move to the nearby table and pour myself a goblet brimming with wine.

Asha's voice scolds me as I raise the goblet to my lips. "*You shouldn't drink so early, Annora.*"

I know.

Knots tighten in my stomach as I drink anyway, knowing I need the wine to face this moment.

"Will you lead the army against Hakan?" I ask after I consume enough to heat my throat and calm my thoughts.

Jasce nods.

I raise my hand to my mouth, a ragged breath escaping through my fingertips, as if the gesture itself could capture and dissipate my mounting frustration.

It cannot. Nothing can.

"Where is your father?" I ask after a moment.

"Engaged in a battle against the Bloodstone tribe."

I shake my head and turn away, facing the window.

As I gaze outside, my mind wanders from my worries to the beauty of nature. Mother taught me that. To enjoy what is around me, to appreciate the sun.

Today, it paints the sky a vibrant orange and pink. I smile as I think of how ardently Asha strived to sketch a sunrise that speaks without any words. That sings without any music. That flies without any wings.

Grandfather and Jerrod want to take that beauty away, to carve it with steel and arrows.

I take a deep breath and turn back to Jasce, who still stands there, watching me. “When does it end?” I ask, longing to know what he thinks about the tension between our houses.

“It ends when people like Hakan stop trying to take what doesn’t belong to them,” Jasce says plainly.

“But the chieftainship belongs to House of Silver.”

Anger sparks in Jasce’s eyes. “It hasn’t belonged to House of Silver for a century.”

“Is that your stance?” I ask, my heart cold, frozen at the bitterness behind his words.

“You cannot change what is already written in the sands. House of Crimson will continue to rule.” His words are so final, so typical of people from House of Crimson.

“And you’ll be chieftain one day,” I say, doubting Grandfather will ever win against House of Crimson. They’re too strong, their armies too large. “Will you be fair?”

Jasce doesn’t answer.

“Do you agree with your father’s decision to attack villages and kill everyone? Even the women and children?” My heart longs to truly understand Jasce, to see his truths as vividly as a vibrant sunrise.

But he gives me nothing. No hints. No secrets. No mantel to hang my hopes on.

I shake my head. “I should have known.”

“Known what?”

“That you are merely an extension of him.” Maybe if I goad him, he will argue and tell me I’m wrong.

“You didn’t seem to have an aversion to Jerrod when you talked to him on our wedding day.” Jasce runs his hand against his jaw. “You talked to him more than you spoke to me that night.”

An icy shiver slips down the length of my back as I think about being close enough to speak to Jerrod.

Determined to try again to reach Jace, to believe he can be different than his father and my grandfather, I step closer and touch his arm—strangely needing the connection. “Don’t go. Don’t fight Hakan. Find a way to make peace,” I say, even while knowing that he must go and protect his people against an attack and that Hakan is no more likely to work toward peace than Jerrod would be.

Jasce shifts enough to meet my eyes, but he doesn’t pull away from me. “Hakan will never make peace.”

“But would *you*?”

His arm flexes beneath my hand. “Stay here until the battle starts. Once it does, I want you to go with the rest of the women to the lower parts of the palace. You’ll be safe there.”

I don’t want to part, being at odds with him, but I am at a loss for what to say to a man before he goes to war, so I simply offer an observation. “I feel the tension inside you, the tightness, the string ready to break.”

“If I’m ready to break, it’s because you keep pushing me away.” He steps closer to me, brushing his body against my smaller frame. “I need to fuck you.”

My conversation with Zerah echoes in my ears. Everything she said. Especially what she said about Jasce liking me more, but it doesn’t change the fact that I’m only a shadow of my real self.

“I’m not what you want,” I choke out.

He brings me against the wall until the cold stone bites into my back. “How do you know you’re not what I want?”

“I...”

He runs his knuckles down my neck, stroking my skin, inflaming the ember burning in my chest. “Do you want to know why I know we’ll win this battle against Hakan?”

“Why?”

“Because I will not die before I take you against this damn wall.” He reaches down and yanks up my hem until the cotehardie is bunched around my waist. Just as quickly, he pushes against me until I *feel* him. I gasp as his mouth comes within an inch of mine.

So close. So tempting. So capable of sending me over the edge of control.

“This will keep me alive. This...” Boldly, he brings his hand to touch me between my legs. “The feel of you. The longing to taste you.”

The muscles tighten in my thighs, and heat pools in my center. The kind of heat I never imagined was possible.

He leans down, crushing his mouth against mine, his kiss claiming, as if he’s trying to carve out a piece of himself inside me.

He breaks the kiss and whispers against my mouth. “Make no mistake. I will win this war, and when I’m finished, you will freely give me what belongs to me.”

A part of me longs to say yes, but three truths stay my tongue. I cannot stay here as Lyra.

He would not want me as Annora. And our houses will always be at war with each other.

I push against the walls of his chest until he frees me.

He says nothing. Just stares at me with those dark eyes of his.

Then, he walks away, leaving me to the agony of my thoughts and the heat churning inside me.

Chapter Twenty-Two



STONE MISSILES BLAST into the walls, shaking the very foundation of the palace. Even sitting in the room far below the fighting, I feel the cataclysm of war. It shakes my bones and rattles my teeth.

I huddle in a room full of women and children, trying to calm them down as they tremble in fear. Some of the women pray softly to themselves, while others sit in stoic silence, holding onto their loved ones.

A little girl, who doesn't look older than five, cries for her mother, who is fighting with Jasce's army. Sadness tightens in my stomach as I hold the girl, knowing her mother's Fate is uncertain.

Zerah shifts next to me, clutching Spark on her lap. I adjust my body until we're shoulder against shoulder. She glances over at me and smiles.

Horrifying memories still invade my thoughts—memories of another attack. I was only eight when Jerrod attacked the fortress where I lived.

Grandfather is attempting to turn the tides. Now he's attacking one of Jerrod's cities.

Grandfather could take me home.

Hope blooms for an instant before logic returns.

He wouldn't know me like this.

The truth stings my skin. I'm stuck here, frozen in a sketch I didn't draw. There's no way to color outside the lines and escape the frame that House of Crimson has placed around me. Not unless I want to brave the desert on my own.

When the little girl looks up at me with wide, trusting eyes, I silently vow to protect her. She deserves that—my protection. After all, she's a casualty of a war she didn't ask for.

War doesn't care about the innocent lives it takes. It plucks from the earth until there is nothing left but ash and dust.

I don't want either side to win. Because even if Grandfather conquered Jerrod, someone else would rise to take his place, and another civil war would carve the life from this land.

I don't want Jasce to defeat Grandfather, either. I cannot lose another family member, even if it is the one who is ashamed of me. He's still family.

If only I could change everything, but I cannot. I am trapped in a stranger's body, in a foreign territory, with no weapons, no power, and no voice.

When another explosion echoes through the walls, I cringe, bracing myself for them to crumble around me. Zerah lowers her hand to mine and squeezes my fingers.

"It's all right." Confidence shines from Zerah's eyes as she continues. "Jasce will win. He always wins."

Does he?

I wouldn't know.

The little girl whimpers, and I rub her back, trying to soothe her. "What is your name?"

"Lillie," she says, her voice a fragile whisper—a whisper I will not allow this war to crush.

"Lillie is a beautiful name," I say softly. "And you're beautiful."

Lillie looks up at me with her dirt-streaked face and smiles. My heart melts at her innocence in the face of such turmoil.

As the day carries on, the noise continues, the sounds of destruction and death. I position myself in the corner of the room with Zerah and Lillie. Every time a loud explosion rocks the palace, Lillie jerks awake, and her wide eyes shoot to me. I rub her back and offer her reassuring words, and she falls back to sleep.

Every fiber of my being wants to race from the room, climb the steps to a higher floor, and look out a window, but wisdom cautions me to remain here, safely tucked away.

So, I stay in the corner with Lillie and Zerah and beg Olah for the war to end.

Chapter Twenty-Three



WE'RE PROVIDED meals by palace guards who refuse to answer our questions. Instead, they bring baskets of food, lower them to the table, and leave.

Even though I understand their reluctance to answer us, I crave knowledge. The craving doesn't leave me as I spend another day caring for Lillie. She chatters endlessly, as though the noises outside no longer affect her. Maybe she's grown desensitized to them.

Every day after the guards leave, Zerah marks the walls with a rock to keep count of how long we've been here. Fourteen days have passed, fourteen days of war, fear, and cramped quarters.

We're only provided water every other day to bathe. It's not nearly enough. I long to bathe in a sea full of herbs.

On the fifteenth day, a guard motions to me. I stand and grab Lillie's hand, refusing to leave the small child behind.

"Come with me," he says.

One of the young women moves closer to him. "Have we won?"

He stares at her blankly.

"Please." Her desperation echoes in her voice. "Have we won?"

"The war continues." He gestures at me again, and I follow him from the room.

As I trail the guard out of the lower parts of the palace and to the upper floors, my mind whirls with questions. Why am I being summoned?

My stomach coils into tight knots. Maybe everyone knows I am Hakan's granddaughter, and they will lock me away, or worse. Maybe they will kill me.

I shudder and climb the staircase behind the guard, who keeps a brisk pace.

"Slow down," I mutter as I tighten my grip on Lillie.

The guard nods and slows enough for me to walk next to him.

Surely, they have not discovered who I really am. Surely, this summoning means nothing. It has to mean nothing.

I'm not ready to die.

Another thought stitches fear deep into my chest. What if this is about Jasce? Maybe he has been hurt, or worse...

My stomach tightens as I push aside those dark thoughts, refusing to believe them.

Finally, we reach a large wooden door that leads to a room full of shadows. A familiar man emerges from the shadows, and my heart thrums in my chest at the sight of him. Instead of armor, Jasce wears a surcoat over pants.

He nods at the guard, and the man retreats, leaving me alone with Jasce and Lillie.

Jasce's gaze drifts to the little girl clinging to my hand. "Who is this?"

"Lillie." I smile down at the girl with vivid blue eyes and curly red hair.

Jasce crouches in front of her. "Hello."

A grin spreads across her mouth, revealing the dimples deep in her cheeks. "Hello, sir."

"Do you want a treat from the kitchen?"

Her face lights up. "Yes."

Jasce turns to the open door and calls for the guard. The man returns and bows.

“Take Lillie to the kitchen.”

“But...” I begin, hesitant to let Lillie go.

“I will make sure she returns to you,” he says with enough assurance for me to free Lillie’s hand and allow her to leave with the guard.

When they disappear through the door and it closes behind them, Jasce turns to me. “Are you well?” he asks as he looks me over.

“I’m all right.” It’s impossible to be truly well in a time such as this.

He closes the space between us and frames my face with his hands. “I owe you something.”

Sunlight streaming through the open windows enhances the gold flecks in his eyes as he leans down and touches his mouth to mine, his kiss tender, slow, mesmerizing, inviting me to surrender to him. I rise on my tiptoes and curl my fingers into his hair, drawing him closer, giving into him in a way I did the first time he kissed me.

He deepens the kiss, urging me to take those steps with him—to walk into the unknown, to abandon my control, to dive into the waves with him.

So, I do.

I even spread my hands across the width of his chest, feeling his breathing beneath my fingertips. His power. His strength. The heat of his flame burning through his surcoat.

It’s much hotter than my flame. Unlike silver, crimson magic tends to burn and destroy.

As our lips part, I look up at him and see the glimmer of something unspoken in his eyes. Something that ties our Fates together in a way I don’t understand.

His hand finds the nape of my neck, fingers threading through my hair as he pulls me toward him again. Our mouths

meet in an intense collision of desire—a desire that is driving me to my breaking point. I would snap for him, burn for him.

The realization nearly sends me to my knees.

I would burn for this man, this heir to everything I have been taught to fear.

A sob rises deep in my chest as I tear away from him and step back, scrubbing at my burning cheeks, as if it could erase this need from my body.

I cannot want him.

I scrub again, needing this want to go away. He watches me, his eyes a fiery wave of heat that threatens to consume me. There's no anger there like usual, just passion, just a burning flame that wants to devour me.

I turn away from him, wanting that devouring, needing that devouring. It's only fair that I get to experience it. Right?

No. No. No!

You cannot experience it, Annora.

My surcoat whips against my legs as I hurry to the window, needing a distraction. But unfortunately, I cannot see past a thick cloud of smoke.

“Why did everything stop?” I ask after a while.

He follows me to the window and stands next to me. “Both sides agreed to take time to bury the dead.”

My chest heaves at the thought of so many dead. So many lives wasted.

“Lyra.” He takes my arm and turns me to face him. “I need your help.”

“My help?” I laugh hoarsely. “What help could I possibly be?”

He studies me for a breath or two before speaking. “You have powerful magic, or did you forget?”

Images of the man attacking me with the fiery rune flashes through my thoughts. The way the flames crashed into me.

The way the heat tried to devour me, yet I walked away unscathed.

“My immunity to fire,” I say after a moment.

“Yes, but that’s not all.”

There’s more?

I grip the windowpane, staring out at the smoke. What does crimson magic feel like? Should I know it’s there? I never feel my silver magic. It’s more dormant than a sleeping volcano.

“Lyra.” Jasce shifts closer and turns me to face him. “Will you help me?”

“How?”

He lets out an exasperated exhale. “By using your magic. Join me. Fight next to me.”

Fight next to him?

I have never been close to a battleground, and I most certainly have never used magic before.

“I cannot help you.”

His expression shifts, turning harder, edgier. “My city is reeling, and if I don’t have your help, Hakan will break through on his next attack. Is that what you want? For him to break through?”

No.

If Grandfather breaks through, he will release his army like dermestid beetles into the city. They would devour everything and everyone until there is nothing left but bones.

The truth rips my heart in half—the reality that Grandfather is just as evil as Jerrod. I have always known that truth. At times, I’ve even tried to hide from it. But there has never been any escaping the rotting corpses of his enemies that he is in the habit of displaying outside the fortress walls.

“I don’t want either side to win,” I whisper, the words fragmenting inside me.

“What?” Jasce snaps.

“I don’t...” Sadness swells inside me as I stare down at my feet. “War destroys.”

“If Hakan’s army advances into this city, they will not just stop at the men,” Jasce says, his voice tight. “They will kill everyone.”

“I know...” I lift my gaze to his and speak plainly. “Your father does the same.”

Jasce’s jaw hardens like a slab of granite. “This isn’t about my father. This is about you helping your husband.”

My shoulders slump, and my arms hang limply at my side. “I cannot help you do something I know nothing about.”

“You summon a phoenix,” he says, his words laced with annoyance.

Lyra can summon a phoenix?

How spectacular!

“That’s impossible,” I say, knowing *I* cannot summon anything. Not even a cloud.

“I thought impossible was a word used by those lacking imagination?”

I frown, hating he turned my favorite quote against me.

He meets my eyes, his stare intense, as if he’s willing me to believe in myself. “Lyra, I know you can do it.”

He’s wrong. I cannot. It’s impossible. Especially without proper training.

I look away from him, my mind racing with the consequences of what he’s asking. Summoning a phoenix is not just difficult, it’s dangerous. I have read about it taking over the minds and bodies of people.

“If I try to summon a phoenix, when I have never summoned one before, it could kill me.”

“You have summoned one before. I watched you.”

“That wasn’t me...” I bring my hand to my mouth, squelching the urge to keep talking, to spill everything.

His gaze narrows. “Why did you say that wasn’t you?”

“Because I don’t remember summoning a phoenix,” I say. “I forgot a lot of things after my accident.”

He closes the space between us and pulls me so close, his heat burns through my clothes. “You’re lying about being injured.”

“I’m not,” I squeak out.

“My men had orders to follow you to Sharhavva. You never had a head injury. You were, however, violently ill, but you recovered and returned to Darhavva. So, tell me the truth. What happened to you in Sharhavva? Were you possessed?”

“No.” I bring my hand to his chest, feeling his power beneath my fingertips.

It sends a thrill racing through me instead of fear.

Oh, please let there be fear.

Fear is so much easier than unwanted desire.

He brings his finger to my throat, feeling that erratic throbbing. “Your heart gives you away. It tells me you’re lying.”

“I’m not.” I push against the brick wall of his chest. “Release me.”

“If you aren’t possessed, someone has cast a linking spell on you.” His footsteps echo across the marble as he walks to the door, pushes it shut, and turns the lock.

I back up, bumping into the marble wall.

“Show me your flame,” he says as he turns to face me.

Something about the sharpness of his tone makes me obey without question. I lower my bodice enough for him to observe Lyra’s flame on my shoulder.

He stares at it for several breaths, then jerks his gaze over me. “Show me the other one.”

My mouth falls open as I yank my bodice back up. “There isn’t another one.”

“That is a lie. Show me.”

“There isn’t another one, Jasce,” I manage.

He closes the space between us and stops when his boots touch mine. “Either you can show me, or I’ll cut off your surcoat and find it.”

“You wouldn’t.”

Determination glints behind his stare. “I would.”

“But I like this surcoat.” Nerves tighten in my throat as I brush my fingers against the soft fabric.

His mouth thins as he reaches for the dagger on his hip.

I throw up my hands. “Stop! I’ll do it.”

Quick breaths escape me as he folds his arms, and I grab the hem of my surcoat. Inch by inch, I lift the material until I have it bunched around my waist. My hands tremble as I shift to holding the linen with one hand and lower my undergarment on my hip enough for him to observe my small flame—the proof of *my* magic.

“Fuck!” His word echoes through the room as I hurriedly drop my surcoat, allowing the material to cover me again, to give me back my modesty.

Angry, brown eyes pin me to the wall, sear into my being, tear me apart piece by piece, then shatter me all over the marble.

“What is your name?” he asks, his tone like a chisel of ice, slamming into my chest and freezing me.

“M-my name?”

“You heard me.”

The gods help me!

“Ana,” I say, using the name of one of Asha’s maids.

I brace myself for Jasce’s anger or a lash of heated words. Instead, he grabs my hand and pulls me from the room. My

heart pounds against my ribs as he leads me down corridor after corridor, his pace so fast I have to nearly run to keep up with him.

“Jasce, *please*,” I plead with him, not wanting to die.

I still have so much to live for, and my family needs me. Asha needs her river. Mother needs my calm and help. And Emerin and Tahira need my friendship.

Jasce keeps walking like I never spoke.

At the end of a dark corridor, he shoves open a thick door, and I suck in a quick breath. The room is sparse, with only a bed and a washing stand.

“J-jasce.” Fear seizes me as I stare up at him with wide, pleading eyes. “Don’t l-leave me in here.”

A muscle tics in his jaw as he speaks in a voice cold enough to freeze the sun. “You will stay here until I decide what I want to do with you.”

“I don’t understand.” I wring my hands together, needing to cleanse myself of this moment, of these words, of my truths, of my two flames.

No one else has two. At least, no one I have ever met.

So why me?

Why? Why? Why?

“You are not Lyra,” he announces, his tone still cold, still freezing this desert he has thrust me into.

“I didn’t ask for any of this.” The truth scorches my throat, my heart, the part of me that burned for him earlier, that wanted him.

Scorn flares in his eyes for several long, painful breaths before he leaves me alone, and the lock clicks.

This is it, the moment I have dreaded. The moment I no longer hold my secret close, and Jasce has discovered enough to condemn me.

It was written in his eyes—that condemnation—that hatred.

I have seen it enough in Grandfather to recognize it.

One moment Jasce kissed me, the next, he brought me to this room and left me all alone. Alone to fear the shaking walls and the cries of war. Alone to wonder why I didn't just tell him everything. Now, I'm stuck in this room with nothing but my thoughts and an ocean of regret. If I'm going to die, I should have experienced more things...

I lift my fingers to my mouth, touching the heat left behind by Jasce. Frustration grips me as I scrub my lips, hating how I responded to him, hating that even now I remember what his lips felt like.

“Damn!” I shout, needing my voice to be heard, needing the door to crash down and free me.

My hem snaps against my legs as I rise to my feet and pace the room. Thankfully, the window, perched high above my head, offers me enough light to see. I lift my hand, allowing the sun to shimmer off my skin and ease the tension.

Jasce left me all alone, but he doesn't realize I am used to being alone.

He hasn't taken my spirit from me.

It will keep me safe, and one day, it will return me to my family.

Chapter Twenty-Four



DAYS AND NIGHTS SHIFT TOGETHER, becoming one. One voice. One echo. One beat in time.

I stay busy with several pieces of charcoal I found in the corner of the room. I use them to write on every inch of the walls—covering them in quotes and drawings.

The charcoal stains my hands and clothing, but I don't mind. Writing my favorite passages gives me purpose.

I skim my fingers across my favorite. *Impossible is a word used by those lacking a vivid imagination.*

It's true.

Other people might see my predicament as impossible to escape, but I don't. Everything is possible if you believe hard enough.

The door swings open, and I pause, still clutching the charcoal. Jasce stands there wearing armor and a frown etched across his features.

I gape at him, that image I will never erase from my mind. Jasce in full armor. Jasce wearing that crimson surcoat.

“Are you my enemy?” he asks, his words piercing the space between us.

Yes. “No.”

His gaze roves over the room, taking in my writing.

“I hope you don’t mind that I wrote all over your walls,” I say nervously.

He steps inside the room as I lower the charcoal to the floor and rise to meet his stare. “Are you here to undermine me?”

“No.” I glance around the room. “I’m not very calculating. Grandfather says I’m like a little bird. Helpless.”

Jasce’s brow lifts. “Grandfather?”

I slip my hands into my sleeves and shift my weight from foot to foot.

“Who is your grandfather?”

Hakan...

The reality numbs my insides.

“No one. At least, nobody of note.” I wave my hand dismissively. “You wouldn’t know him.”

“Do you want social standing?” When I stare blankly at Jasce, he continues. “Coin? Jewels?”

My tangled strands lash my cheeks as I shake my head.

“Fuck!” He turns to the door and grips the wooden frame with both hands.

“Has something happened?” I hesitate, then take a step toward him.

Has the battle ended?

Tension ripples down his back as he stiffens and tightens his grip. “Yes. My *wife* is someone else.”

Over and over again, his words repeat, playing in my mind like a never-ending song, yet I cannot decipher them. At least, not enough to analyze his tone.

Does he hate me now?

Well, obviously he’s mad at me. Why else would he lock me away?

But does he hate me?

“You could leave me here,” I offer, then instantly regret it. I don’t want to stay in a room all alone.

“No, I cannot,” he snaps. “Everyone would wonder where you are. They are already asking about you.”

They are?

“I’m not evil or calculating. I don’t want to harm you or anyone.” *I just want to go home.*

He turns at my words, and I step back, wiping my charcoal-stained hands against my filthy surcoat. “You need a bath and clean clothes.”

Without another word, he opens the door and holds it for me. I step through, following him into the corridor immersed in a harsh light. I squint, my eyes adjusting as he leads me to the bathhouse and tells a maid standing near the entrance to bring me food and tea.

Then, he turns to me and speaks like I’m one of his servants. “Bathe, and then return to your bedchamber.”

After he leaves, I peel off my clothes and step into the bath with steaming water. I sink deeper, letting the heat soothe my skin. It’s a pleasant reprieve after being locked up.

I grab a bottle of oil and scrub my body and try to not think about Jasce. But it’s impossible to not think about him, to not remember the frustration burning in his eyes.

When I’m finished, I climb from the bath and pull on clean clothes. The maid, a young woman with blonde hair and amber eyes, enters with a tray of bread, cheese, and fruit. I eat every bite and drink all the mint tea before walking to Lyra’s bedchamber, where I find Zerah and Lillie.

Zerah stands when I enter, hurries to me, and throws her arms around me. “You were gone for two days, Lyra. I was so worried.”

Chapter Twenty-Five



THE SUN RISES EVERY DAY, and the moon crests the night sky. It doesn't care that war wages outside these walls or that men and women are dying.

For three days, I count the sunrises, seeing them through a cloud of smoke and ash, knowing that when everything clears, it will be the same. It's always the same. Nature. The cycle of life.

After Lillie falls asleep, and Zerah leaves to talk to her mother, I move to sit near the window, watching the smoke in the distance.

I shift to stare at Lillie, who calmly sleeps on my bed. Ever since she moved to my room, she's been calmer, as if she feels safe here with me.

But safety is only a mirage in times of war. I know that too well. I close my eyes and let out a deep sigh, yearning for the battle to cease, for the soldiers to return to their families, and for peace to reclaim its throne.

When the door rattles with a knock, I hurry across the bedchamber to open it.

Lady Dinah stands there wearing a black cotehardie. "Change into clothing more suited to your station." Her nose wrinkles, as if the sight of me is an affront to the castle's very foundation.

"Has something happened?" I jerk my attention to the window but see no proof that anything has changed.

She offers a knowing smile. “You’ll see.”

Her nose wrinkles even further as her gaze moves to the bed. “Leave the child.”

My chest squeezes at the insensitivity of her words, but I don’t argue.

Lady Dinah crosses Lyra’s bedchamber and selects a gown from the armoire. I remove my plain surcoat and pull the cotehardie over my head.

As I walk down the hall with Lady Dinah, guards turn to stare at me. My cheeks burn with embarrassment, but I can’t tell if it’s from the attention or the knowledge that something is about to happen.

We make our way to the throne room, where a group of men gather. I look around, trying to find a clue to what is happening, but they give nothing away.

Lady Dinah sits to the left of the throne and gestures for me to stand near her. My heart races as I follow her request, standing next to her in the large room.

“Are you with child yet?” she asks, her voice low enough so only I hear her.

I bite back the urge to respond with a dry remark, my mind conjuring a witty retort that remains trapped behind my polite facade.

“I don’t believe so,” I say instead.

“When my husband arrives, you will lie and tell him you are carrying Jasce’s child.”

“He’s here?” I ask, my lips numb.

Lady Dinah smiles and nods, sending a shiver against my heart.

The gods help me!

Please, please help me.

Lady Dinah shifts against the chair and looks out over the assembly of men.

“Is Jasce all right?” Inwardly, I brace myself, waiting for her answer.

“Of course.” She continues in a proud voice. “My sons are strong. Nobody from House of Silver will ever break them.”

The door slams open, and a man steps into the room, a tall, older man with gray hair and a hardened face, dressed in armor with the blood of his enemies smeared on it. He walks with a confidence that could shake even the most resolute of opponents.

But it’s not his appearance that leaves me breathless. It’s the way he looks at me with enough coldness to freeze a volcano. To freeze me. To destroy me.

As quickly as he looked at me, he glances away as he strides toward the throne and sits. The men turn to him, their eyes speaking their victory even before they say anything.

My heart sinks to the marble floor as the truth hits me. Grandfather has failed.

He may not have been loving, but he’s still family.

And now...

I’m not even sure he’s still alive.

The door swings open again, and more warriors fill the throne room. Too many to count. The man with the long scar on his face is among them. The young woman with fiery red hair stands next to him.

I look up as Jasce moves to me, wearing a surcoat with a crimson phoenix over dark pants. Worry drums inside me as I eye him, searching for signs of injury. Other than a thin bandage wrapped around his left arm, he looks unharmed.

Jasce nods at Jerrod.

“I rescued you today, boy,” Jerrod says.

“The rescue wouldn’t have been necessary had you not taken most of the army with you,” Jasce’s words cut through the air, eliciting a smirk from his father.

“I see that you still have your mother’s tongue.”

Tension ripples across Jasce's shoulders, but he doesn't speak. Maybe he knows it's wise to not say anything.

"Jerrod," Lady Dinah begins, her voice commanding her husband's attention. "Do you remember Lyra?"

The chieftain's gaze shifts to me, and I sway closer to Jasce.

"Of course. How could I forget such a face?"

Everything in me wants to shift even closer to Jasce, to make his father stop looking at me.

Instead, I dip my head in respect. "My Lord."

"Lyra is with child," Lady Dinah announces.

I cringe and prepare for Jasce's scorn. To my surprise, he stands there as rigid as a tree trunk.

"Let's hope the child is a boy," Jerrod says.

I slip my fingers into my sleeves and will myself to not crumble in front of the chieftain. He'd probably enjoy that, watching me crumble.

One of the men in the crowd steps forward and bows before the dais. "My Lord, you are victorious today. House of Silver has surrendered."

The men cheer as tears prick at my eyes. I blink, willing them away, willing myself to not give into them in front of these people.

Everything will change for House of Silver now. Someone will try to take over leadership. Probably a distant relative.

Jasce's hand drifts to the small of my back. Although, he might have intended his touch to be comforting, I feel the tension in his body, the anger.

Is it directed at his father for the taunting? At me, for not helping him before his father arrived or for not bearing his child? Or perhaps, he's angry with himself?

All around us, the men celebrate their victory, but I cannot force myself to pretend and join in. I have nothing to celebrate.

WHEN THE CELEBRATION ENDS, Jasce leads me away from the throne room and toward his bedchamber, but he doesn't follow me into the room.

"Where are you going?" I ask as a thousand questions bombard me at once, all the things I long to have him explain. I need to know what's going to happen to Grandfather and his army.

"To bathe," Jasce says. "I'll be back. Stay here."

As soon as Jasce leaves, I step into the bedchamber with nothing but the sound of my breathing and the weight of my thoughts. Even Lillie is gone. She must have returned to her mother. The thought makes my stomach tighten the way it does when I think about my sisters.

My mind races over everything that has happened the past few days. Grandfather is likely dead or imprisoned. I lift my hand to my chest, expecting a twinge of pain or sadness, but I'm only left with a hollow sensation. Grandfather should have loved me better. He should have loved us all better.

I force aside the sad thoughts, but they're quickly replaced by another painful truth. Lady Dinah lied to Jerrod—promised him a child that doesn't exist.

Jasce must be so angry at me. Does he think I told his mother I'm with child?

Olah, help me.

Please hear my prayers and help me.

I want to go home to Mother and my sisters.

I sit on the edge of the bed and unlace my bodice, needing out of this cotehardie. It clings to my skin like a web of lies. I rip the fabric away, tearing the material until I'm sitting on the bed in my chemise.

I lie flat and stare up at the ceiling, thinking of my family. Of my sisters, who are probably worried sick about me. Of a

life that may not have seemed great to others, but I had everything I needed. Food. A bed. Family. Seashells. Books. So many books. And my garden full of flowers, herbs, and vegetables. My sisters took most of the harvest to the surrounding villages to feed the poor.

Moonlight sprawls through the window when Jasce returns and closes the door behind him.

His footsteps echo across the floor as he moves to sit on his side of the bed and shifts enough to meet my eyes.

“I didn’t lie to your mother,” I say, needing him to know.

“I know.”

“I would never lie about a child.” It would be despicable to lie about such things.

“You don’t have to worry about Jerrod finding out. He never stays long.”

I study Jasce for several breaths before speaking. “Why would your mother lie?”

“Dinah tries to protect me by lying. She has always done that.”

“I suppose that is kind...in a way.”

He shrugs. “She tries...”

“Are you close to her?”

“I care about her, but I’m not close to her. She tries too hard to fill the role of a woman who has been gone for a long time.”

“Who?”

“My mother. Dinah is Jerrod’s second wife.”

Second? I thought she was the first.

Exactly, how many wives does he have?

Jasce stacks his hands together and studies me. “Tell me about Ana.”

My throat turns dry as I try to shift away from him, but he grips my arm, pulling me back.

“If I’m going to share my bed with you, I want to know *you*,” he says.

My chest squeezes as I try to conjure words that will appease him, but even if I spoke, I would tell him more lies. And frankly, I hate lies and deceit.

So, I decide to offer him a real piece of myself.

“One summer ago, my brother returned from battle with a wound.” Tears prick at my eyes as I remember those awful days. “He didn’t get better. He died four days later, on the morning of my eighteenth birthday.”

Jasce’s expression softens. “I’m sorry.”

“He was so brave, so strong, so everything I always wanted to be,” I whisper.

“Five summers ago, I lost a brother in battle. So, I know what that pain feels like,” he says, his voice thick with emotion.

I touch his arm, feeling compassion for his loss.

A muscle jerks in his jaw as he shifts the subject. “How old are you?”

“I’m nineteen.”

“Who is Asha?”

My chest heaves as I draw in a quick breath and try to think of something to say.

“You call out for her in your sleep sometimes.” When I don’t respond, he continues. “When I first returned, you said she was your sister. I only know one Asha.”

Don’t say it.

Please don’t say it.

Fear spikes inside my veins as Jasce continues ripping apart my secret. “Asha is Hakan’s granddaughter. Are *you* his granddaughter?”

The fear slithers deeper and deeper, carving a path into my soul as I lie numb, unable to dive off the bed and escape his dissection.

“Asha is the oldest, then Annora. The two youngest are Emerin and Tahira. So, you must be Annora.”

The gods help me!

I try to scoot to the edge of the mattress, but he grabs my arm, keeping me pinned to the spot.

“No, you don’t get to leave,” he says, his voice a quiet but firm command that anchors me to the mattress. “Why is Hakan’s granddaughter in my bed?”

“I don’t know,” I say softly.

We both sit in silence for a moment as the haze that has been swirling around us clears and makes a path for the truth.

Jasce’s grip tightens. “No more lies. Are you Annora?”

Yes, a thousand times yes. I am Annora.

I’m not Lyra. I have no desire to be Lyra, but right now, a strong part of me wants to be someone he desires. Not this reflection trapped inside this frame.

“Yes,” I whisper. “I am Annora.”

He sits, and I brace myself for his anger, his wrath, his vengeance. But he’s strangely silent as he locks his gaze on the far wall.

My heart longs to call out to him, to get him to look at me, to really look, for him to see beyond the surface. To see me. The real me.

Instead, I lie in silence, waiting for the world to stop spinning around me.

“If you were working with Hakan, you would have helped him,” he says, breaking the silence that stretched way too long between us.

Helped him?

Does that mean Hakan is dead? Are all his men dead?

An icy chill slides down my back as I jerk my covers closer.

“What is your magic?” Jasce asks.

“My magic?”

“Yes, what can you do?”

“Nothing. My mother never gave me my rune, and she made me hide my flame from Grandfather.”

“So, your magic requires a rune?”

“Yes.”

Jasce stands and moves to the window. “Why should I believe you when you have been lying to me the entire time?”

“I tried to protect my secret by lying. But...” I rise to sitting and swing my feet over the side of the bed, “...I am not a threat. I just want to go home.” My voice breaks on the last word.

“Why should I trust you?”

A part of me wishes I had some elaborate speech prepared for this moment, but I don't. Nor do I have words to make him believe in me.

“Is Hakan dead?” I blurt out in a desperate attempt to change the subject and divert my thoughts. “Please tell me.” I stare into Jasce's eyes, trying to read his face, to see proof. “*Please.*”

“He has been taken prisoner.”

A ragged exhale escapes me as I sink against my pillow. The people from House of Silver are going to be devastated when they find out.

“What does Jerrod do to prisoners of war?” I ask, needing to prepare myself for the inevitable.

“He executes them,” Jasce says, his tone heavy with grim certainty.

Chapter Twenty-Six



THERE IS NOWHERE TO HIDE, to crack as I stand next to Jasce, overlooking the largest courtyard. Four men stand on the platform below. I know every single one of them, but there's only one man I cannot look away from.

Grandfather.

The sunlight casts a golden hue on his face, highlighting the firm lines of his jaw and the deep crevices of his cheeks. It reflects in the depths of his eyes, making them look like molten silver.

There's a small part of me that wants to leap from this balcony and throw my body at his feet to stop this execution. As his granddaughter, it's expected of me. To protect. To preserve the future of House of Silver.

But I cannot.

I don't have it in me to protect him. Maybe I should. Maybe someone who's able to forgive him would.

Jerrod raises his hand, and the crowd falls silent. "Today we squelch dissension," the chieftain begins, his voice ringing loud and clear across the courtyard.

My heart pounds harder and harder as he continues.

"Those who go against the will of the gods will be punished. The punishment for treason is death. There is only one house. Crimson. Anyone that stands against it will die."

I look past the platform, training my gaze to the line of trees as my legs tremble. Jasce stands stiffly next to me, his body rigid.

The chieftain nods at the executioner, who steps forward and raises his axe high in the air, and with one swift motion, brings it down. The crowd erupts into cheers as the man's head rolls off his shoulders, blood spurting everywhere. Bile rises in my throat as I sway against Jasce.

He tightens his grip as the executioner repeats the process with the next two men, leaving only Grandfather standing there, his eyes locked forward, his mouth tight.

The words I long to say to him scald my tongue. *“Do you hate me? Is that why you locked me away?”*

The executioner raises his axe again, and I close my eyes. I still hear the sound, the awful thudding of steel against flesh. The cheers from the crowd. My heart, slamming against my ribs.

“Lyra,” Jasce says with his mouth near my ear. “Come.”

Her name stings my ears, but I follow his request anyway, allowing him to lead me away from the balcony and into the palace. Everything echoes. Our footsteps. My heartbeat. Guards patrolling the corridors.

Jasce leads me into a study, but unfortunately, we're not alone. Jerrod and Dinah trail us into the room.

Pride gleams behind Jerrod's eyes, as if he's proud of what he did. “There are no sons,” he says with triumph.

“Sons?” Jasce asks with a rise of his brow.

“Hakan has no male heir.”

My stomach squeezes as I stare down at my hands. It's not true. Asha has a son, and Grandfather named him as his heir.

I must go back and protect my nephew from the same bitterness that destroyed Grandfather.

Grandfather's face bleeds into my vision as the last words he ever said to me ricochet in my ears.

“Go to your bedchamber, Annora. I don’t want you scaring my guest with your hideous face.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven



OVER THE NEXT FIVE DAYS, I avoid Jasce as much as possible, and we never speak about my confession. He makes it easy by coming to bed late and rising early. He treats me differently. He's colder and distant, and I'm never allowed to go anywhere alone. Alban is always nearby.

Zerah spends a lot of time with me. Usually, we stay in the library reading until the light fades from the windows. Sometimes, I am forced to eat dinner in the Great Hall, where there are more people than I care to count.

Jasce ignores me there too.

I know everyone must feel the tension between us. Lady Dinah certainly does. She gives me disapproving looks. Lyra's mother snubs me, as if I'm not there. Instead, she talks to anyone who will listen.

Aleksander is the only person who doesn't seem to mind the tension. He teases me and talks about the different cities he has visited. I always listen, imagining the cities he's speaking about and their people. I even give them unique accents and elaborate clothing choices.

Jasce usually glares when I give Aleksander too much attention.

But every night, when I lie in bed, it's Grandfather I think about. Grandfather I cannot forget. Grandfather I cannot mourn.

Maybe I should.

Maybe I should do a lot of things, but I don't.

Chapter Twenty-Eight



THE WIND STROLLS through the courtyard as I join Zerah and Aleksander to celebrate Zerah's eighteenth birthday. Alban stands nearby scowling, and my heart breaks as I think of his wife.

Zerah's eyes sparkle with excitement as she leads me to a colorful blanket spread out with an array of delicious food. "I ordered us a feast."

Aleksander sits and plucks a grape from a platter full of fruit, plopping it in his mouth as we join him on the blanket. Eagerly, I reach for a loaf of wheat bread and slice off a hearty chunk.

As I take a bite, I savor the soft texture. It's absolutely perfect.

Zerah smiles as she picks up a honeyed pastry and aims it at her brother.

"Don't you dare, Zerah," he says with a frown.

She launches it at him, smacking him in the chest with it. He brushes the crumbs from his surcoat and gives his sister a long look. She laughs and picks up another pastry.

I smother a smile and take another bite of bread as she raises her hand, throwing another pastry at her brother. It hits his arm, leaving crumbs and honey on his clothes.

He scrubs at his surcoat with one hand and grabs a handful of grapes with his other. Her eyes widen as he throws them at

her, hitting her in the face.

“Aleksander.” She launches to her feet and runs, but not before he pummels her with more fruit.

I laugh as she tries to dodge him, but when Aleksander reaches for my loaf of bread, I snatch it up and back away.

“Oh, are you protecting that?” he teases.

I nod and clutch the bread closer.

He picks up pastries and throws them at me. I yelp as one hits me in the chest. When he strikes me again, I toss my bread at him, hitting him in the forehead.

His laughter echoes through the courtyard as he keeps picking up food and throwing it at us. The gods are my witness. I try to avoid him, but he hits me more times than he misses.

Zerah taunts him as she runs. So, he picks up the entire platter of fruit and launches the contents at his sister. He misses terribly. The fruit smashes into the cobbled pathway.

“You missed,” she teases.

“Lyra,” he says as he grabs the last pastry and gives it to me. “Get her.”

A smile stretches across my mouth as I throw it at Zerah. It smacks her in the back as she tries to run away. Her laughter carries to me as she runs into the nearby bushes, still laughing, still taunting us.

I look at Aleksander covered in honey and crumbs and laugh. I cannot help it. He looks ridiculous.

“Oh, you’re laughing, are you?” Merriment twinkles in his eyes as he looks me up and down. “You should see yourself.”

I brush at my cotehardie, but I only make it worse.

What would Jasce think if he saw me like this? I shake free the thought as Zerah returns and stares at her empty blanket.

“Let’s go to the kitchen,” she says.

Aleksander straightens the sleeves of his surcoat. “Why?”

“Because I’m starving.”

I roll my eyes and follow them to the kitchen, where we get odd looks, but the staff serve us food we do not throw this time.

I STEP into the bedchamber and grimace at how sticky I am. Even my hair has honey in it. Still, I smile as I open the armoire to grab clean clothes.

The door creaks open, and I turn to find Jasce standing there, his gaze fastened to me.

“Where were you?”

I grab a clean surcoat and undergarments and turn back to him. “In the courtyard with Zerah and Aleksander.”

Jasce’s eyes trace over my sticky clothing. “Did you climb into a pot of honey?”

“We had a food fight,” I say brightly. “And now I’m headed to the bathhouse. So, if you don’t mind.”

I try to squeeze around him, but he doesn’t budge.

“I have been doing research,” he says. “And I want to talk to you about it, so I’ll join you.”

“Join me,” I squeak out as I think about him climbing into the bath with me.

“Yes, I will join *my* wife in the bath.”

My pulse thrums at the base of my neck. It’s the first time he’s called me his wife in days.

I follow him down the corridor and into the bathhouse. This time, he doesn’t turn around as I hurry out of my ruined surcoat and into the first pool. Unfortunately, I chose a cold one. I try to relax, but it’s impossible with goosebumps forming on every inch of my skin.

I hurry from the cool pool and into a heated one. The warm water instantly chases away the chill.

Jasce removes his weapon belt and then his surcoat. The water laps at my skin as he climbs into the bath next to me.

“So, as I was saying. I have been doing research.” He moves until he’s directly facing me, and I back up, brushing against the smooth edge of the pool.

He’s too close. Too handsome. Too naked.

I blink, but he doesn’t disappear.

“What kind of research?” I manage after a moment.

“About Annora.” He glances at me as I lower my body further into the water, seeking an escape from the intensity of his gaze, and the emotions churning inside me. “You.”

“That couldn’t have taken long.”

“When you were a child, you were locked away. Nobody saw you anymore. Some people thought you were dead. Your father disappeared summers ago. And your mother is absent and flighty. Asha leads you and your sisters. In fact, Asha leads the entire city of Bakva.”

I remain mute, my lips pressed together.

“Why were you locked away?” he asks, his question chipping away at my truths.

Tears prick at the back of my eyes as Grandfather’s face burns my vision. I blink, willing it away, willing him away, willing his memory to not hurt so much.

I will strength too, the kind I have always expected Asha to give me. But she’s not here.

I must do this alone.

“Is it because of your magic?” Jasce asks, jerking me back to him and all his questions.

The water ripples around me as I shake my head.

“Did your grandfather think you were insane? Possessed?”

“No,” I whisper.

“Then, tell me, *Annora*,” Jasce says, his voice laced with curiosity and a hint of something more, something that makes my pulse race a little harder.

“Grandfather locked me away because I have scars,” I say, my words raw, painful against my tongue.

“Why should scars matter? Everyone has them.”

“Not like mine.” The memory of that day overtakes me, blinding me with those horrifying events that had led me to the stove, where I tried to see the pot. I only wanted to help. Then, it teetered on the edge before pouring boiling liquid on me. I had turned away at the last second. That’s why it only hit the left side of my face—forever ruining me—forever making me an object of ridicule.

Mother had tried to heal me with her silver flames. If not for her care, the scars would have made me unrecognizable.

She had begged my grandfather to allow her to take me to the Kyanite tribe. Their more sophisticated healing abilities originate from their light magic. Grandfather refused, of course.

“I was burned.” The words choke out of me.

“Where?”

I bring my hand to the left side of my face, drawing a line from my forehead to my jaw. “Here.”

“And now you’re here,” he says plainly. “With me.”

“Yes, but I didn’t ask for it. I was content with my sisters.”

He grabs a bottle of oil and pours it onto a cloth and washes his chest and arms. “I have done a lot more research into the types of magic involved in something like this, and there’s only one type that could do this.”

Eagerness surges over me, compelling me to slide closer to him. “What type?”

“Soul linking.”

Soul linking? I have never heard of such a thing.

“It’s rare,” he says. “And mostly unheard of, and it requires silver magic.”

“Then,” I say, thinking out loud. “Someone from House of Silver did this to me?”

“Yes.” He sets the cloth down. “What do you remember?”

I run a finger across my forehead, needing to think, to remember everything. “I was ill, and Asha took me to a healer. The healer gave me a painting of Lyra.”

“What did the healer look like?”

“She had dark hair and eyes and a tattoo here.” I touch below my mouth. “It had odd symbols. I think they might be ancient Hematite words.”

A twitch forms beneath his left eye as he speaks in a strangled voice. “Was she in Bakva?”

I nod.

“For how long?”

“I don’t know. It was the first time I had ever seen her.”

He climbs out of the bath with a swift, graceful motion. Water cascades off his skin, slowly running down the length of his hard, muscular body. I trace those droplets with my eyes, wondering what it would be like to taste them, to taste *him*.

Heat scours my cheeks as I pick up the oil and cloth and scrub my arms. He grabs a drying cloth from the shelf and wraps it around his waist as I keep scrubbing.

“There will be more questions tonight.” With that, he leaves the bathhouse.

I blow out a quick breath and lower the cloth to the side of the pool.

Why hasn’t Jasce locked me away?

I blow out another breath, not understanding him. He could use me. Well, he could use me once I have my rune, and I learn how to cast silver magic.

He could have us magic bound like The Widow Maker and Ellery. I asked Zerah their names the other day, and she happily supplied them.

My insides tighten into knots as I think of those gold threads weaved around Ellery's arm—how it binds her to him—how she can never escape him, even if she wanted to.

A scowl presses against my mouth as I hurry from the bath. I hate waiting for Jasce's next move. I especially hate caring what he thinks.

Does he hate me now that he knows I'm Annora?

He probably does.

Chapter Twenty-Nine



THAT MATTRESS DIPS as Jasce settles in the bed next to me and asks his first question. “Do you have a lover?”

I open and close my mouth, baffled by his choice. Of all the things he could—and probably should—ask me, why this?

“What?”

“You heard me. Do you have a lover back in Bakva?”

I smile, even though I know I probably shouldn’t.

Jasce’s brow lifts.

“Obviously, you weren’t listening when I told you I am scarred, Jasce.”

He shrugs.

The mattress dips beneath me as I rotate to lie flat. “Men don’t want scarred women. So, no, I do not have a lover.”

Jasce doesn’t answer.

I allow the silence to immerse us for a while before I ask him a question. “When you were reading about soul linking, did it say if I can return to *me*?”

“There wasn’t any information about that.”

Of course. Why would there be?

Disappointment spears my heart, fragmenting the part of me that desperately needs my sisters. As Lyra, I can never visit

them. Never embrace them. Never tell them how much I love them again.

My chest aches as I roll away from Jasce and squelch the urge to sob in frustration.

“You miss your family,” he says, his voice surprisingly compassionate. “Tell me about them.”

I remain quiet for a while, thinking of them, remembering them, remembering the way we stayed up until the moon hovered in the night sky. Always talking and laughing.

“Asha is twenty-three, and she’s fierce and protective. Emerin and Tahira are seventeen and fifteen, but they are already so strong.”

“Are you fierce and strong?” he asks.

“No. I’m timid. I prefer books over people. Gardening over parties. Not that I’m invited to parties. Grandfather makes me hide when he entertains.” *And now he’s gone.*

What will Bakva look like now that he’s dead?

“So, it is your sisters that you want to return to? Not a man?”

“Yes.”

“What about your mother and father? Are they alive?”

Mother’s face skims my vision as I speak. “My mother has not been the same ever since she consumed a vile flower. And my father...” I take a deep breath and continue. “My father left us a long time ago.”

I try to shut out the memory, but it rushes in like a midday storm. The agony of Mother’s cries. The horror on Asha’s face. The anger on Grandfather’s.

I had sat alone in my chair, waiting for Father to come and read to me, but he never came.

“How old were you when he left?”

“Eleven.”

“I’m sorry.”

Bitterness claws at my heart as I speak in a flat voice. “Don’t be sorry. I have forgotten him.” It was purposeful in the beginning—forgetting him. Over time, it became easier and easier.

“He hurt you,” Jasce says, his words a statement and not a question, as if he understands my pain.

Yes, but I cannot talk about him.

Desperately needing a change, I shift the subject. “Tell me about The Widow Maker.”

Jasce brow lifts. “Why do you want to know about him?”

“Because of Ellery. What’s his real name?”

Jasce shrugs.

“Surely, The Widow Maker isn’t his real name?”

“He grew up in a village that was raided when he was a child. His parents were slaughtered, and he was too young to remember his name. When he became a warrior, they called him The Widow Maker.”

“Who bound him to Ellery?”

“I did.”

My mouth falls open. “Why?”

“Because we need her silver magic to stifle fires after battle.”

“So, you took her and bound her to The Widow Maker?”

“She was a captive who escaped death.”

I pull away from Jasce, creating distance. “So, you just take innocent women and bind them to strange men?”

“It wasn’t like that. She was far from innocent. She was a warrior leading Hakan’s army. It was either death or binding their magic. She chose the binding.”

“Why The Widow Maker? Why not someone else?”

Jasce folds his arms. “Because he’s the strongest of my warriors. Nobody else could keep up with her.”

For a while, I lie next to Jasce, allowing his words to percolate. Why did I not know about magic binding? House of Silver doesn't do that.

Maybe because we can't.

As I drift to sleep, I think about Jasce's questions, but mostly, I think about the way he looked in the bath next to me.

Chapter Thirty



LEAVES scatter through the air and settle against the cobbled pathway as I wander the courtyard, trying—unsuccessfully—to distract myself from thinking about Jasce. If only I had found that healer. If only I had done a lot of things, like never sharing a bed with Jasce.

Hanah approaches me and curtsies. “Come with me, My Lady. Jerrod wishes to speak to you.”

The urge to deny her burns my tongue. To say no, to turn away, to not visit the Hematite chieftain.

I swallow that urge, knowing my Fate here is precarious. With one word about my identity, Jasce could end my life. So, I follow Hanah back to the palace, down a long corridor, and to the Great Hall. A guard pushes open the door, and I step into the room full of men, but there’s only one man that makes my blood run cold. Jerrod.

He stands at my entrance. “There you are, Lyra.”

The hem of my elaborate cotehardie skims the marble as I curtsy. “You asked to see me, My Lord?”

“I heard you are a great dancer,” he says with a smirk.

I swallow down the fear in my throat. “I’m not.”

He glances at Aleksander, sitting next to him. “Aleksander told me you danced for Jasce and his friends. I want you to dance for us.”

“Y-you...” *Stop stammering.* I start over. “You wish for me to dance for you?”

“Yes.” He looks at his men, all staring, watching, waiting to see me make a fool out of myself. “We want to see you.”

Mortification sprouts inside me as I obey his wishes, swaying my hips and swirling in circles. The men lean forward, eagerly watching as I continue this humiliation.

I finish my last spin and come to a stop, facing the chieftain.

Lust sparks in his obsidian eyes as he barks out. “More.”

“My Lord,” I begin, my voice wobbly. *Be strong. You can do this.* I lift my chin and continue. “I’m no dancer.”

“Dance, Lyra,” he says, his tone harsh, commanding. “Entertain your chieftain.”

Entertain him? I would rather shove him off his chair.

Bile rises in my throat as I dance again, moving to the beat of my own fear, my humiliation. Tears prick the back of my eyes, but I keep going, giving the chieftain what he wants.

The door rips open, and footsteps approach, pounding in my ears as I continue. I come to an abrupt stop when a hand grabs me.

Jasce.

“What is this?” he thunders.

“Only a little dance,” Aleksander supplies.

Anger blazes across Jasce’s features as he grinds out. “I didn’t ask you.”

The chieftain picks up his wine goblet and swirls the liquid. “It’s just a dance, Jasce.”

Jasce pulls me close to his side. “My wife isn’t your entertainment.”

Jerrod swirls his liquid again and again, his stare never leaving his son. “Your wife is whatever I want her to be.”

“She’s not,” Jasce says, his words like ice. “If you try something like this again, I will dismantle your palace brick by brick.”

Jerrod laughs.

“Test me.” The gold flecks in Jasce’s eyes flash as the torches heighten, their flames doubling inside their brackets and raising the temperature in the room. I shrink against Jasce as the men rub sweat from their brows, but not Jerrod. His focus remains fiercely locked on his son.

“Do you think I fear your magic, Jasce?”

“I think you fear it so much your tiny, hardened heart is quivering inside your chest.”

Fury smolders from the chieftain as he stands. “Leave us, or I will be compelled to give your birthright to Aleksander.”

“Do it,” Jasce grinds out. “And he will march your armies to their deaths.”

With those words, Jasce grabs my arm and pulls me from the room. I don’t speak as he leads us down the corridor and into an alcove.

He brings me close. “Are you hurt?”

Tears blur my vision as I keep my gaze averted, not wanting him to see my weakness. He grips my jaw, turning me back to face him.

“Are you hurt?” he repeats, his voice thick with concern.

“I’m fine.”

“You’re not fine.” He brushes his knuckles across my cheek. “You were crying.”

“I wasn’t.” I sniff.

“Jerrod will never do anything like that to you again.”

“But he’s the chieftain,” I argue, knowing what a man in power is capable of.

Mother never defied Grandfather. It was forbidden.

Defiance meant being lashed. Asha received ten lashes when she insisted that I join everyone for dinner on my seventeenth birthday.

“I don’t give a fuck who he is,” Jasce says. “He will not make you the object of his entertainment.”

I think about something Jasce said and bring my hand boldly to his surcoat, to the area where his flame rests beneath the material. “Does your father have magic?”

“No.”

“But you do. I feel the heat.” Boldly, I press in harder, feeling that undeniable warmth. “I have never felt crimson magic before.” His dark eyes lower to mine as I continue. “It feels alive. Reckless. Volatile.”

He lifts my chin even higher. “It is all of those things when I’m near you.”

I think of all those moments that have passed since he found out I’m not Lyra. All those nights when I thought about him, wondered why I’m drawn to him.

His gaze lowers to my mouth, resting on my lips, teasing them with the thought of him kissing me. Instinctively, I lift to my tiptoes, needing this.

But he doesn’t kiss me. Instead, he pulls back and frees my chin, and my heart sinks to the marble.

“We shouldn’t,” he says, his words sketching pain against my chest.

“Why not?” I ask, not able to disguise my sadness.

“Because if I kiss you right now, I won’t stop. I will yank up your cotehardie, and I will take you against this wall.”

Oh, yes.

Do that.

Pull up my gown.

Asha’s voice hisses in my ears. “*Don’t you dare let him bed you.*”

I swallow and muster one word. “Oh.”

Jasce shifts away from me and places his back against the stone wall and lets out a ragged breath. “I should hate you.”

“Why don’t you?”

“I don’t know.” Sincerity lingers from his words as he continues. “I have asked myself that question a thousand times.”

“And?”

“I am left with nothing but curiosity.”

“But I am Hakan’s granddaughter. I am House of Silver.” It’s a truth I could never escape, even inside someone else’s body.

Jasce shifts enough to meet my gaze. “I see no threat in your eyes.”

“I am a helpless bird,” I say, repeating Grandfather.

“No, I doubt that very much. But your heart is good.” He curls his hand around mine and leads me down the corridor. “Much better than mine.”

Chapter Thirty-One



JASCE'S WORDS follow me as he leads me from the corridor and to the stables, where I mount Scarlet, and he takes Midnight.

It has been weeks since our last ride together, but the memories of those lessons come flooding back. Every word. Every brush of his body against mine when he rode behind me.

A cool breeze teases my hair as we ride side-by-side, the clapping of the horse's hooves echoing in the air. I enjoy that sound, that rhythm, that drumming only a horse's hooves create. It's peaceful and soothing.

I glance over at Jasce, taking in his hard jaw as his words return, humming in my ears. "*I should hate you.*"

And I should hate you, but I don't.

We continue riding until dusk settles over us. Then, we return to the stables, where we dismount, and servants take the horses.

The entire time Jasce doesn't speak, and I cannot bring myself to break the silence. It weighs heavier than a thick rain cloud.

He confronted his father for me. Threatened him for me.

Why? I'm a nobody here.

He knows it. I know it.

When we step inside Jasce's bedchamber, he turns to the table and picks up a basket. "I brought you something."

"You did?" I unlace my cotehardie and slip out of it.

"I didn't find these, but I thought of you when I saw them."

I move to him and take the basket of seashells from him. My heart lightens as I run my fingers over the shells, feeling their smooth texture. Jasce watches me as I examine each one of them.

"Thank you," I say, giving him a wide smile.

Jasce leans closer and brushes loose strands of hair from my face, tucking it gently behind my ear.

My throat tightens as I stare down at the collection of seashells. "Do you know why I like seashells?"

"Why?"

"My mother used to collect them. She says they remind her that beauty can always be found, even on the beach where storms arrive with the waves." Of course, she said those things before she consumed that vile flower. "A few summers ago, she gave me her collection. Asha drew their likenesses, and I hung the sketches in my bedchamber."

"Is that why you sketched seashells all over my parchment?" he asks, his tone light, teasing.

"I wanted a piece of me here. A piece that was Annora," I say truthfully.

"Did it work?"

"Yes." My voice cracks as I continue. "And it allowed you to discover one of my favorite hobbies—collecting seashells." I stare up at him. "Thank you. How might I repay you?"

"There is no need to repay me."

"I know, but I want to."

He moves to sit on the edge of the mattress. "I don't need anything."

I set the basket of seashells on the table and sit next to him. “How about I promise to give you something in return? You ask, and I give it. Except...” heat flames my cheeks, “...you know.”

“You know?” He smiles, his lips curling in amusement. “What is, you know?”

More heat rushes to my cheeks as I cross one leg over the other and bounce it back and forth. “Coupling.”

His head tilts back as he laughs, the sound deep and full of humor.

“You’re laughing at me,” I grumble.

Jasce reaches for my hand and molds his fingers around mine. “I’m not laughing at you. I’m laughing at how you blush when you say *coupling*.”

“Are you going to ask me for something?”

“Hmm. Let me think. How about a kiss?”

I shake my head. “I meant something of value or importance.”

“A kiss is valuable,” he says with a twinkle in his eyes.

“But...” I argue. “I want to give you something you will always remember me by.”

“Are you leaving me?” He stiffens and releases my hand.

My belly clenches as I look away, fastening my gaze to the window, where raindrops slip down the glass.

Someday, I will leave, and his Lyra will return.

Or so...I hope.

“I just want you to remember me.” Sadness grips me as I look back at him.

Jasce’s gaze fixes on me, his eyes holding a spark of confusion. “I would always remember you.”

No, you wouldn’t.

I swallow, not able to speak.

“Tonight, at dinner, I will ask you for what I want,” he says, breaking the agony of my thoughts.

I push aside my melancholy and focus on preparing for dinner.

Chapter Thirty-Two



THIS DINNER IS different from the ones I usually attend with Jasce. It's held in the Great Hall, and it's attended by hundreds of people. There are nobles, warriors with an aura of valor, scholars radiating intellect, and then, of course, there's me—sitting beside Jasce.

The room is massive, with huge wooden pillars dominating each corner and tapestries with their coat of arms covering the walls. An enormous candelabra hangs from the ceiling, casting an amber light across every inch of the room.

My attention shifts to the food placed on gold plates. There's roasted hogshead adorned with rosemary and thyme, spiced olives beautifully arranged around a bowl of creamy goat cheese, wild mushrooms tossed upon vegetables. And potatoes mixed among herbs...all leading up to towering trays of pastries.

Everything looks so tempting and inviting that I forget entirely why I'm here. Instead, I focus on filling my plate with the food. Jasce watches me as I eat, his eyes belying his amusement.

"Why are you staring at me?" I take a quick sip of the mulled wine.

"I enjoy watching you take pleasure in eating."

"That's silly."

I take a bite of the pastry. The flavor is sweet and smoky, with hints of cinnamon that linger on my tongue.

“Look at me.”

I turn at the sound of his voice. Then, he does something entirely unexpected. He leans down and kisses me, as if we’re alone, as if his father doesn’t sit nearby, as if hundreds of people don’t watch us.

His hands move along the sides of my face, caressing, before he pulls away with a half-smile on his lips.

“Why did you do that?” I ask, my voice breathless.

“I wanted to see if you taste like the pastry.” He runs his tongue across his bottom lip and smiles. “You do.”

Heat spreads over my cheeks as I duck my gaze away. I can find no words. Not when I am lost—tossed in the sea of his seduction.

He brings his hand to my thigh, his touch tender through my cotehardie. “I know what I want.”

“You do?”

Torchlight sparks in his eyes as he leans closer and lowers his voice to a whisper, a whisper meant only for me. “I want to show you the pleasure of my touch.”

“Here?” Unfortunately, I don’t manage the question without my voice raising an octave.

“Yes. Here.” He trails his hand down my thigh and back up.

“I said no to—”

“—I know what you said no to. You may leave your clothes on.”

“How generous of you.” I roll my eyes.

He grips my thigh through the fabric of my clothing, his touch strong enough to elicit a soft gasp from me. Satisfied at my response, his fingers resume their slow, pleasurable pace.

I lean closer to him. “Jasce, people are watching.”

A smirk tugs at his upper lip as he continues touching me. “Let them.”

“But I...”

“You’re my wife. They would think it was odd if I didn’t touch you.”

He traces lazy circles along my thigh, then travels upward to settle mere inches away from forbidden territory. I try to focus on the sounds of the crowd, the rustling of their clothes, and the occasional clink of metal as the guards adjust their armor. Anything to distract me from the warmth spreading through my body.

Jasce’s touch is too much. I let out a soft moan. I can’t help it. Every nerve screams for more.

He leans closer, his lips brushing against my ear. “Do you want me to stop?”

“No,” I breathe out, needing everything I thought I would never find. All that passion locked away. All those stolen moments never meant for a woman like me.

His fingers move upward, ghosting along my inner thigh. I suck in a quick breath as he moves higher and higher, but never quite touches the spot I need satisfaction from.

His lips graze my earlobe as he cups the area between my legs. “I bet you taste better than the pastry.”

I buck my hips forward, encouraging him to continue, *longing* for him to continue. He doesn’t press harder, doesn’t do anything but tease me. It’s enough to make me insane.

“*Please.*” How pathetic I must sound.

He withdraws his hand. “Please what?”

I grip my wine goblet, needing to hold on to something. Anything. “Why did you stop?”

“Because I got what I wanted.”

“What did you want?” My grip strengthens, fingers tightening around that goblet as if it binds me here and not to the man sitting next to me.

“For you to beg.”

A gasp escapes me.

“Should I have kept going?” he asks in a teasing tone.

Yes, a thousand times yes.

“No.” I shake my head.

“How disappointing. I was hoping you would want to return to my bedchamber.”

“Jasce,” I say, my cheeks burning with embarrassment.

“I want to tear that cotehardie from your body and taste every inch of you.” His fingers move slowly and deliberately over the edge of my sleeve.

“Jasce.”

“I want to hear you moan when I make you arrive,” he says, his tone carrying something wild, something beckoning me to explore his touch, to know him. *Really* know him.

“Jasce!”

“Yes, Lyra?” Her name is the cold dose of reality I need.

I am *not* her!

Sadness wrenches deep inside me as I stand, curtsy toward Jerrod, and flee the room.

Chapter Thirty-Three



I SHOULDN'T CARE!

Everything in me knows that, yet I still care that he called me Lyra.

I step into Jasce's bedchamber and change into a plain nightdress. It hangs loosely on my body as I sit on the edge of the mattress and stare wordlessly at the wall.

Even if I was myself right now, I couldn't pursue him. After all, he's married to Lyra, and he's from House of Crimson. Our houses don't mingle. It's forbidden.

Over the summers, I have heard a few stories of people from House of Crimson and House of Silver marrying, but it has never ended well. Someone always ends up dead.

I raise my fingers to my flushed skin, wondering when this will all end. Some magical effects have an expiration. Don't they? Maybe soul linking does too.

Maybe I should try harder to find Mazaline.

The door swings open, and Jasce steps into the bedchamber. His eyes instantly lock on me, and I draw in a quick breath at the desire burning there.

"Why did you leave?" he asks.

I look down at my feet. "You called me Lyra."

"I couldn't call you Annora in front of everyone."

"But you were teasing *me*. Not her."

“I know. It is your innocence that provokes me. I’m consumed by the thought of making you moan.” He moves closer.

I shake my head. “I don’t...We can’t...”

The mattress creaks as he sits next to me and lifts my chin to meet his gaze. “You want this. I feel it.”

“It doesn’t matter.” I bite the inside of my lip, yearning for things to be different between us, yearning for him to not be from House of Crimson.

“It does.”

“No.” I break away from him and move to the opposite side of the bed. “I’m not *her*.”

Something sparks behind his eyes as he studies me. “I know.”

“You don’t know. If you did, you would understand what it is like to be trapped in a world where you don’t belong. I’m simply a reflection etched in fragile glass. You shouldn’t bed me. You shouldn’t even want to bed me.”

When he doesn’t speak, I shake my head and continue. “Don’t you want to know what happened to your wife?”

“Of course. I looked for answers the moment I discovered your secret.”

My heart quickens as I stand and move to the armoire. I ruffle inside, finding the note I stashed beneath my nightdresses, and carry it to Jasce.

“Lyra’s mother gave me a bag. This was inside it.”

He opens the parchment and reads, his expression stoic as I shift my weight from foot to foot. After a moment, he folds it and sets it on the table.

“I didn’t know about this,” he says, his voice tight.

“She was obviously blackmailing someone.”

He nods.

“Do you have any idea?”

“No. We weren’t close. I barely spoke to her before our wedding day.”

I shove my braid over my shoulder. “Do you love her?”

“Love?” He scoffs.

My eyes widen as I move to the bed and sit. “Do you believe in love, Jasce?”

“No,” he says, his words flat, emotionless.

“How sad.” I play with the ribbon binding my braid. “I would think you are capable of loving fiercely.”

Instead of answering me, he moves to the table and pours himself wine. As he sits on the sofa and drinks, I walk to the bed and lie down.

Memories of our dinner replay through my mind as I shift to my side and resist sighing. Even now, my skin tingles, anticipating the thrill of his touch. I jerk my leg against the bedcover, trying to make the urge disappear. It doesn’t. It burns between my legs.

I squeeze my eyes shut and count to twenty, but that doesn’t work either.

I think about calling out to him and begging, then I remember that I have no claim to him. Nor do I have a claim to his touch.

The truth hisses in my ears as I fall asleep.

I WAKE a short while later to the sound of his footsteps as he moves to the washing stand, only wearing a pair of pants. My mouth turns dry as I tell myself to look away, but I don’t.

His muscles flex and tense as he pivots to find me staring. “Do not look at me like that, not unless you want to spread your legs for me,” he says, his voice a low, seductive growl.

Desire thrums through me as I bite my bottom lip and glance away from him.

He moves to stand in front of me. “Look at me.”

“You said for me—”

“—look at me.”

I obey, lifting my gaze to the heat smoldering in his eyes.

“Pull up your nightdress,” he says, his tone low, urgent.

I swallow and shake my head.

He moves closer and sits on the edge of the bed. “Pull it up.”

“Jasce...”

A muscle tics in his jaw as he reaches for the hem and pulls it to my thighs. “I will not take anything from you that you’re not ready to give. I only want to show you pleasure.”

“But I...”

He presses his thumb against my mouth, silencing my words. “Just feel.”

Yes, just feel.

He lowers his hand to my thigh and trails his knuckles over my skin, eliciting a soft gasp from me. He does it again, skimming over my leg with the lightest of touches. Yet it’s enough. This feeling. This awakening of pleasure.

He drags his knuckles up my thigh and between my legs. I grit my teeth, wanting it to stop and needing it to never end. When he climbs higher, I instinctively spread my legs wider to give him more access.

Moonlight sprawls across his features as he caresses and discovers. I think about touching him too, of exploring his body as boldly as he explores mine. But I don’t.

What if I do everything wrong? Or worse, what if he hates it?

As he continues, my breath rises and falls with each wonderous wave. I moan as he applies pressure to the nerves between my legs.

“Good girl,” he murmurs, his tone as soothing as his touch.

Ridiculous.

I'm not a girl.

But when he says it again, I moan even louder, as if my traitorous body enjoys his encouragement.

Jasce continues caressing and stroking until my body trembles with need, with want, with things I cannot explain. Nor do I want to. That would take effort, the kind of effort I don't want to take right now. Not when it would distract me from this moment with him.

Right now, I am just a woman, craving the touch of a man who knows exactly what to do.

He's not from House of Crimson, and I'm not from House of Silver.

We're equals, wearing the same crown, the same color. Our reflections are the same, a glimmer of light and darkness. We both have sharp and blunt edges. Peaks and valleys. Sunny skies and rainy days.

He slows his movements, keeping me from reaching a place I have never reached before. Not with him. Not with anyone.

"Jasce," I breathe. "*Please.*"

He shifts to kneel between my legs, and I let out a quick breath when he lowers his mouth to my center. He licks and kisses, hitting every point that needs this surrender, this total abandonment of thoughts, wants, dreams, hopes.

Tomorrow, they can matter again, but not right now.

I curl my fingers around the bedcovers, wanting it to never end, needing it to never end. All of my resistance fades as I shatter. I close my eyes, savoring the lingering sensation as my body quivers with pleasure.

When I open my eyes, I find him watching me, a satisfied grin on his face.

"I always knew you would shatter for me."

JASCE SETTLES NEXT to me and keeps my nightdress bunched around my waist. “Let me lie next to you like this.” He brings his hand to rest against my hip, allowing his heat to warm my skin. “I like your flame.”

My breath catches as he skims his knuckles over the birthmark.

“It’s the part of you I can physically see and touch.”

Don’t do this.

Please don’t make me fall for you.

“What color hair and eyes do you have?” he asks.

“My hair is reddish brown. And my eyes are dark blue.”

Boldly, he brings his hand to my breast and cups his fingers around me. “Are you the same here?”

“Jasce...”

“Tell me,” he insists.

“Mine are bigger.”

“Nice.” He brushes his fingers through the material until he finds my nipple. I gasp when it hardens. “I want to know how to recognize you in a room full of people.”

Just look for the one with the scars.

My heart squeezes, aching as I turn my face away from him.

“Annora, look at me.”

Something about the way he says my name draws me back to him, to meet his eyes, to see the warmth glinting in them. “Tell me why you look so sad.”

“Because this is a fantasy. *You* are a fantasy. None of it is real.”

“It could be real.”

“No.” I push him away and yank my nightdress down. “It may be real for you, but I am trapped in a body that isn’t my own.”

“You are the wife of the heir of a chieftain. You have prestige, power, coin.”

“Lyra is your wife. *I* am not.”

“Lyra is gone.” He sits up and leans against the headboard. “You are my wife now.”

“No.” I shake my head. “That cannot be true.”

“What do you think soul linking means, Annora? She never returned from Sharhavva. You are here instead.”

“But I don’t want to be your wife.” It’s only partially true. One side of me wants to fall asleep next to him every night, to forget the world outside this bedchamber. The other side knows the moment we step outside, everything will return, and I’ll remember what his family has done. “You are from House of Crimson,” I say, my words low. “I am from House of Silver. It’s forbidden.”

“Only if people knew. They don’t have to know.”

“But I would. Do you expect me to stand by idle while more villages from House of Silver go up in flames? Or when your father hunts the people who supported my grandfather?”

Jasce remains silent.

“What if your father attacks Bakva? Would you lead the army? Would you kill my sisters?”

Jasce’s jaw clenches, but he still doesn’t speak.

“I cannot be your wife and love my family at the same time. I would have to sever my heart in half, and I will not do that,” I say, my voice trembling with determination.

“I would not ask you to.”

“But you would. You would ask me to stand next to you, to fight with you, to learn how to summon a phoenix.”

His jaw clenches as he looks away.

“And you want a child, but I cannot give you a child. Not when you would raise him to defeat my people.”

Jasce grips my hips and brings me back until I’m sitting on his lap. “You are thinking of the future instead of living in the moment.”

“I don’t want to be blinded by my emotions,” I whisper as he rotates me to face him.

“You are trying to stop a fire that hasn’t started.”

“It has. You just refuse to see the flames.”

He strokes my jaw with his knuckles. “I see yours. They burn like embers in your eyes.”

“Jasce...”

“Annora...”

I let out a shuddering breath, wanting to give into him, to feel what it’s like to be adored by a man, but I can’t. Not like this.

Instead, I pull away from him and lie on my side.

“Annora.”

Pain hammers against my heart, but I remain on my side, facing away from him.

“Have you ever asked me what I want? What I need?” he asks, his words low, raw.

“No.”

“I need *you*. Your charcoal-stained hands. Your love of food. Your drawings. Your laughter.” He brushes his hand against my arm. “Everything else doesn’t matter. It cannot matter.”

“But it does to me,” I say softly. “It does.”

He pulls away from me, and my heart throbs against my chest as he stands and grabs his surcoat. As he pulls it on, I rise to sitting and meet the storm in his eyes.

“Don’t leave, Jasce.”

“Every time I try to get close to you, you push me away.”

“I’m protecting myself,” I whisper.

“You are building a fortification you do not need.”

He doesn’t understand that he’s the top of a summit I could never reach, nor should I. One day that summit will pierce the silver sky, and crimson will bleed everywhere.

He’s crimson. He will always be crimson.

I pull my knees up and place my arms around them and meet the storm still churning in his eyes. He yanks on his surcoat and gives me one final look before leaving the bedchamber.

I shove my fingers against my mouth and resist the powerful urge to scream.

Whoever did this to me was cruel. So very cruel.

Chapter Thirty-Four



AS I MOVE around Jasce's bedchamber the following morning, everything we talked about echoes through my mind. Every word. Every moment. Every touch. Everything that didn't happen but could have.

Jasce would happily bed me if I allowed it. But every time I think about abandoning my control, I see Asha and her disapproving face. She would never want me to be with Jasce.

As I move toward the door, a glint of something out-of-place catches my eye. I bend down, scooping up a folded piece of parchment, and open it.

You have questions, and I have answers.

You will find me at the purple cottage along the banks of the Hyacinth River. Come alone and tell no one.

Mazaline.

My heart pounds against my ribs as I fold the parchment. Mazaline is here, and she wants to see me? I open the letter again, reading every word as my skin prickles with excitement. It's happening. It's finally happening!

I'll speak to Mazaline, and everything will change. It has to change.

My happiness receives a considerable blow the moment I step into the corridor and remember, I cannot go anywhere alone. Alban is always nearby. Always.

Even now, he straightens when he sees me and stares at me. He knows I will lead the way, and he will follow. But this journey I cannot take with him. Jasce warned me to never go into the city without him, and I have no wish to upset him.

“Do you know where Lord Jasce is?” I ask.

Alban nods.

“May I see him?”

“You probably could,” he answers, his voice naturally gruff.

Alban turns, and I follow him. He doesn't speak as he leads me down several lengthy corridors. I think about the letter tucked away in my cloak, and I think about Mazaline.

What will she say?

What excuse will she offer for what she did to me?

Surely, she's responsible.

At last, Alban swings open a door at the rear of the palace, revealing a massive training ground. It is surrounded by imposing walls that soar into the sky. Intricate carvings engrave each one, etching summers of history into every stone.

A tall, wide oak tree grows in the center of the training ground, its long, twisted branches, providing patches of shade. Stations surround the tree, each equipped with weapon racks, targets, and training dummies.

As I walk next to Alban, the sound of clashing blades and grunts of exertion fill the air. I sweep my gaze over the warriors, looking for Jasce. Near the far corner, I spot him.

He trains bare-chested, sweat glistening on his skin, his every movement fluid and purposeful. Aleksander spars with him, equally shirtless.

My heart quickens with every strike, and I flinch when Aleksander launches an attack, only to be countered by Jasce.

The men continue, engaging in a fierce sparring match, their wooden practice swords clashing in the morning air, their movements a blur of precision and athleticism. Aleksander,

though quick and agile, finds himself continually thwarted by Jasce's superior strength and speed.

As the sun blinks between the clouds, Jasce unleashes a counterattack with a ferocity that leaves no room for hesitation. His strikes are swift and powerful, carrying an intensity that Aleksander struggles to match.

Determination sparks in Jasce's eyes as he slams his practice sword into Aleksander's, and it flies from the younger man's grip and lands on the ground. Jasce steps back, allowing his brother to scramble for his weapon.

Jasce's attention shifts to me, locking as I shift my weight.

"That's all for now," he says to Aleksander.

Aleksander grins. "Are you quitting before I can show you how to properly strike your opponents?"

"Yes." Jasce lowers his sword into a nearby weapon rack and moves to where I stand next to Alban.

I stare, my mouth slightly parted at the sweat covering his chest. It heightens every muscle, every line, every hard edge. Heat sparks through my veins as I imagine spreading my hands over his chest and feeling him beneath my fingertips.

Would he mind?

"What do you want?" he asks, his tone barely civil.

Embarrassment floods my face as I snap my mouth closed.

"Alban," Jasce says as he keeps his eyes on me. "You may go."

The guard nods and walks away.

Jasce takes my arm and leads me out of earshot of everyone. "What do you need, Annora?"

I reach into my cloak and pull free the missive and hand it to him. He opens it and stares down at it for several long breaths.

"I need to go to the city, so I can speak to her," I muster after a moment of unbearable silence.

Jasce's jaw tics as he folds the letter and hands it back to me. "I will take you."

"HOME IS WHERE YOUR FAMILY IS." Asha's voice hum in my ears as I set out with Jasce.

Thankfully, he bathed and put on a surcoat before taking me to the city.

He glances over at me as we walk. "Are you sure you want to speak to the healer?"

"I have to. I need answers."

His brow furrows. "What if she tells you things you don't want to hear?"

A frown tugs at my lips as I skirt around an older man carrying an armful of books. "It doesn't matter. I still need to speak to her."

He nods and falls silent again.

The sun hovers over the Hyacinth River as we arrive at the purple cottage a short while later. My nerves knot in my throat as I think of finally gaining answers. Hopefully, those answers will lead me back to my family.

Jasce knocks, but nobody responds. We exchange a look, then he tries again.

Nothing.

He shoves the door open, and I follow him into the dimly lit room. As my eyes adjust, I take in the empty room, and then...the woman lying on the floor in a pool of blood.

My heart slams against my chest as he moves to the body, kneels, and presses his index finger to her throat. His face pales as he snaps up and jerks his gaze around, searching the room.

Nothing else stirs. No animals. No people. No wind through the open window.

Harder and harder, my heart slams against my chest as I move to crouch next to the woman's lifeless body. The tattoo beneath her mouth tells me what I don't want to accept. She's the healer that gave the portrait to me.

Jasce grabs my arm, pulling me to standing. "Stand by the door."

I shove my hand against my mouth, stifling the strong urge to scream.

"Go," he says, his tone frigid, and I obey, weakly moving to the door as he kneels again and says words too low for me to understand.

No!

Please!

I look away, wanting things to be different, wanting her to still be alive, but when I glance back, she still lies there, her body motionless.

If only we had reached her before this happened. We might have saved her, and I would have answers. Now, I'll never have answers.

My body trembles as I turn to face the wall and lean my forehead against the cool stone. It's over. My life is over.

I'll never see my sisters again.

Chapter Thirty-Five



JASCE BUILDS a pyre on a hill overlooking the river, then he calls on his magic. The golden flecks in his eyes spark in the sunlight as he lifts his palm, speaks words in our ancient Hematite tongue, and a flame bursts to life at his command. The heat sears my cheeks, and I step back. But I don't look away, not from him, not from the flames casting shadows over his strong features.

The fiery tendrils dance around his hand as he steps forward and catches the pyre on fire. The flames crackle and pop, consuming the wood and throwing a warm glow over the hillside.

My chest aches as the inferno consumes Mazaline's body. This shouldn't have happened to her.

I stare up at the blue sky, hating that it's so perfect, so serene when someone else has lost their life. It should turn gray, and it should pour big, sorrowful raindrops on top of us.

Jasce stands stiffly next to me, his jaw hard, his stare locked in the distance. There's a part of me that wants to comfort him, even though I do not know why he would need my comforting.

She's just another healer from House of Silver to him. I saw the evidence beneath her cloak, the silver phoenix etched into her surcoat. Why she would wear it here is beyond my comprehension.

He turns away first, and I follow him, my steps matching his longer strides.

Jasce clenches his fingers into fists. “She got reckless.”

“Who?”

“The healer.” He guides me around a group of warriors patrolling the streets.

“Mazaline?”

“Her name isn’t Mazaline. It’s Anastasia.”

“How do you know that?” I ask, my confusion echoing in my question.

His fists tighten even more, his knuckles turning white as he speaks. “Because she is my mother.”

His words scald my chest, and I stumble. His hand catches my arm as he steadies me.

“Y-your mother?”

The gods have mercy!

His mother?

He nods.

My heart throbs as I remember the way he caught the pyre on fire. It wasn’t for him to display his magical skills. It was his tribute to his mother’s memory.

“I’m so sorry,” the words escape me in a whisper.

I couldn’t bear it if I found my mother in such a way. He shouldn’t have to bear it either.

He keeps walking like I never spoke.

His silence gives me plenty of time to think, to wonder. How is this possible? How is his mother responsible for what happened to me?

The questions bombard me before I finally voice one of them. “I thought you said your mother was dead?”

“I didn’t.” He frowns. “I said she was gone.”

Confusion swirls within me, and I slip my fingers into my sleeves as I struggle to grasp the truth. *His* truth.

“I don’t understand any of this. How is your mother from House of Silver when your father slaughters everyone from that house?”

A muscle pulses in his jaw as Jasce finds his voice. “She hid her heritage from him, and when he learned of her deception, he tried to kill her.”

“Oh, Jasce.” Compassion swells inside of me as I touch his arm, hoping to comfort him. “How long has it been since you last saw her?”

He stares straight ahead as he speaks. “I hadn’t seen her since I was a child.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“I don’t need or want your pity,” he says, his tone devoid of emotion.

“Yes, but she was your mother.”

His shoulders stiffen, and his mouth tightens into a thin line.

For a while, I’m content to walk next to him, to listen to our footsteps pounding against the street. I even watch the clouds. They follow us as we draw closer and closer to the palace.

When we’re finally alone in his bedchamber, I speak. “Why did your mother do this to me?”

“I don’t know.” He positions himself near the window, his body stiff, his jaw hard.

“Is this something she does regularly to people?”

“I don’t know.”

“You could be lying to me,” I say, finally voicing my doubt.

“Why?” He raises an eyebrow. “What benefit would it serve me to lie to you about this? I am stuck with you instead

of Lyra.” His words land like a blow to my chest, stealing my breath and leaving me momentarily speechless.

“Well, I didn’t ask for it,” I say after a moment, my anger rising. “I have no desire to be your wife.”

“I know. You’ve made your sentiments perfectly clear.”

Jasce turns toward the door.

“Where are you going?” I inquire, the lingering tension in my body making my voice sharper than intended.

“To prepare for Jude and Reeve’s arrival,” he says. “They will arrive within the week.”

His other brothers are coming here?

The bed creaks as I sit on the edge of the mattress. “Jasce, there are things we need to talk about,” I press, desperation edging my tone.

More questions burn my tongue, all the things I long to ask about his mother, the portrait, and the future.

But he doesn’t stay. Instead, he walks away, closing the door behind him and leaving me.

“I am stuck with you instead of Lyra.” His words mock me, belittle me, shred through the part of me that feels something for him.

I shouldn’t care. We’re bound by magic, not by choice, but despite my best efforts, his words have forcibly carved a path of pain in my chest.

I strip out of my cotehardie and change into something simple. A sudden knock against the door jerks my attention away from the task at hand.

Sunlight streaks across the granite floor as I cross the room and open the door. A short and stocky guard stands there.

He bows his head in respect. “Lord Jerrod requests your presence.”

Bile rises in my throat as I follow the guard down the dimly lit corridor. I don’t want to speak to Jerrod.

No! I don't even want to be in *that* man's presence. But alas, here I am, forced to submit.

The torches flicker ominously as we walk, casting shadows across the walls that seem to follow me. Or maybe, they dread this impending meeting too.

When we reach Jerrod's chambers, the guard bows and moves aside, granting me entry. I draw in a deep, shaky breath and step inside.

The chieftain sits on a chair, his fingers steeped on his lap. He looks up as I enter, his eyes as cold as a wintry morning.

A shiver slips down my spine as I curtsy in front of him, my voice steady despite the unease in my chest. "You wished to see me, My Lord?"

He nods at the guard, who quickly leaves me alone with the Hematite chieftain, the man responsible for Grandfather's execution.

I shouldn't care about that either, but I do! He viciously slaughtered Grandfather in front of a crowd.

"Take a seat, Lyra."

I slip into the chair across from him and smooth the fabric of my surcoat. He watches me, his gaze burning through me.

"Usually when I watch someone die, they stay dead," he says, his tone frigid and callous.

My skin crawls, but I don't speak, nor do I budge.

"Yet, here you are," he continues, his voice sharpened with an ominous implication.

"I-I beg your pardon?"

"Who are you?" His question hangs in the air like a blade, poised to kill me.

"I am Lyra, your son's wife," I say, my words weak, breakable.

"Are you?" He smirks. "You may wear his ring, but that does not mean you are his wife in truth."

My heart pounds in my chest as I try to figure out where this conversation is going. What does he want from me?

“What are you saying?” The question escapes my numb lips.

“You are not what you seem. You are not a mere noblewoman from some insignificant family that Jasce happened to marry. You have secrets.”

He knows?

I swallow hard. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Jerrod leans forward, his eyes pinning me to the chair. “Don’t play coy with me. I know things about you. Things that would make your husband question why he ever married you.”

Heat rises in my cheeks. What could Jerrod possibly know?

My voice trembles again, betraying my fear. “What kind of things?”

Jerrod slouches back in his chair, a cruel smile playing at his lips. “I know you’re not innocent. Someone fucked you before your wedding, and it wasn’t your husband.”

“Who?” I ask, wondering what he will say.

“Do you not remember *our* tryst on your wedding day?”

My mind reels as Lyra’s truth burns my ears, as if she whispers them to me. Maybe she does because of our soul linking. Surely that is what it means. We are linked.

Jerrod took from her, forced her, then broke her.

“There was no tryst.” Anger forms deep within me—anger that has boiled just below the surface. Always there. Always dormant. Always forced to submit. “You’re a monster who takes what you want by force.”

Jerrod lunges out of his chair and wraps his fingers around my throat, his grip like iron. “Watch your tongue, or I will cut it out.”

I gasp for breath, but he only squeezes harder, stifling my ability to breathe, to think, to fight him off me.

He will kill you.

Desperation fuels me as I struggle against his grip. I claw at him, hoping that if I can cause him enough pain, he will let go of me, but it only makes him squeeze harder.

I slip into darkness as he cuts the air off from my lungs. This is how I die—strangled by a monster.

No.

Fight!

Images of myself as a young girl flood my thoughts—the ones where Grandfather locked me away and told me how hideous I was. I channel that pain, that sadness, that grief, that horror. It erupts from deep within me, burning a molten core in my chest.

I scream the ancient Hematite words as power surges from my veins, inexplicable power that spews from me like a volcano. Jerrod's grip loosens as flames burst from my fingertips, sending him sprawling across the room. As he crashes into the wall, the flames dissipate, and I lurch to my feet, the anger still churning inside me.

How dare he try to harm me?

He doesn't deserve to draw another breath!

Anger sparks behind his eyes as he springs to his feet and pulls a dagger from his weapon belt.

Something feral takes over, propelling me into an uncontrollable frenzy as I scream more ancient words, needing to be heard, truly heard. Over and over again, I scream, desperate for my chains to melt away and for the reflection to change.

Flames surge from the walls and spew around me, as if answering my plea.

Chapter Thirty-Six



I OPEN my eyes to bone-crushing silence. It surrounds me like a hazy fog as I look around the empty room. It's familiar and comforting.

I rise on shaky legs and raise my hand to my neck, expecting tenderness. It's not there. Not even a little.

Shakily, I stretch out my hands, assuming they will look different after everything that happened with Jerrod.

What was that? I cast Lyra's magic even though I have never received training?

Impossible. This is all impossible.

The door opens, and I flinch, bracing myself for Jerrod. Instead, Asha fills the doorway, her eyes meeting mine with relief.

"Oh, good." She smiles. "You're awake. I was starting to think you would sleep all day. Would you like to take a walk?"

I blink and rub my gritty eyes. Yet she doesn't fade. She continues to stand before me, an impeccable reflection of poise and grace.

"I don't understand," I whisper, my voice hoarse.

"What is there to understand?" She shrugs. "I'm bored, and I would like to take a walk."

"How long was I gone?" Every fiber of my being yearns to know what I missed. How many days? Weeks? Months?

Her brow wrinkles. “You were never gone, Annora.”

It's not true.

It cannot be true.

If it is...everything that happened with Jasce was never real. It was a figment. An imagination. A moment that never existed.

“Where’s the painting?” I scan the room, searching for proof of the inexplicable events that transpired.

“What painting?”

“The one the healer gave me, Asha.” Panic settles in my bones as I speak in a rush. “Where is it?”

Asha stares at me for several long breaths. “You’re worrying me. Are you unwell again? Shall I call for a healer?”

“Please, Asha. I need to see the painting.”

She sighs, crosses the room to the table, and picks up the portrait. “Are you referring to this painting?”

My surcoat rustles against my legs as I hurry to where she stands and retrieve the painting from her, but it’s not the same. It’s not Lyra’s face gazing back at me. It’s a different young woman with auburn colored hair and sorrowful eyes.

“No...” My hands tremble as I thrust the painting back into Asha’s arms. “That’s not the right one.”

“Well...” Asha shrugs as she places it on the table. “It is the one the healer gave you.”

I sink into the nearest chair and bury my face in my hands. My raised scars brush against my palm—evidence that I have returned. “It was all a dream.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Oh, Asha.” My hands shake as I lower them and gaze up at my older sister. “I was beautiful.”

“Was?” She sits across from me and takes my hands in hers. “You *are* beautiful, Annora.”

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