

BETRAYER

THE CURSED BLOODSTONE



LIANNE KAY

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BOOK ONE

LIANNE KAY

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For Kara.

*Thank you for being such a great inspiration
and for believing in me.*

Never stop reaching for the stars.

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CHAPTER
ONE

Fire blazes in the far corners of my heart, fire so fierce it threatens to sear through my veins and erupt around me. I seize control, ordering it to stay locked away. My captor, this Bloodstone barbarian, must never see my hatred, feel my hatred, burn in my hatred.

I can harbor it, though. Oh, how I harbor it.

I present a meek shell. Eyes lowered. Shoulders hunched. Everything about my appearance looks like a woman ready to submit. Thankfully, my captor doesn't touch me. He doesn't feel the flames hidden beneath the calm.

Flickering torchlight casts shadows over the small tent. The crude table. The rickety chairs. The wide-shouldered Bloodstone warrior sitting across from me.

With my eyes lowered, I only make out his worn boots and the hem of his dark gray surcoat. It's enough to send trepidation rippling through me.

The air thickens, beading sweat on my brow. I lift my bound hands, wiping it away, and raise my gaze to his. Haunted green eyes stare back at me. A shroud of unease settles over me. I expected evil or cowardliness to burn behind his gaze.

The young warrior wears a marked surcoat over a combination of leather and mail armor. Fear should grip my stomach and tremble in my bones at the sight of him. Maybe if I were normal, it would.

“What is your name?” my captor asks, his dialect a crude version of my own.

“Sol,” I whisper, my tone as meek as my appearance.

“Sol.” He says my name as if he tests it out. “Do you understand why I have taken you?”

“For my magic?” I dig my nails into the palm of my left hand, sinking pain into my skin instead of my abductor.

This Bloodstone warrior is responsible for the death of Mother. His steel may not have ended her life, but men like him did. Men like him rode into my village and killed nearly every man and woman.

The edge of the man’s blade catches the light of a single torch as he rests the broad sword across his thighs. Perhaps to remind me I’m at his mercy. Maybe he thinks it will make me think twice about running. He doesn’t know I have no intention of running.

Calloused fingers wrap around the hilt of his weapon, a blade he makes no attempt to lift. “Precisely. I want you to heal someone.”

“And then?” I ask, even though I know how they treat their captives. They rarely free them.

He shrugs his shoulders. “I will weigh your worth.”

Pain sears through my palm as I dig my nails deeper into my skin. “What if I fail?”

I didn’t consider those words before speaking. They’re fragile. The army taught me to never show fragility, yet in this tent, kept away from everyone I care about, I’m unable to keep it from showing.

The man’s mouth thins as he loosens his grip on the hilt of his broad sword and straightens in his chair. “If you fail, you will never return to your people.”

Never return.

Those two words echo long after he falls silent. Down, down, down, they resonate deep within my heart—to the place

where I sealed everything away.

Torchlight catches on the hissing serpent etched into his weapon belt, kindling the flame of hatred. Jagged memories pierce my thoughts. Mother falling to the enemy. Mother's dying eyes staring into mine.

Forever open. Forever locked.

Horror had seized my chest, trembled in my bones, and kept me hidden. I whimpered and watched as the Bloodstone warriors murdered my mother and destroyed the only home I ever knew.

The moment they had ridden away, I rose, sword in hand. Heaving it to the light of the moon, I swore to the gods I would kill Roland, the man who stole Mother's breath. At only ten summers old, the pledge had engraved itself into my skin, branding my soul in hatred.

I bury the bitterness, the memories, the contempt until all I hear is my heart beating evenly.

Meekness, Sol.

Never let them see your flame.

The man stands, seizes my arm, and pulls me up next to him. "You will show me your worth. Then, maybe you will live."

CHAPTER
TWO

A humid summer night wraps around me in a thick blanket of darkness as we leave the small tent and head toward the center of the camp, where a roaring fire lights our way. The flames lick greedily at the warm air as my captor guides me down a long pathway where tall square-shaped tents line both sides—enough to contain at least five hundred warriors.

My steps falter at that realization. I'm in a camp full of Bloodstone barbarians. The warriors on night patrol are the only men moving around the camp. They wear the same type of armor as the man who took me. That combination of leather and mail. Yet, I don't need to set eyes on all the warriors to know how precarious this is—my being here.

The first prickle of fear needles into my skin. It wasn't there when the man took me from the alehouse and forced me onto the back of his horse. Nor was it there when we rode until the moon gave way to the sun.

As Olah is my witness, I must show my worth. That is the only way my kidnapper will allow me to live. I glance at him, taking in the determined jaw. Those haunted, sad eyes.

A tall warrior wearing a combination of mail and leather armor straightens at the front of the largest tent in the center of the encampment. Thick black battle marks slash below his intense blue eyes and under his bottom lip. If not for his dark beard, I'm sure he'd have more paint on him. I shudder at the thought. The imagery of him ready for war with his face smudged in death.

Another night rears into my thoughts like an angry nightmare, blinding my vision in intense images. The Bloodstone warriors racing into my village. The way their black battle marks slashed across their harsh features. The way they brutally swung their weapons. The way they plucked lives the way others pluck weeds. Nobody meant anything to them.

I swallow and shove the memories into the farthest crevices of my mind, locking it there with all my other painful memories. Like losing Aniah.

A sharp pang pierces my chest as I allow thoughts of my younger sister for a breath before shoving it away too.

It's not the time for such memories. Not here. Not among the Bloodstone.

"What have you done, Luc?" the tall warrior asks, his voice strained and his dialect as crude as the man holding on to me.

The Bloodstone talk faster than Kyanites, as if they must rush through everything they say.

"What I had to do." The man's grip on my arm strengthens. I resist the urge to wince or to grunt my objection. "Now, make way."

"Luc." Amber shadows weave over the warrior's disapproving features. "She doesn't belong here."

"She's a Kyanite healer, Gabriel."

The warrior turns his angry blue eyes on me, slashing them over me in displeasure. "Precisely. She's a *Kyanite*. Her magic cannot be trusted."

"What choice do I have? What other solution? I have tried everything." Desperation fuels my captor, this Luc's words.

The man steps closer to Luc and lowers his voice a fraction. "I am close to finding the stone."

What stone?

Surely, he doesn't mean bloodstone.

Forty summers ago, the gods cursed the Bloodstone tribe, taking all their magic and their ability to obtain even a pebble-sized stone. Without their bloodstone, they cannot call on their gifts, and without it, the rest of us are safe from their darkness.

Luc's jaw clenches. "Leah doesn't have time."

Something flickers behind the disapproving warrior's stare. Maybe the first hint of compassion. "Use the Kyanite's magic," he says, his tone brittle, "then before the light of the sun, send her away."

No!

They cannot send me away. I have waited ten summers for this moment. Besides, this is the closest I have ever gotten to the Bloodstone tribe.

Luc offers a curt nod. "So be it."

Without another word, the warrior moves aside, allowing us access to the tent. Luc steps through, bringing me with him into the well-lit interior. Beds line the walls of the room. Shelves and a large, well-crafted washing stand mark the center. Their furniture isn't shabby like I expected, nor is it ornate. Father would call it comfortable.

Father:

My chest aches as I recall sneaking away from our home in the middle of the night. It has been four summers. Four summers of wondering if he thinks about me.

A bed near the far wall catches my attention. Rather, the woman lying on the mattress catches my attention. Her chest rises and falls in labored breaths. Long brown lashes flutter against her cheeks. A sweaty sheen coats her skin.

My stomach sinks to my feet. I expected a soldier or a leader—someone they couldn't bear to live without. Not a young woman, and never one this ill.

Empathy prods at my chest, compassion for a woman who should sleep soundly in her bed right now.

Luc leads me closer. "You will heal her."

I wrap my fingers around the leather satchel tied to the belt at my waist and make myself meet his hard gaze. “I will.”

When he finally releases me, it takes all my fortitude to not rub at the spot where he held on to me. Instead, I armor myself with the meek facade I have adopted since Luc kidnapped me and kneel next to the bed. As I open the satchel, I listen to the woman’s breathing. It’s labored but not forced, nor is it hanging between the edge of this world and the next.

I pull back the bodice of her nightdress to observe the cloth covering her chest. I remove it and inhale at the sight of the angry wound below her right shoulder. By the redness and swelling, it looks like someone struck her with a poisoned arrow.

My anbellem weed should draw out the poison, and my swallow flower petals will lessen her fever.

Hope stirs in my chest as I prepare the mixture of herbs grown only in Kyanite soil. My blue kyanite stone fails to amplify my magic, but my education in medicinal herbs will not forsake me. It is the only thing I can truly control—my mind, my ability to learn.

Thankfully, I learned to grow the herbs—that way, I’ll never run out of my supplies. And thankfully, Kyanites use potent herbs to supplement using magic. Otherwise, they would spend all their energy and not be able to help many people. Even the best Kyanite healers require rest between curing patients. Their weaknesses provided me with these herbs.

Knowing Luc will expect it, I chant words in the healing dialect of my people. Every utterance burns my tongue and prickles my skin. Children can cast better magic than me.

Moonlight trickles through the slats in the tent opening as I pull back the wool blanket covering the woman’s chest and apply the poultice. Luc stands over me in stony silence, his presence a threatening storm cloud.

After applying a thick layer, I move to the washing stand. Luc doesn’t budge, nor does he remove his attention from the

woman. I wash my hands and allow my determination to dampen my fears.

They will not send me away.

I'll prove myself valuable.

After all, they cannot heal the way a Kyanite can. They don't have our herbs or training. Even without the ability to cast magic, I'm more efficient than their healers.

I return to the woman, take a small glass jar from my satchel, and pull the lid off. With one hand, I lift her head, and with the other, I allow a few drops to slip between her parted lips. Without looking at Luc, I bring a chair close and sit. Time will determine her Fate ... and Olah, of course.

If he wills it, the woman shall live, and I shall live too.

CHAPTER
THREE

1 DAY EARLIER

Forty-nine tankards filled to the brim. That's precisely how many I served to the men waiting impatiently in Luther's Alehouse. With every pass across the sticky floor, my arms ache a little more. I ignore it and try to keep a smile pasted to my face. It's what they expect, a friendly face, a welcoming face.

That's what Luther, the owner of the alehouse, always says. *Smile at them, Sol, or they will not stay for more than one ale.*

Katya, a woman from the Malachite tribe, scurries next to me, working a little faster, a little better. She keeps her pale blonde hair pinned at the nape of her neck, and she wears a surcoat tight enough to enhance all her attributes. It shows off her slim waist. Her wide hips. Her large bosom. If I had breasts like hers, I wouldn't need to scrape for every coin I get. She simply waltzes around the room and receives more gold than I do.

Or maybe it's the ocean in her eyes. If mine were blue, like hers, instead of brown, these men would bend to my will the way they bend to hers. If allowed, they'd probably throw gold at her feet.

Not that I need men to bend to my will. I just need their coin.

I'm a mere shadow compared to her. I'm shorter, have black hair, and my skin is nearly as pale as the plaster on the walls.

“What can I do ye for?” Katya asks the newest patron to enter the alehouse. The man sits alone in a corner.

Candlelight skims his features as he shakes his head. “Ale only.”

Inwardly, I smile at his refusal. Few men deny Katya when she offers more than liquor. The hem of her elaborate surcoat trails the ground as she returns to where I stand near the front of the room. She probably spent two month’s wages buying the ridiculous garment. Men don’t care about her clothes. They care what she barely conceals beneath them.

“Take ale to the man in the corner,” she says. “He obviously doesn’t know a beautiful woman when he sees one.”

I take the tankard from her. “All right. But I’m not offering him more.”

Those haughty blue eyes shift over me, lingering on my surcoat with its high bodice and loose waist. My breasts easily fill out the bodice, but they’re nothing compared to Katya’s. The rest of my shape is lost by the voluminous fabric.

“I never thought ye would.”

She knows I’m not here to entice men.

When I had first entered the establishment, I told Luther I only wanted enough coin to continue my journey to the foothills beyond this town.

I steal a glance at the window, looking at the promise of the mountains in the distance. The Bloodstone live there. Soon, I’ll leave this alehouse. I’ll journey to those mountains, and I’ll carry out my destiny.

Tomorrow is my birthday, a time of celebration for most people. I only want it to be a day that will lead me closer to the Bloodstone people.

I tighten my grip on the stoneware, approach the stranger, and plop the tankard near his hands. “It’s one gold coin.”

Piercing green eyes look up, holding on me. My breath catches in my throat. He’s Bloodstone. He may wear a green,

unmarked surcoat, but he has *their* serpent emblem on his bracers.

He glances over my blue surcoat with the Kyanite coat of arms. In the candlelight, the gold threads on the fabric nearly glow. It makes the mother tree seem more sacred.

When I started working here, Luther warned me to remove all traces of being Kyanite. I couldn't bring myself to do it.

With his boot, the stranger pushes the chair across from him out. "Sit."

"That would be two gold pieces." Should I have said three? I still need more coin to continue my journey.

He reaches into his cloak, pulls free a leather bag, and lowers it to the table. The contents clink against the wooden surface. "You may have all of my coin."

My brow rises. "What is your price for such a generous offering?"

Don't say me.

Men have propositioned me enough working here to worry that's what this stranger wants.

"Conversation," he says, his voice rising over the hum of the people sitting at the nearby tables.

I slide into the seat and settle my elbows against the table. "Are you so lonely, you feel compelled to give away all your coin for a conversation?"

"I'm not lonely." He lifts his tankard and takes a slow drink before lowering it back to the table. "I'm curious why a Kyanite is so far from home."

"Oh." Unconsciously, my fingers trace the gold tree sewn into my surcoat. "I am working."

His brow lifts as he allows his gaze to take in the alehouse. "Here?"

It takes everything in me to not follow his stare around the tavern. I know how small it is. How dank. You need only to stand and take forty steps to walk from one end of the room to

the other. The smallness didn't deter Luther from cramming tables and chairs into every available space.

"Yes. Here," I say after several moments.

The stranger's focus shifts to the window, much like mine had done earlier. "Beyond this town lies the foothills of the Bloodstone mountains." His haunted eyes shift back to me. "It doesn't welcome Kyanites."

My hand trembles as I lower it back to the table. He's right. I knew it when I set out on this course. It didn't sway me. Maybe it should have.

"I left Kyanite land four summers ago to explore all the Tarrobane territory. Those mountains, and the people who live in them, are just another tribe to me." I allow a quick pass over his armor. "You are just another Tarrobane barbarian."

Please forgive my lies, Olah.

Mirth skips behind the man's gaze. "I see." He lifts his tankard and takes another drink. "So, the fact I'm Bloodstone doesn't bother you?"

"Shall I tell you a secret?" I lean closer, anticipating his answer. He nods. "I find you fascinating. Your people, that is. You live in obscurity. That's difficult to do in Tarrobane." Warmth scours my throat at the bold lie, the terrible lie, the lie that scalds my insides. There's nothing fascinating about the Bloodstone.

Something in me is unwilling to admit the trembling I felt in my bones the moment I knew he was Bloodstone. If I act brave, he won't see the nerves clattering in my throat.

Again, he settles his gaze on the tree emblem. "Do you heal with magic?"

My breath catches. It's a simple question, and one I get asked often enough. I always reply with the same fib.

"Yes."

A Kyanite who cannot heal is as useless as a cart with no wheels. At least, that's what the head mistress at the apothecary used to say.

You are useless, Sol.

You have no wheels.

No magic.

No gifts.

I blink, but her voice remains a bitter reminder in my ears.

Katya appears at my left with a tray overburdened with tankards and gives me a pointed look.

I stand, smooth my surcoat, and address the man. “Thank you for the conversation.”

The man pushes the leather bag toward me. “Take the coins.”

I hesitate as indecision ripples through me. If I take the coin, I would be one step closer to my Fate. If I don’t, I wouldn’t be beholding to this Bloodstone man.

With her free hand, Katya yanks up the bag and shoves it against me. “Take it.” I barely place it into the leather satchel tied to the belt at my waist before she thrusts the tray into my arms. “People are waiting to be served.”

Red singses my ears as I distribute the ale. People had witnessed Katya chastising me.

The stranger remains at the table, his tankard half full. He doesn’t speak to anyone else, and he doesn’t leave until nightfall settles over the modest town.

When the tavern empties, I sit in a corner and sip on a tall tankard of ale Katya gave me. As I drink the bitter liquid, I mull over everything that led me to this town. I gave the mercenary army three summers. Hopefully, it was enough training.

“Sol,” Luther calls out as he waves a hand, trying to get my attention. “You can go.”

I turn as blots blur my vision, and the noises dim to an indiscernible pitch. “Go?”

He waves his hand again. “Yes. It’s closing time.”

“Time,” I say into my ale and take another sip. “I like time.”

“I’ll help her.” Katya crosses the room to where I slouch.

Gratitude strums through me as I stand and allow her to take my arm. I drank too much again. Or did I? I try to glance back at the tankard, to see how much I left inside the stoneware.

Katya jerks me away, guiding me toward the back of the alehouse and to a set of stairs leading to the lower level. Luther allows us to rent the rooms below for a reasonable price.

“Sol.” She shakes me, and the dots multiply, swarming my vision like a parade of sparkling diamonds. I blink, but they keep building and building.

“I’ll take her,” a familiar voice says.

The stranger?

“Wait,” Katya says, as she tugs at the satchel at my waist.

“Leave it,” the man says, his voice sharp.

“But you prom—”

“—I said, leave it.”

She draws up next to me, her body stiffening. “There’s no need to get angry. You can have her *and* the coin.”

“The gold is hers.”

Katya scoffs and releases me. “As if I would trust the word of a Bloodstone.”

“You did,” he says bluntly.

I sway, searching for something solid to lean against. Or a pillow. Yes. A pillow would be fantastic.

The man catches me against his firm body. “Leave us,” he says, his tone commanding. Frigid.

I even think about obeying.

Katya's footsteps scurry away, leaving me with this man. This stranger. This Bloodstone barbarian. I squint my eyes, trying to make out his features in the dimness. He remains a silhouette of shadows.

"Can you walk?" he asks, his voice brusque.

I nod and attempt one step before my knees buckle. He catches me against him.

"You cannot." Without another word, he picks me up and hauls me over his shoulder.

Everything in me shrieks with warning, but all I manage is a strangled scream before blackness reaches in and steals what's left of my light.

CHAPTER
FOUR

My Fate is no longer mine, not when it rests solely in the Bloodstone people's hands. They're happy for now. I healed Leah. I stayed up the first night, tending to her. After three days, she is healed enough to no longer need me.

Luc didn't say thank you, not that I expected gratitude. Instead, he ordered me to the care of a young Bloodstone woman.

I jerk my gaze around, taking in the camp I could only see bathed in torchlight the night I arrived. This part of the Tarrobane territory doesn't look much different from my village. It has the same grassy shores. The same tall, broad trees. The same blue sky. The same flowers dotting the landscape.

Except, it isn't the same. The Bloodstone people inhabit this area of Tarrobane.

The woman leads me from the watchful stare of the Bloodstone warriors and to a secluded alcove along the bank of a wide river and points her chin toward the root-stained water. I have seen it before—water turned brown from the roots of the nearby trees.

“Luc wants you to bathe,” the woman says, her tone kind.

The young, petite woman wears her light brown hair in a thick braid down her back. No wrinkles mar her skin, and her blue eyes seem vibrant, like the scars of life haven't touched her yet.

She wears a long black surcoat over dark pants, but unlike the rest of her tribe, she doesn't have a serpent coat of arms. Instead, someone sewed a large red circle onto the center of the material.

From the satchel on her shoulder, she pulls free a clean surcoat, pants, chemise, and a bundle of herbs. "You will change into this surcoat and bathe with these."

Automatically, my fingers brush against the gold tree stitched on my blue surcoat. If I shed my clothes, nobody will know I'm Kyanite. Well, except for the stone I still wear around my neck. Surely, they will not ask me to remove it too.

I accept the surcoat and bundle of herbs from the woman. "Thank you."

She nods.

I lay the clothes on a grassy spot near the bank and place the herbs close to the water's edge.

"What is your name?" I ask, hoping to compel kindness. If I'm going to succeed here, I must make friends.

"Kassandra." Eyes the color of the sky meet mine and crinkle at the corners as she widens her smile. "What is your name?"

"Sol."

She plays with the leather cord binding the end of her braid. "That's a unique name."

We often bathed in rivers like these back home. The women were always separate from the men, of course.

I always wore a linen surcoat when other people were around. Father demanded that I hid the serpent mark on the inside of my wrist. Today, I have no such luxury. There are no linen robes.

If I shy from this woman or try to hide my mark, she might see through me and she might see my purpose beyond healing Leah.

I strip off my worn clothes and hurry into the water. Water laps at my skin as I use the herbs. My nerves tighten in my throat as I think about the last few nights and everything that has transpired. Mostly, I cannot stop thinking about finally being among the Bloodstone people.

It was an out-of-reach fantasy for so long. Now, here I am, precisely where I have longed to be for ten summers. Ten summers of waiting, planning, training.

Everything that led me here was worth it. The army. The alehouse.

I never dreamed Katya would betray me, though. She put something in my ale. Then, she tricked me and sold me to Luc. How much was I worth to her? Probably not much.

Sunlight sieves through the trees as I walk out of the water and consider my next step. The man standing guard three nights ago wants to send me away. That cannot happen. Somehow, I must convince the Bloodstone people of my worth.

After I dress, Cassandra leads me back to the camp and into a small tent. Familiar smells and sights greet me. Frankincense burning in a brazier. A kettle with venison cooking over an open fire. Various bottles of herbs sitting in glass jars on the shelf.

Kassandra moves to the kettle, pulls off the lid, and stirs the soup inside.

She seems friendly enough. Maybe I can get her to answer some questions for me. Over the summers, I found out some things about Roland and the Bloodstone tribe but not enough.

And Luc. I was surprised when the other warrior called my abductor Luc.

If my information is correct, Luc is Roland's nephew. If Luc is here, maybe he can lead me to Roland, the Bloodstone's chieftain.

I'm close.

I know I am.

Inwardly, I dance with elation. I twirl until the moon rises high in the night sky. Outwardly, I remain calm.

From a nearby table, Cassandra grabs a jar and pours wine into a terracotta goblet. She offers it to me, and I happily accept. It has been a while since I drank anything more than warm water.

“Is Luc Roland’s nephew?” I ask, testing the validity of my information.

“He is.” Cassandra says.

“And Hector is Roland’s only son.” There’s a part of me that desperately wants to know the world Luc brought me to. If I understand the Bloodstone people, I can better infiltrate them.

Kassandra traces the rim of her goblet for several breaths before answering. “Yes, but he has been gone for many summers.”

That’s what I heard as I traveled around Tarrobane. Some people claimed that Hector was dead. Even more argued that he turned his back on his people and chose to live deep in the Bloodstone mountains. Some even said he wielded the blade of his ancestors, the one infused with the blood of a serpent.

Though, I doubted the validity of the blade. After all, the gods took the Bloodstone’s magic.

A memory from three nights ago races through my thoughts. “*I’m close to finding the stone.*”

Unease trembles down my back. If these people find any bloodstone, they may awaken their long-dead gifts. I shake the thought free. The high gods, the ones who don’t walk among us, will never allow them to cast magic again. There’s a reason they punished the Bloodstone. One stone will not revive their darkness.

It cannot.

The Bloodstone people once wielded dark magic, the kind capable of sending plagues into villages and destroying everything. Every crop. Every animal. Every human.

Thick, summer heat slips through the cracks in the tent, beading sweat on my brow. I wipe it away as Cassandra sits across from me and props her elbows against the table.

“Are you married, Sol?”

“Me?” A laugh spills out of me. “No.”

“Do you have a lover?”

Her question strikes at the part of me that wishes I did, or that I had never deserted Malachi. He was the person I hated to leave the most when I left Kyanite land.

“I do not,” I say after several moments.

“I don’t have one either.” Threads of wistfulness thicken her tone as she continues. “But I wish I did.”

“Then you should take one.”

She sighs and stares down at her wine. “For as long as I can remember, I have loved the same man.”

“Does he love you?”

“No.” She stands and returns to her pot. “He doesn’t see me that way.”

“Maybe if you spoke to him?”

Pink tinges her cheeks as she stirs the stew in a quick, jerky motion. “I couldn’t.”

“If you never speak, he may never see you the way you wish him to.”

Her fingers tighten on the ladle as she talks, her voice soft. “Or I could ruin everything by speaking.”

Maybe. I have never understood men.

She serves the venison stew in two terracotta bowls. A peaceful silence falls between us as we eat. With her, I can breathe a little easier. Especially, when she’s so open and friendly.

She waits until we’re both finished to collect our bowls. As she returns them to the washing stand, I reach for my leather pouch and suck in a breath. I left it by the river. It contains

everything I own. More importantly, it has powerful healing herbs. I'll need them to prove my worth.

"I left my bag near the river."

"Oh." Cassandra places the bowls in a basin. "You may fetch it."

A light drizzle pelts my face when I walk outside. I pause, allowing the raindrops to slip down my cheeks. Each drop cools my skin and the heat churning in my belly.

I follow the muddy tracks trampled by horses, each step carrying me closer to the river's edge. I take another step and gasp when I collide with something solid. No, someone solid.

My gaze jerks upward. Piercing silver-blue eyes meet mine, then narrow.

He's the warrior from three nights ago, the one who disapproved of me being here. Luc called him Gabriel.

"Kyanite," he grinds out between his teeth and grabs my arm. "I need to speak to you."

"Sol." I offer no resistance as he leads me inside a dimly lit tent.

"What?" He releases me the moment we enter but stands, blocking the entrance.

"My name is Sol. Not Kyanite."

The warrior folds his arms and stares blankly.

All right, so he's not friendly.

Not that I truly expected a Bloodstone barbarian to be friendly.

Torchlight weaves around his features, sharpening the angles and amplifying the Bloodstone marks. Like several nights before, the black paint slashes beneath his eyes and lower lip. The dark lines only add to his stern brow and midnight hair, making him look as fierce as every rumor spread about Bloodstone warriors.

He doesn't wear an amulet or gaudy rings. Only a single gold band adorns his pinky. From his weapon belt, a sheathed broad sword rests against his hip. But it is his armor drawing my attention, that mixture of leather and mail.

He's younger than the men in my nightmares, the ones who attacked my village. They were older, angrier.

This man is not yet thirty.

He's still one of them. Still Bloodstone. Still wearing those battle marks even though he's not at war.

Does he apply them every morning, hoping to intimidate everyone he meets?

Maybe he does. Maybe he likes looking intimidating.

"What did you want to speak about?" I ask after several moments of excruciating silence.

"When the council asks," he says, his tone cool, "you will tell them you must return to your people."

The council?

I copy his stance, folding my arms and squaring my shoulders. "I will stay."

"You will not," he grinds out as if he's incapable of speaking in any other manner.

Calmly, I allow my eyes to slide over his rigid form, noting the breadth of his shoulders, the muscular planes of his chest, and his thick arms. Summers of fighting made him this, a man used to delivering killing blows. I have spent summers fortifying my walls.

He will not conquer me.

"I am an asset to your people."

He scoffs. "A Kyanite belongs with other Kyanites."

"True. Most do, but I don't." I keep my expression demure as I step closer to Gabriel. "I can help your people. I can help you too." I'm not sure where the impulsive offer comes from.

Probably from my desire to succeed. If I *please* him, he'll not send me away.

A sneer pulls at his upper lip. "I have no need of a Kyanite."

"None?" I attempt a silky tone like the women who worked in Father's brothel. "Then you have never been with a Kyanite woman."

The women in the brothel satisfied men with their bodies, and in return, they got what they wanted. Surely, I can do enough to convince this man to let me stay.

Shadows and bands of light mingle in his eyes, hindering me from reading his emotions. "Are you offering?"

Boldly, and no doubt foolishly, I lower my hand to his arm, feeling his muscles beneath my fingers. "Yes."

Before I comprehend his intentions, he grips my jaw and brings me against a table. My heart lurches, and my skin prickles as I allow the contact instead of kicking him unmercifully between the legs.

The heat of his breath sears my cheek as he leans closer and speaks. "Ask nicely."

Angry words claw at my throat, begging to be released. I stifle them the way one smothers a candle at night.

"What should I ask for that I have not already offered?" That's probably not what he wanted to hear, but at least I spoke without allowing my hatred to show.

"Are all Kyanite women so free with their bodies?" he asks, his words bruising my pride. "Or are you just desperate?"

I open my mouth to speak, but for the first time since Luc kidnapped me, I have nothing.

Gabriel's eyes slice over me in disapproval. "I thought so."

I am desperate. Desperate to stay. Desperate enough to offer myself to a strange man.

“I sought only your warmth. It has been months since I have had a man in my bed.” Well, never, but he doesn’t have to know that. “And if I want to be free with my body, it’s mine. Not yours. So, I can do with it what I want.”

“Even offer yourself to a Bloodstone warrior?” Before I reply, he tilts my face upward, and my stomach quakes as his gaze lowers to my mouth. Alarm fires through every inch of my body; try as I might, I cannot contain the tremor or the way I stiffen. “I smell your lies, Kyanite.”

“Sol.”

His mouth thins as he releases me. “Go home.” Just two words, yet they lash my skin *and* pride as he steps back.

“I have no intention of leaving.”

“You’re not staying here.” He strides to the tent flap and lifts the material. “Come.”

Everything in me wants to deny him, to speak sharply. Instead, I quell my disdain, my anger, my powerful urge to shove him, and I follow him from the tent.

Rain pelts my face as I trail him through the murk and mire. We pass rows of tents and four Malachite men chained together inside an iron cage.

My stomach lurches as I force my focus away. The men still ingrain themselves into my thoughts. Their scared eyes. Their thin bodies. Their ragged hair. Their blue face paint. It covers their facial features, from forehead to chin. The very thing that sets them apart from other Tarrobane barbarians is probably what condemned them.

Gabriel stops near a small tent in the center of the camp. “In there.”

My brow rises as I cast a glance between the man and the tent. “Do you plan to murder me in there?”

Like earlier, his upper lip curls into a sneer, and even though he speaks plainly, a shiver slips down my back. “I have no such plans.”

“Will you at least tell me why you want me to go in there?”

He folds his arms, his body seeming relaxed, if not for the stiffness of his shoulders. “You will stay here until we decide what to do with you.”

“We?”

“The council,” Gabriel says, his voice terse.

Those four Malachite men chained together flash through my thoughts. If I’m not careful, I could end up like them—tethered like an animal in the rain.

Without another word, I step into the small tent. As the warrior’s footsteps fade, his words pierce my ears. “*Go home, Kyanite.*”

I will after I kill your chieftain!

CHAPTER
FIVE

The flap closes behind me, barricading me from the sun. I exhale and pace the small space between the bed and the wall. No other furniture sits in the tiny tent. So, I use the bed as my starting point. Then, I march to the wall. I pace back and forth until my hands shake. Bed. Wall. Bed. Wall.

When I met Gabriel, I knew he would be a problem. Now, here he is—very much a problem.

I'm going to kill him.

The thought burrows so deep within me, I even plan the execution. First, I'll steal his broad sword, then I'll ram it through his eyes, those unnaturally, beautiful blue eyes of his. I have met many people in my twenty summers, but I have never seen anyone with the same color as his. They're blue on the outside and silver near the center.

Of course, after I finish planning everything and go through the scenario, I reject the idea. Murdering Gabriel would serve me no purpose. Though, it would give me keen pleasure to kill a Bloodstone warrior, to avenge Mother and all those who died with her.

The truth of why I'm here stops me. Only one man's death will give Mother peace in the afterlife. Roland.

Maybe if Gabriel hadn't bruised my pride, I wouldn't have thought about killing him. I raise my fingers to my throat where he grabbed me. My stomach quaked at his touch. There's no way I would have enjoyed him bedding me. It was a foolish decision—offering myself to him.

For what seems like the hundredth time, my gaze lifts to the tent flap. This isn't how I expected to spend my fourth night here—alone, abandoned, left to dwell on all the things the Bloodstone people must say about me, a Kyanite.

Determination strengthens my resolve as I stiffen my shoulders. I will succeed. They will not send me away.

This is my mission, just like it is the moon's mission to always chase the sun. Though, I will succeed where the moon cannot.

I will catch my quarry!



Four days and four nights. That's how long I spend alone. Cassandra brings me food and water. Gabriel probably forbade her from bringing me wine. She even returned my leather bag. Surprisingly, all the contents were still there, even the gold coins Luc gave me.

The entire time I wait for the council's decision, I only allow positive thoughts. Everything will go as planned. The Bloodstone council will accept me and allow me to stay.

On the fifth morning, the tent flap lifts, and Cassandra beckons me to follow her. I gather my leather satchel and trail the young woman outside.

Sunlight breaks through the clouds and quivers over the center of the camp where the four Malachite men huddle together in chains. Bloodstone warriors loom around them in a wide circle. Luc, Gabriel, and three other men stand at the front of the group.

I don't need anyone to tell me why we're here. This is an execution. I have heard about the Bloodstone and their method of choice for killing those who offend them. They always use bows.

My stomach clenches, and ice slips down the back of my neck. Maybe the four Malachites aren't the only ones the Bloodstones intend to murder.

No!

The clenching increases, squeezing around my stomach, my chest, my throat.

I'm not next.

I will succeed.

Luc raises his hand, and the men fall silent. "Who has a grievance with these Malachites?"

A young Bloodstone warrior with long black hair and a thick bandage around his neck steps forward. "I do."

"Then you will take the lives of these four men, and you'll obtain the vengeance you're owed."

The Malachites cry out, pleading for mercy.

Luc doesn't flinch, nor does he sway from his course as he nods at the long-haired warrior and speaks again. "May Olah forgive them. For we do not."

My heart drops the moment the Bloodstone warrior lifts his bow, nocks an arrow, and aims it at the chest of one of the Malachites.

"Please, I beg you. Have mercy," the thin man pleads. "I have children."

The clouds shift, stealing the sun as the Bloodstone warrior releases his arrow, striking the Malachite man in the chest. Blood pours from his mouth as he falls to his knees. One by one, the long-haired man's arrows hit their marks until all four men are lying in the bloodstained grass.

Bile rises in my throat as the urge to scream overcomes me, to yell so loud all of this disappears. These deaths. These Bloodstone people. This urge to avenge Mother.

Everything I have done since Mother died—abandoning my tribe, training with the mercenary army, seeking out the Bloodstones—was all to prepare for this moment.

It wasn't enough.

This is real. These Bloodstone barbarians. Their Malachite enemies. The blood staining us all. This is what I have chosen.

Oh, Olah, give me the strength to do what I must.

As the conversation shifts to disposing of the bodies, I wait. Either the Bloodstone people will condemn me too, or they will not. I cannot run. My Fate is here.

After what seems like an eternity, Cassandra turns to me. "Come."

A relieved breath rushes from my lungs as I raise my hand to my flushed cheeks. I hadn't realized how hot it had gotten.

She adopts a soothing tone as she speaks again. "Come, Sol."

It takes everything in me to not look at the dead men, to rotate and follow Cassandra away from that horrible scene. Away from the dead Malachites. Away from not knowing if I'd live or die. Away from the awareness of being different.

Those Malachites were different.

I *am* different.

These Bloodstone warriors know that better than anyone. My blue kyanite stone necklace reminds them I am from the tribe that helped bring an end to their magic.

Forty summers ago, our chieftain pleaded to the high gods. Called for an end to the Bloodstone and their darkness.

I am everything the Bloodstone hate and shun.

My heart thrums in my ears as we step inside my small tent. A few days ago, I foolishly believed if I offered myself to a Bloodstone warrior, I would be allowed to stay.

He didn't take my bait.

Now, I don't know what to do to compel these people. Healing Leah hadn't been enough.

My heart thrums harder and harder as I ask Cassandra a question, a pointed question, a question I must know. "What

will happen to me?”

Kindness glints in Cassandra’s eyes as she speaks. “The council will decide your Fate.”

Vivid memories play across my thoughts. The Malachites’ pleas. The long-haired man striking them with arrows. The way the condemned fell.

“Do you mind...” I swallow and voice my question pensively. “...if I ask why those Malachites were killed?”

She runs an unsteady hand against her surcoat and shake her head. “I don’t mind if you ask. Malachite warriors attacked us a week ago. Our warriors killed most of them. But those four men were captured by Cenric, the man who executed them today.”

The hem of my surcoat brushes the dirt-packed ground as I step back. “Thank you.”

Kassandra pauses near the tent flap and turns back to me. “I hope they decide in favor of you staying.” She weaves compassion into her words the way others weave bitterness.

She steps from the tent, and the linen flap settles into place.

If they allow me to stay, I can move to step two. The first step was making contact with the Bloodstone people. The next will be diving deep into their culture and being fully accepted. Only then will I be able to get close enough to Roland to carry out his execution.

But none of that can happen until I get through the Bloodstone council.

CHAPTER
SIX

Red. Orange. Yellow. Green. Blue. Indigo. Violet. It takes each one of those to make a brilliant rainbow, to create colors so vibrant that the moment you spot it, it steals your breath.

Two days after the brutal execution of the Malachites, I think of that beauty as I sit cross-legged on my plain but well-crafted bed. Even the washing stand isn't elaborate. It serves its function. Maybe that's what these bloodstone people prefer—items that simply serve their function.

My gaze shifts to my leather satchel tied to the belt at my waist. Inside its leather folds are all the items I took with me when I left Kyanite land.

Nothing else mattered. No jewels. No fancy gowns. Not that I owned any of those things.

Maybe my herbs will serve a function for the Bloodstones. Even if they had magic, they wouldn't have healers with the ability to cast spells. That isn't the way the six tribes of Tarrobane work. Each tribe has different types of gifts.

As a young girl, Mother told me the Kyanites have light, the aptitude to heal. Malachites have earth, the ability to change the world around them. The Bloodstone people once had darkness, the skills to weave cruel spells.

The memory of an older woman, whose face was covered in deep, painful-looking scars, haunts me. Of all the people I met on my journey here, it is her voice I hear most clearly. She said a Bloodstone woman cursed her when she was a girl. She

didn't say why. And I didn't need to hear the details to know it was unwarranted.

The tent flap lifts, and I look up, expecting Cassandra. But it's not Cassandra who steps into my shelter. A brawny warrior with intense black eyes moves into my dwelling, my safety, my security. Those eyes stare into mine, drawing a line of fear to my heart. A line so fierce it steals my breath.

At full height, his head nearly brushes the roof of the tent. Scars crisscross his face like a tapestry of horror. His weapon belt contains a broad sword and three daggers. A necklace made of pelican bones hangs around his beefy neck. A piece of linen covers his nose and mouth.

"You're the Kyanite," he says, his voice muffled by the material.

"What do you want?" I ask in the calmest voice I can assemble.

Quicker than a breath, he moves closer, removes a glass jar from his cloak and yanks off the lid, spilling a cloudy liquid from the vial. It engulfs the room and snakes up my legs. I gasp, eyes watering as I fight the overwhelming urge to slumber.

Fear slams into my chest as I stumble from the bed, trying to evade him. He reaches out, grabs me around the waist, and hauls me off my feet. A scream splits the air. My scream.

He squeezes my chest with solid, meaty arms, and my breath halts.

Olah, help me!

Numbness entombs me as I blink through the thick haze and try to break from his hold.

He's too strong. Too deadly.

So, I react with the only thing I have left. My voice.

I scream out the ancient words of my people, the healing verses that, when shouted, sound like a spell. Louder and louder, I scream, hoping they will scare him. His arms go slack, and I crumble to the dirt floor.

My heart pounds against my chest as I continue shouting.

“Shut up!” He raises his hand and lands a mighty blow against my cheek.

Pain splits my face as dots blot my vision. I blink, desperately seeking clarity. Blood pools out of my mouth as he grabs my hair, yanking me off my feet.

Blackness fringes my vision as he shakes me. Over and over again, he shakes me until there are no words. No sounds. No screams.

Feebly, I claw at his arms, desperate for escape, for freedom, for life.

I must live.

I must survive.

Mother needs me.

“Esmund!”

The tent flap lifts, freeing the poisonous cloud and grabbing the attention of the man shaking the life from my body.

My assailant turns as another man joins us, his eyes far angrier than my attacker’s. But his anger is not focused on me. It’s focused on the man who stole into my sanctuary.

“Let her go.” The warrior rips his broad sword free and raises it to the light of the torch. “Now!”

The man drops me for a second time. I crash into the hard, unforgiving ground. Shock spears my body as my assailant draws his weapon and turns to meet Gabriel with a quick, angry strike.

Gabriel counters. Then, he attacks the taller man, his movements fast and impossible to stop. The more Gabriel strikes, the more he sends his opponent backward until he has him pinned and his sword to Esmund’s throat.

My abductor raises his chin and stares straight into Gabriel’s eyes. “Do it. Taint your hands with my blood.”

The edge of Gabriel's blade digs deeper.

“Do it, you undeserving scum. You're not worthy of your ___”

Fierceness seethes behind Gabriel's gaze as he rams the sword through the man's throat. The man's eyes widen as he chokes on his blood. Violently, Gabriel rips the blade free, and the man collapses to the ground.

I slap my hand to my mouth at the savagery. It shouldn't shock me, shouldn't surprise me, yet it does.

Gabriel swipes his blade across the dead man's surcoat and straightens. I scurry to my bed and sit on the mattress as he slides his broad sword back into the scabbard.

“I won't hurt you,” he says, his voice low, empathic. If one can imagine a man able to speak in such a way after slaughtering someone.

I draw my knees forward and clasp my arms around them. Trembling overtakes me as I try to unsee Gabriel stabbing the man in the throat.

“Come.” Gabriel holds out his hand, and I sink deeper, shrinking away from his offer. Away from the Bloodstone barbarian and that hissing serpent emblem on his surcoat.

It means death. *He* means death.

“Kyanite.” He crosses the tent, grabs my arm, and pulls me from the bed. “I cannot leave you with a dead man all night, and you're bleeding. You'll come with me.”

“No.” I shake my head. “Leave me.” It would be easier to be with the dead than this man capable of viciously murdering someone much larger.

Instead of heeding my pleas, Gabriel tightens his grip on my arm and leads me from the tent. Away from the dead man. Away from the brutality. Away from the only sanctuary I built while imprisoned by the Bloodstone people.

If Gabriel is willing to kill one of his own, he'll kill anyone. Harm anyone. Destroy anyone.

I'm next.

CHAPTER
SEVEN

Night crushes me as Gabriel leads me through the center of the camp and toward a tent that is bigger than the one the Bloodstone imprisoned me in. He lifts the flap and guides me into the well-lit interior.

The moment the flap settles into place and he frees me, I stumble a half step away from him and jerk my chin up. “Kill me quickly.”

He folds his arms.

“I don’t care to be a victim,” I say. “So, make it quick.”

“Do you think,” he begins, his words low and lined with annoyance, “that I would rescue you, dispatch your assailant, and then kill you too?”

I jab my right thumb into my left palm, sinking my nail into my flesh. “Yes.”

Gabriel scoffs and moves to a nearby shelf. “I brought you here, so you wouldn’t be forced to spend the night with a dead man.”

“A dead man cannot fight back,” I say. “Besides, I prefer him to you.”

Something about watching Gabriel murder my assailant freed my tongue and it left my emotions raw and torn.

Gabriel turns, holding a clean cloth. “Sit.” He nods toward the bed.

“No.” I’d rather sit on a cactus than on *that* bed.

It may be his.

I scan the room. No furniture, other than a washing stand and two shelves, inhabits the space. I hug my arms around my body and will this night to be over.

Before I comprehend his intentions, he crosses the tent, grabs my arm, and brings me to the edge of the bed. He pushes me to the mattress with a firm hand against my shoulder.

“I didn’t ask,” he says.

Frustration explodes through my veins at the sheer audacity of this man. I quell it the moment he shoves the cloth against my cheek. I gasp and try to jerk away. He grips the back of my neck, keeping me from squirming. Pain smarts against my skin as he holds the material tight. Earlier, I hadn’t remembered the injury.

“You’re the worst patient I have ever attended,” he grumbles.

“That’s because I’m not a patient. Release me.”

If anything, his hold tightens.

“Gabriel,” I begin, my tone as frigid as ice, “let me go.”

“I will when you stop bleeding.”

“I’d rather bleed all over this tent.” *Than to be indebted to you.* “Now, release me.”

He doesn’t listen. He does nothing but hold that damn material to my face. I exhale as his grip against my neck loosens, and he raises my face enough to meet his silver-blue eyes.

“You will not die tonight, Kyanite.”

I blink and allow his words to sink into my being. He hadn’t killed me. Instead, he prevented my attacker from shaking the life out of me.

He pulls the cloth back. “You need stitches.”

I nod numbly as he steps back to his shelf and rummages around until he finds the necessary items. He joins me on the

mattress, pours wine on a cloth, and touches it to the wound. Pain sears my skin anew, but I don't move. Don't protest.

When I was fourteen, I had a hook rip through my arm. Hattie, one of the women at the brothel, had stitched the wound. I remember the way she spoke, how she warned beforehand how badly it would hurt.

The warrior offers no such words. Instead, he pinches the cut together and pierces my skin. I inhale at the agony as he continues weaving the thread in and out. He finishes after he places six stitches into my torn flesh.

"Do you have salve?" When I fail to answer, he pulls the satchel at my waist, widening the material enough to glance inside. He pulls free a tiny, amber-colored bottle, pulls the lid, and sniffs. "Is this salve?"

I blink, but all I see is the man with the bone necklace entering my tent. All I hear is him smacking me and sending me to the ground.

"Kyanite."

The sound keeps coming. Hand against flesh. Over and over again, he smacks me, and I fall into an endless drop.

Gabriel gathers a small amount against his index finger and rubs it against his hand. Torchlight throws shadows across his stern brow as he raises his arm and stares at the ointment.

"It doesn't sting. It must be salve." With his thumb, he lifts my chin and rubs the cream onto my cheek.

I wince against the throbbing, the memory, the horror. I was sure the huge man was going to kill me.

Gabriel gains his feet and moves to the washing stand, where he cleans his hands. He dries them as he turns to face me.

"You'll stay here tonight." He crosses the tent, picks up a blanket from the shelf, and sets it beside me. "Here."

I grab the soft material and clutch it to my chest.

He reaches for my kyanite necklace, and I cringe, expecting him to rip it from my neck. Instead, he tucks it into my surcoat. “Keep this out of sight.”

Softness bends beneath my fingers as I clutch the blanket even tighter.

“You’re in shock,” he says in that same empathic voice from earlier.

I tuck my chin against the blanket. It’s my shield. My protection. My solace from the shadows gathering outside this room.

Gently, he brushes his fingers against my jaw. “You’re safe.”

I allow that contact, that tenderness, that comfort, even though the one offering the comfort is Bloodstone.

He picks up another blanket from the shelf and moves to the opposite side of the tent, where he sits. “You don’t belong here. When the council asks tomorrow, tell them you must go home.”

I shift to lie on my side and keep that blanket tucked close.

Help me, Mother. Give me strength. Pull me away from this darkness. This fog. Please, oh, please help me, Mother.

Silence answers my pleas. Such bone-aching silence.

Mother isn’t here. Not listening. She’s never been so distant before, never so far out of reach. It’s as if my being here with these Bloodstone people took her even further from me. Further than death. Further than the ravine between us.

I inhale and exhale, desperately searching for my calm. It’s out there somewhere. I know it is. I just need to find it.

Maybe then, I’ll remember my reason for staying.

CHAPTER
EIGHT

“Sol, wake up.”

I try to shift away from the hand against my arm, that insistent hand that keeps pushing on me.

“Wake up.”

I blink through gritty eyes and glimpse Cassandra kneeling beside the bed.

“Oh, thank Olah,” she says. “You’re awake. I feared you were dead.”

Death would be easier than this, waking in a Bloodstone warrior’s bed.

Several times during the night, I woke with a start, and jerked my gaze to where Gabriel sat. He never moved, never spoke, but I knew he was awake. It was the position of his body. He never slumped forward. He sat stiffly, his focus trained on that tent flap, as though he would murder the next person who dared to step through.

I rise to sit as Cassandra gasps.

“Oh, Sol. Your cheek.”

With trembling fingers, I lift them to the ache and trace the stitches. Sympathy shines in Cassandra’s eyes as she watches me for several moments before speaking.

“Gabriel told me what happened last night. I’m to help you get ready for the council.”

“The council?” I whisper, my words hoarse.

“You need water.” Cassandra hurries from the tent and returns a moment later with a goblet brimming with water. “Here. Drink this.”

I comply and take a greedy drink. Only after I fully quench my thirst, do I lower the goblet.

Kassandra takes it from me. “I’ll find you something clean to wear. Then, I’ll take you to the council.”

As promised, Kassandra provides a clean surcoat. I bathe with the herbs she supplies and don the soft garment.

The moment I’m finished, she pulls me from the tent. Another humid summer day wraps around me as I follow her to a circular tent, where dark gray Bloodstone flags stab the ground in front of the structure. The serpent coat of arms etched into the fabric taunts me, bringing back memories of a different night. A different place.

That night, the Bloodstone people rode into my village and slaughtered nearly everyone. They left the survivors with fire in their bellies. Survivors like me.

Mother is the reason I’m here, and she is the reason I cannot leave. No brute in the middle of the night will steal my revenge. Esmund attacked me, but he didn’t destroy me. Gabriel made sure of it.

I stab my thumbnail into my palm and exhale. One day, I may even have to thank him, but not yet.



Frankincense burns from a single brazier, and a long, rectangular table occupies the center of the tent. Five men sit on the far side, waiting for me. I recognize three of them. Luc, Gabriel, and Cenric—the man who executed those four Malachites.

The other two council members are young too. They wear the same type of armor, the combination of leather and mail.

Luc points to an empty seat across from them. Cassandra follows me to the table and sits next to me. I exhale and fold my hands in my lap. Thank Olah, they allowed her to join me.

Luc studies me for several breaths before speaking. “Are you well, Sol?”

Unconsciously, my fingers lift to my cheek, to the stitches. I rip my hand free. “I’m well.”

“Gabriel gave me a full account of what happened last night. Esmund should have never attacked you.” Luc glances at the quiet man next to him. “Gabriel did what was needed to assure your safety.”

I blink, but the imagery of Gabriel ripping the sword out of my assailant’s throat still sears my vision.

Find your calm.

I swallow and make myself speak. “I know.”

“Are you well enough to proceed?” Luc asks, bringing my focus back to him.

A part of me, a very large part of me, wants to say no. “I’m well enough.”

“Great.” Luc steepled his hands together and continues. “This is my council. You already know Gabriel, my first commander.” Luc points to the other three men. “And these men are my captains—Aston, Cenric, and Gray.”

I nod at the men.

“Do you know why you’re here?” Luc asks.

“Yes. I wish to stay here.” I nod toward Gabriel. “And he doesn’t want me to.”

The warrior in question stares solemnly, his expression giving no hints to what lies beneath his stern brow.

“Why do you want to stay here?” Luc asks. “Are we not your enemy?”

“I am an outcast among my people.” Familiar bitterness tugs at my chest. There’s a truth to my words, I haven’t faced

until now. First, they removed me from their apothecary. Then, I ran away. They wouldn't welcome me back.

"You healed my sister," Luc supplies.

Leah is his sister?

I should have been able to learn more about the Bloodstone people. Surely, it would have helped me.

"She was ill. I treated her ailment. My people can bring people back from the brink of death."

My people have many powerful gifts—gifts I long for. Kyanite healers bring people from death's clutches, weave peaceful dreams, cure failing crops, rid trees of diseases, and purify water and food. In truth, there's very little a Kyanite cannot do to improve something.

"Are you not able to wield such magic?" Luc asks.

"Not to that degree." *Not at all.*

Gabriel speaks, his tone stiff and frigid. "There's no room for someone like you here."

"But I'm a healer."

"Apparently not a good one." His words bruise my pride, the same pride wounded every time I failed to please the Kyanites at the apothecary.

A frown wrenches at Cassandra's mouth, but she doesn't speak as she places her hands against the table, palms facing down.

"I healed Leah," I say. "Something your healers couldn't do. I'm valuable."

"Sol has a fair point, Gabriel," Luc says.

"She is a Kyanite." Gabriel folds his arms and stares through me as if I'm not sitting here. "She should return to her people."

"Gabriel is right," Cenric says as he runs his fingertips against the table, his movements slow, purposeful. "The Kyanite cannot stay here."

No. I cannot fail.

Think of something. Anything.

You have come too far to fail now.

My body wasn't enough to convince Gabriel to let me stay. My healing wasn't enough to convince Luc. There's only one thing left of value. Only one avenue.

"I will marry one of your warriors." The words turn to decay inside me. It has been summers since I thought about marrying. But I can be a wife if being one brings me closer to my Fate.

Gabriel opens his mouth and snaps it closed.

Perfect.

I surprised the angry warrior into silence.

Luc's green eyes narrow as he studies me. I don't fidget. Out of all these men, he's the most powerful. If I win him over, I win them all over.

I lift my chin a fraction and speak in an even tone. "Name him, and I will marry him."

Luc's eyebrow rises. "Why are you eager to remain here?"

"I told you. I am an outcast. I want to belong to something greater than myself. I want to serve you."

Gabriel scoffs. The sound burrows beneath my skin and prods at my temper. I exhale and keep my focus on Luc.

"Please let me belong here. Let me serve your people with my healing and allow me to marry one of your warriors. You need more women, and you need someone with my capabilities." Even though I have heard their men outnumber their women, I don't know if it's factual. I cling to the hope anyway.

Luc sinks back against his chair and studies the parchment on the table, as if the words alone will give him the answer he seeks.

"No," Gabriel says, his tone final.

I don't look away from Luc. I cannot, not when he's holding my Fate in his hands. Not Gabriel. Never Gabriel. He will never have such power over me.

"*Please.*" I allow my desperation to echo in that one word.

Finally, Luc looks up. Something stirs behind his eyes. Compassion? "You will stay, and I will find someone for you to wed."

My heart leaps for joy *and* shatters. Now, I'll have to keep my pledge to marry a Bloodstone warrior.

"Luc," Gabriel begins, then he tightens his mouth into a firm line.

"Sol saved my sister's life, Gabriel. I can't just send her back."

"I will serve you." I have won the first battle. Despite Gabriel's objections and my trepidations, I won.

"Luc," Cassandra says, drawing his attention to her. "May I speak?"

He nods. "Of course."

She glances at me for a breath before talking, her voice soft. "Sol has the serpent mark. I saw it on her wrist when I took her to the river to bathe."

My breath catches as I force my hands to stay folded and not reach for my wrist.

Doubt festers in Luc's eyes as he cast his gaze between Cassandra and me. "That's impossible."

"It's not." Loose strands of hair fall over her shoulders as she nods toward me. "Show them."

"*Never show anyone what the gods cursed you with.*" Father's words pierce my ears.

"I don't..." I swallow through the sudden grit in my throat. "...see how that has anything to do with my desire to wed one of your warriors."

“It has everything to do with it,” Luc says curtly. “Show me.”

I reach for my sleeve and grip the hem with all my strength. For ten summers, I have hid the mark. Now a Bloodstone warrior is asking me to show him.

I dart my eyes between Luc and Cassandra. She offers an encouraging smile.

“*Please.*” I choke out.

I gasp when Gabriel reaches across the table, grabs my right hand, and flips it over.

“Don’t,” I hiss as he yanks up my sleeve with his free hand.

Sunlight streaks through the open tent flap, engulfing the white mark. The hissing serpent laughs at me, as it has since it appeared the summer Mother died. Father said it was a cursed handed down from the high gods, though he never explained why they cursed me.

I try to tug away, but Gabriel’s grip tightens.

Luc’s eyes widen as he stares at what the gods did to me. “Gabriel, she has the—”

“—no!” As quickly as Gabriel grabbed me, he lets go and folds his arms.

“You cannot ignore the Seer, Gabriel,” Cassandra says in a soft voice.

The Seer?

What Seer?

“Hades!” Anger and frustration collide across Gabriel’s brow as he lurches from his chair.

Luc stands and grabs Gabriel’s arm. “Don’t leave.”

“I don’t want anything to do with this,” Gabriel says through his teeth.

“You don’t have a choice.” Luc yanks Gabriel back to his seat.

“Are you willing to marry the man of my choosing?” Luc asks after a moment.

“I am.” There’s no better way to prove my commitment to them. They must allow me entrance into their world, their city, their trust. Then, I can walk among them and fulfill my destiny.

I will avenge you, Mother.

“Good.” A smile stretches across Luc’s mouth. “You will marry Gabriel.”

Gabriel? I would rather wed a scorpion.

Its bite would prove less deadly than the angry warrior.

Luc’s smile widens. “Gabriel is unwed, and he could use a wife. You will wed him.”

I wait for an objection or a scoff from Gabriel. Anything. He remains strangely quiet.

Maybe he thinks I will do enough objecting for both of us.

I will not.

“If it pleases you,” I begin, “then, I will marry him.”

Gabriel doesn’t react. He does nothing but stare. Outwardly, I remain a shell of humble placidness. Inwardly, I imagine running.

I’d run so fast, my hair would stream out behind me. My surcoat would lash my legs. I wouldn’t look back.

“When shall we marry?” I direct my question toward the solemn man, who probably thought I would object, so he could send me back to my people.

“Now,” Gabriel says, “if it *pleases* you.”

Challenge accepted, warrior.

“It pleases me.” The words turn to dust in my throat.

Gabriel slides his eyes over me, his assessment thorough as if we’re alone, and he imagines me naked. “The quicker, the better. I’m famished.”

“Then, I hope our union pleases you.”

A smirk tugs at the upper corner of Gabriel’s mouth. “I can think of a thousand ways you could *please* me.”

“Gabriel.” Luc stands. “You can verbally spar with Sol later. As for now, you must take her to the Seer.”

I dig my nails into my left palm, jabbing my skin instead of the man I have trapped myself with.

For Mother.

Always for Mother.

Wood digs into the dirt-packed floor as Gabriel stands and jerks his chin toward the door. “Come with me, Kyanite.”

“Sol,” I say.

CHAPTER
NINE

The Seer, a young woman with hair-streaked golden from the sun and a distinctive shell-shaped birthmark on her neck, settles vibrant blue eyes on me. They look through me, wrap around me, probe into all those places I hide my fire. My heart pounds against my ribs, but I remain outwardly calm. It's all I have right now. Calm.

“Sol, of Tarrobane,” she whispers in a velvety tone.

Of Tarrobane? We may all live in the Tarrobane territory, but it doesn't make us the same.

“I'm Sol of the Kyanite tribe.”

“So, I see.” She turns to the man sitting next to me. “You have chosen wisely, Gabriel. Sol is your path.”

It takes everything in me to remain in the chair, to not run for the door, or scoot away from Gabriel. The Seer placed the chairs so close, my shoulder brushes his. His heat burns through my thin surcoat, sparking my bitterness, my hatred.

Gabriel doesn't speak. Deep down, a part of me hopes he will, and when he does, he will call off everything. Maybe I could actually walk away. Return to Father. Maybe he would accept me back with open arms.

But that is all a dream. Gabriel will never relent, and I can never return to Father or Kyanite land.

The Seer lays her hands on the table, palms facing up. “Take my hands, Sol of Tarrobane.”

Needing this woman's approval, I follow her command.

She pauses for a long, uncomfortable moment. “If you succeed in your quest, you will lose everything.”

A lump forms in my throat. “I only want to serve the Bloodstone people.”

“Your heart is part fire and part ice. You are stricken with grief, loss, torment, ineptness.”

“I mourn those I have lost.” The truth scalds my tongue. But I cannot wish them unsaid. This Seer can’t see my lies if truth borders them. “My mother...”

“You witnessed her death,” the Seer says, her words soft, direct. “And after she was buried...” gently, she touches the serpent-shaped mark on my arm, “...the gods left this and scorched your soul.”

“Yes,” I say, my voice oddly strangled. Usually, I talk about Mother without losing control. Yet, here in front of this Seer, I *am* vulnerable.

“You have lost a lot.” The Seer continues prodding at my defenses. “But you need to be wary of the path charred black with vengeance. It always leads to death.”

“I only wish to serve,” I say, repeating the words I said earlier.

A half smile touches her mouth. “Do you know what I am?”

“A Seer.”

“Yes, of the Tarrobane. So, do not lie to me, Sol. Not when I see through you as if you’re made of sheer fabric.”

She’s not a Bloodstone Seer. She cannot be. They have no magic.

Then, why is she helping them? They’re cursed, banned from using magic, yet she aids them.

Frustration flares in my veins, but I stay focused and remember her last words. *Not when I see through you as if you’re made of sheer fabric.*

I swallow and speak evenly. “My truth is my commitment to marry Gabriel.”

“Indeed, it is.” She locks her gaze on Gabriel. “Trust is as flimsy as a seedling flailing in the breeze. Never reveal what is yours to hold close.”

He nods and rests his palms against the table. “Is she the one you spoke of?”

She spoke of me?

Why?

“She is.” The Seer places my right hand on his left. “She is your future.”

He exhales, but he doesn’t pull free, nor does he tighten his fingers around mine. I expected a sour sensation to twist in my stomach at his touch. Instead, there’s only the feeling of skin against skin.

As a child, I learned how to pick roses without being stabbed by their sharp thorns. This man is no different.

He’s my path to acceptance.

“Take her.” The Seer nods toward the door. “Olah approves.”

At last, Gabriel’s fingers tighten around mine, and he stands, bringing me up next to him. “We will wed.” No warmth lingers from his tone. Only iciness. It cuts through my fortitude, freezing my heart.

CHAPTER TEN

A kyanite stone for me. A kyanite stone to cool my fire and kindle my magic. I received my necklace on my twelfth birthday. It was the same day the Kyanite healers accepted me into their apothecary.

Now, the stone sits cold against my skin. Ice against the flame.

Time and time again, it has failed me. When I needed it to calm my nerves, they only twisted into knots inside me. When I needed it to magnify my magic, it sat idle.

It's part of who I am, though. Sol, born of the Kyanite tribe.

For now, the flames must disappear. Only ashes can remain on my heart. Otherwise, Gabriel will see through me.

Over the last two days, while I waited for our binding ceremony, I have observed Gabriel more. He obviously has the respect of the other warriors. He doesn't get sloshed like many do, and he seems to consider his words before speaking. I must never take his quiet strength for granted.

Kassandra hums as she combs through my black hair in her tent. She can be a loyal friend. After all, my quarrel isn't with her.

She stops humming and speaks in a soft voice. "I never dreamed Gabriel would ever marry. Not after..." Her mouth tightens like she's stopping herself from saying too much.

"After?"

She shakes her head. I decide to change the subject, knowing it's better not to press her.

"Shall I please Gabriel?" I stand, smooth my borrowed surcoat, and meet Cassandra's gaze.

"Oh, yes. You shall please him. I know you shall."

My fingers lift to my cheek, to the stitches sewn into my flesh. Cassandra watches me for a breath or two before speaking.

"He will not care about a scar. He has plenty of his own." She tilts her head to the side. "Does it hurt?"

"My cheek?" I lace my fingers together.

"Yes. Does it bother you?"

"Only when I forget about it and accidentally scratch it."

She beams a bright smile. "Gabriel did a fantastic job stitching you."

I wouldn't know. I cannot see his handy work.

"Here." She moves to her bag and pulls free a small looking glass. "Look."

I have no time to protest before she thrusts the thing in my face. Wild, haunted eyes stare back at me, eyes that look a lot like Luc's. Mother's death made them that way.

I blink, but the haunted look doesn't fade. It is a part of me.

My fingers lift to my cheek again, to the stitches Gabriel left behind. He did a masterful job. One might think he has had plenty of experience mending someone's broken skin.

"Your skin is so pale," Cassandra says as she gazes at me. "It makes your hair seem blacker and your eyes brighter."

"I've always hated my brown eyes," I admit. "As a child, I wanted them to be blue."

"You're beautiful, Sol. You do not need blue eyes." She takes the looking glass and stares into it. "I, on the other hand, need them so I don't look so plain."

A laugh escapes me. “You are far from plain.”

She places the looking glass back into her bag.

“Will you tell me about Gabriel?” If I’m going to succeed, I’ll need to understand him. He could be the difference between me moving freely among the Bloodstone people or being hidden away.

“He’s kind, fierce, loyal, and stubborn.” Admiration lingers in her words as she continues. “He’s a great warrior. One of the best.”

I reach for that useless kyanite stone through the fabric of my surcoat and squeeze it between my fingers. “Has he ever been married?”

“No.”

“Does he...” I thread pensiveness into my tone. After all, this is a question a fiancée would want to know about her intended. “Does he have a lot of women?”

She laughs and shakes her head. “Women are always interested in Gabriel.”

Dig deeper, Sol.

“Are Bloodstone warriors faithful?”

Say no.

I would prefer Gabriel shared another woman’s bed—*any* other woman’s bed—but mine. But I can handle a handful of times. In truth, I can endure many things to carry out my destiny.

“Most Bloodstone men are faithful. But there are always those who cannot commit to only one woman.” The hem of her surcoat twirls around her legs as she pivots and smiles. “Gabriel isn’t like those men.”

“Oh, that makes me happy.”

Liar!

“Gabriel is fiercely loyal.” Esteem shines in her eyes as she continues praising him. “You should have seen the way he

was with his family. He was steadfast until there was nothing left to serve.”

A sudden thought strikes me, so I say it out loud. “Is he the one you love? If he is, I can call off the binding ceremony.”

Another laugh spills from her lips as she shakes her head. “No, not Gabriel. Luc is the man I care for.”

“You’re in love with Luc?”

I have observed Luc more too. When he’s around his men, he’s friendly and a natural leader. When he’s sitting alone, he’s quiet, morose, and he doesn’t smile.

“Yes.” She adds in a much softer voice, “But I shall never have him.”

“Why not?”

The lines near her mouth deepen as she grimaces and stares down at her hands. “I am an outsider.”

“Outsider?” My brow lifts as I consider the meaning behind her word. “Is that why you don’t have a serpent coat of arms?”

Her hands go to the red circle in the center of her surcoat. “Yes.”

What makes you an outsider? What does it mean?

The questions prod at my thoughts. I cannot ask them until I get to know her better.

Lines of tension deepen across her brow as she speaks. “You should know that once you agree to marry a Bloodstone man, you don’t break the agreement. It’s seen as an offense.”

Before I came here, I vowed to do whatever it took to give Mother peace in the afterlife. I never prepared myself for marriage, but I will not cower from it or shiver at the thought of being a Bloodstone warrior’s wife.

“I have a lot to learn about your customs,” I say after a moment.

“I shall help you.”

“I would like that.” It’s not a lie. I could use her help.

Kassandra’s long brown hair sways against her hips as she turns back to the window. “It’s time.”

CHAPTER
ELEVEN

Kassandra leads me to an oddly shaped tent near the fringes of the camp. Instead of being tall and square, it's shorter and dome-shaped. Instant heat engulfs me the moment she guides me inside. Two square grass mats lie on either side of a square pit in the center of the room. Steam rises from the heated rocks inside the cavity. It clings to my skin like a humid morning after it rains.

Kassandra frees my hand. "This is the purification part of your binding ceremony with Gabriel. The Bloodstone people believe the first step to a peaceful union is releasing all your past sins. You'll spend a short while here with Gabriel."

I know the Bloodstone people spend a lot of time inside sweat lodges like this. However, I didn't know about this part of their binding ceremony.

My stomach clenches at the thought of being trapped here and forced to spend time alone with Gabriel.

From the satchel on her shoulder, Cassandra pulls out a narrow strip of cloth. "You'll wear this around your waist."

My brow rises. "That's all?"

"Yes. It's all you're allowed." Compassion sparks behind her blue eyes. "You can cover your breasts with your hair."

She leaves me to the silence of my thoughts and the frustration bubbling inside me. I hadn't considered all the Bloodstone's traditions when I decided to wed one of them.

I grumble under my breath as I undress and tie the cloth around my waist. It only covers me to my upper thighs. Obviously, this tradition was created by one of their men. It had to be. No woman would think this is a good idea.

As I sit on a grass mat and crisscross my legs, I pull the ribbon from my braid. Sweat beads across my brow as I unweave the dark strands and allow two sections to cover my breasts. It doesn't cover enough. I'm too well endowed.

My pulse races as I glance at the tent flap and brace for Gabriel's arrival. He had stared so openly during the council meeting. My stomach tightens at the thought of him doing it again.

Sunlight floods the lodge as the flap lifts, and Gabriel steps into the room. Like me, he only wears a strip of cloth. Luckily, it covers him to mid-thigh. Otherwise, I'd see far more of him than I'd like.

His firm body glistens with sweat as he moves to the opposite side of the lodge and sits on a grass mat. I try not to stare, to compel my gaze to the ground. It's incapable of lifting off all those tight muscles and the tattoo etched into his right arm. It covers him from wrist to shoulder. The ancient words and symbols must mean so much to him.

He no longer wears his battle marks. It's strange to see his face without those black smudges. Without them, he seems younger and more approachable.

The lone torch casts wavering light on the walls of the lodge. I watch the shadows and try not to think about how miserable this is. Everything sticks together. Sweat trickles down my back, my neck.

"Kyanite," Gabriel says, his tone brittle. "Come here."

My skin bristles at the command. Maybe he's used to speaking this way to women.

The stubborn Kyanite woman inside me wants to deny him. The woman who knows she cannot, stands, and moves to the others side of the pit. He watches me, his thoughts veiled behind shadows.

He pats the space next to him. I sit and curve my legs to the side, trying hard to keep my thighs tucked close. Those silver-blue eyes flicker over me, trailing my body as if I'm goods in a shop he's considering buying. I swallow but don't shy from his stare.

"Do you like what you see?" I ask when I can no longer bear the silence.

Father hates my bold tongue. I find it serves my purpose. I'd rather be bold than shy.

"You will do," Gabriel says, his voice flat.

"I will do?" I roll my eyes upward.

I may be too skinny, and my eyes are brown instead of blue, but it doesn't make me any less desirable.

Or maybe it does.

His stare lingers a moment longer, then shifts away. I swallow through the sourness in my throat and try to think of something to say.

"Thank you for..." The words stick in my throat, like everything else in this lodge.

The image of that night overcomes me, blinding me with its memories. The man with the bone necklace entering my tent. The darkness stirring behind his eyes. The way he picked me up as if I were simply air. I weighed nothing to him.

Another memory inks its way through. Esmund poisoned me. It made me sluggish and sleepy.

Why did he go through such efforts to overcome me?

Maybe he feared my magical abilities. He wasted his time. Even if I did have Kyanite magic, it's incapable of being evil.

It's light and goodness.

My stomach twists as I remember how helpless I had been. As a child, I was taught to defend myself. Everyone had to with how often our villages were attacked. Then, I trained with a mercenary army. I shouldn't have been so easy to overpower.

“You do not need to thank me. I was simply guarding a prisoner,” Gabriel says.

I jerk my gaze away and study the steam rising from the rocks. “You could have harmed me too.” In truth, Gabriel could have done many things to me that night, but he didn’t. Instead, he rescued me, aided me, and he stayed on the other side of the tent.

“Oh,” he says in a sarcastic tone, “because I am a monster?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“You didn’t have to. It’s written in your eyes. You think I am beneath you. That I’m a savage.” Gabriel’s words come out in a stream of unveiled bitterness.

“You’re not a savage.” I run my fingers against the stitches. “A savage wouldn’t have tended to my wounds as you did.”

The muscles in his shoulders flex as he folds his arms. “Perhaps not, but I am still Bloodstone.”

Still Bloodstone.

Those words ring in my ears as I try not to think, to not remember what the Bloodstone did to Mother.

A half smile touches his mouth. “I see my words hold truth. You cannot stand the idea of being wed to a man like me.”

“I am processing.” I jab my thumb into my palm. “As you are doing, I’m sure. Two days ago, neither one of us thought of marriage.”

His gaze lowers to my hands as I jerk them apart and settle them against my thighs. “Do you do that to cause yourself pain?”

“It is nothing,” I say.

He reaches out, snags my left hand in his and flips it over. The indentation in my palm stands out like a red flag.

“Why do you hurt yourself?”

“Let me go.” I try to pull away, but his grip remains firm.

“Every time I touch you, you get angry. Why?”

“I don’t like...” *To be touched by you.* The words freeze against my tongue as I inhale and exhale, desperately seeking my calm.

“What are you hiding?”

“*Please,*” I say. That one word desperate. “Let me go.”

Almost as quickly as he grabbed me, he frees me. “There’s hate inside you. It’s deep, like a canyon gouged into the earth, yet you agreed to this marriage.”

“*I need to belong,*” I say, my words tender, raw against my throat. There’s truth there. Real truth.

“You didn’t belong with the Kyanites?”

I lay my hands against my thighs, palms facing up. “No. I could never do what they wanted. My hands were useless. My spells nothing more than dust.”

“So, you came here to live with the Bloodstone people. For what purpose? What do you think we could give you that they didn’t?”

Revenge. I lick my bottom lip and speak. “A new beginning.”

“Then you’ll be sorely disappointed. Astarobane isn’t where you go for new beginnings.”

“Astarobane?” I brush sticky strands from my cheeks and grimace as sweat drips down the small of my back. *I’m going to need a bath after I leave this lodge.* “What is Astarobane?”

“My home.” He rolls his neck and stares into the pit. “At least, for a few months.”

Inwardly, I assess the name, testing it against my tongue. It doesn’t sound familiar. Is it in Tarrobane? Surely, these Bloodstone people don’t live outside of Tarrobane.

“Is that where you’re from?” Why are the Bloodstones so secretive about their homes? Even the patrons who visited the

alehouse were tight-lipped.

“No.”

“Is Astarobane the only Bloodstone city?”

Instead of answering, he stares blankly.

All right. So, he obviously doesn't want to divulge that information.

I decide to shift the subject. “Why did you agree to this marriage?”

“The Seer,” Gabriel says plainly.

“Do you always obey the Seer?”

He studies me in the low light for several moments before speaking. “You don't understand my people. If you did, you wouldn't have asked that question.”

How can I understand when they're so guarded with their information.

“Help me understand.”

“No,” he says bluntly.

“Why is the Seer so important to you?” I ask, trying to get him to open up to me.

“The Seer is important to all Bloodstone people.”

“Why?”

“She guides my people's Fate.”

“You don't decide for yourself?”

A smirk pulls at the upper corner of Gabriel's mouth. “You're naive if you don't think the high gods control yours.”

I shrug. “I control my Fate.”

Mirth glints in his eyes, as if he silently laughs at me. He probably does. “So, you say.”

Father said don't come here, and here I am. I alone prepared for this moment, and I alone will carry out my plan. Not the high gods. Never the high gods. They don't care about

me. They don't care about anyone. If they did, they would never allow such violence to exist in the world.

The tent flap shifts, and Cassandra peers into the sweat lodge. "The purification part of the ceremony has ended."

Relief surges through me. Finally, I can escape this man.

When she smiles and speaks, my breath catches in my throat. "It's time for the next step."

The next step?

There's more?

CHAPTER
TWELVE

Kassandra leads me to another dome-shaped tent, this one without steam. My pulse thunders in my ears. It's not empty. Gabriel entered before we did. He sits on a chair, wearing that strip of cloth.

A table occupies the center of the room. A terracotta jar perches on top. Two small braziers burn frankincense.

Surely, Olah is laughing at me.

Kassandra nods at the cloak she gave me before she led me here. "Take it off."

Take it off? As in, in front of him?

Why? So, he can stare at me again and say, "*You will do.*"

I swallow through the strong urge to protest and pull the cloak free.

The hem of Kassandra's surcoat skims the ground as she moves to the table and nods toward the jar. "This is cardamom and olive oil. You will rub it on each other's bodies."

My heart slips right out of my chest at those words. She wants me to rub what on Gabriel's body? Oil?

Has she gone mad?

Heat floods my cheeks as I think of doing precisely that, rubbing oil all over his muscles. I cough and stare down at my feet.

"It will bring you closer, bonding you both physically and emotionally," she says.

Isn't that what bedding is for?

I cough again to the point my eyes blur, and my ears ring.

Kassandra pats me on the back. "Are you all right?"

Do I look like I'm all right to her?

I'm wearing next to nothing. I'm in another tent with *that* warrior. And he's sitting there with a piece of cloth around his body. Thank the sky, he keeps his legs tilted away from me.

"I'll leave you now," Kassandra says, snapping my attention back to the present.

Before I think of a response, she steps out of the tent, leaving me with Gabriel.

Again.

I lift my eyes, taking in the warrior sitting in that chair as if it's a throne. He keeps his shoulders straight, his chin lifted, and his arms folded across his body.

"Kyanite," Gabriel says, his tone commanding. "Come here."

This man is far too bossy.

Shall I fetch a rope for him? Then, he could just lasso me and pull me to wherever he wants.

I curse beneath my breath and walk to where he sits. He reaches for the jar and dips his hand into the oil. I let out a quick breath when he grabs my arm and pulls me close enough for my thighs to dig into his knees.

"We don't have to prolong this part or spend unnecessary time on it," he says evenly. "They will notice if you don't smell like this oil, though."

They?

As if understanding my thoughts, he adds, "The council."

"Oh."

The word barely leaves my lips before he runs the oil along my arm, raising goosebumps against my skin. I flinch as

he grabs my other hand, turns me slightly, and spreads it on my side.

It's not terrible. It should be terrible, his touch. The feel of his fingertips gliding along my body.

He stands and rotates me until my back is to him. My breath hitches as I catch sight of our silhouettes on the wall of the tent. He's large. I'm small. The top of my head barely reaches his shoulders.

Why didn't I notice how tall and broad he is before? I mean, I noticed. It's hard not to note. But here, all alone with him, I *really* notice. He possesses strength and raw power—the kind obtained from summers of wielding a blade.

He repeats his actions, dipping his hand into the mixture and rubbing it slowly along my shoulders, my spine. I bite the inside of my lip and focus on the torch in the nearby sconce. It throws amber shadows over the walls, creating a distraction for a breath before Gabriel moves my hair and slides his fingers along the back of my neck.

I let out a shuddering breath, and his touch stills.

Don't mock me.

Please, don't mock me.

“That's enough oil,” he says, his voice distant. “Here.”

He pulls me around, grabs my hand, and pushes it into the mixture. I gasp at the sensation of the oil against my fingers. Before I have time to think, to breathe, he places my palm against his chest. My mouth turns dry, and I try to compel my hand to move. It remains frozen against him.

“Shall I do it myself?” he asks, snapping me from the spell he put on me the moment I touched him.

“I can do it.” Still, my hand doesn't move. I try to not stare at him. It's impossible to move my gaze from his wall of strength.

“Can you?” he asks, his voice teasing my inability to focus on my task.

It should be simple. Shouldn't it?

"Of course, I can." I swallow again and force my hand to move over him.

Don't think.

Please, don't think.

The sky above. It's impossible to not think about what I'm doing. It's the first time I have touched a man like this. It's too intimate. Too compelling. As if, at each stroke of my fingers against him, I'm lured into the seduction he weaves.

Ridiculous. He's not trying to seduce me.

I hiss out a quick breath and consider grabbing the jar and dousing him with it. Then, I'd be free to leave, and he'd smell how the council expects him to.

I freeze when he grabs my wrist and yanks my hand away. My focus lowers to his chest where five fingernail indentations mark his skin.

I clawed him?

"I'm sorry," I breathe as heat flames my cheeks.

"As much as I enjoy a little roughness, you may want to leave the foreplay for later." The humor in his tone only adds to my embarrassment as he reaches for a cloth and hands it to me.

"But I..." I squeeze my eyes shut and exhale. Why couldn't I do this?

"Here." He takes the linen from me and wipes away the excess oil from my hands.

Get it together, Sol. I inhale, taking it a deep breath of the cardamom and olive oil. Then, I slowly exhale. *Find your calm.*

I open my eyes as he picks up my cloak and places it around my shoulders.

"Kassandra will be back for you shortly."

“Thank you,” I mumble. I have nothing else to say. No words. No excuses. Nothing that would explain my embarrassing actions.

He offers a curt nod and exits the tent.

The moment I’m alone, I slap my hands against my mouth. I clawed him. He will probably be bruised tomorrow.

Why couldn’t I just rub the oil on him? I have touched men before. Especially when tending to their injuries.

There was something about Gabriel and all those muscles. The heat of his body beneath my fingertips. The stirring deep in my belly.

Hades!

He’s Bloodstone.

I shouldn’t give him a second thought.

But I do—over and over again until Cassandra enters the tent.

CHAPTER
THIRTEEN

If I was home, the sounds of drums would fill the air. People would line the streets, throwing flower petals as the newly married couple walks past. A progression of young girls would follow with grass baskets laden with rice, wheat, and barley—their gifts an offering for Olah to bless our marriage.

Here, there are no sounds of drums. No flowers. No young girls. There's only Gabriel, Luc, Cassandra, and one of the council members standing in a small tent. Thankfully, Cenric is absent. There's something unsettling about the long-haired man. Something dangerous.

Or maybe that's the way all Bloodstone warriors are, but he strikes me as being different because of how he killed those Malachites.

I return my attention to the ceremony and the tent we stand in. A brazier burns herbs I don't recognize, and Cassandra stands with a terracotta bowl filled with soot and brown dyes.

I wear the same surcoat Cassandra gave me on the day she ordered me to bathe in the river. Gabriel wears a marked gray surcoat over dark pants.

I try to not breathe in too deeply. If I do, I'll smell the cardamon. I'll remember touching Gabriel and clawing him earlier. My cheeks heat as I still a sideways glance at him, taking in his stiff jaw, as though he grinds his teeth together. He probably does. I cannot blame him for not being happy about wedding me. After all, people from our tribes rarely wed.

Apprehension settles deep within my bones as the ceremony continues binding me to Gabriel. He's simply a fork in my path, and I learned a long time ago to approach every fork with a smile. So, I smile until my mouth aches.

At the conclusion of the ceremony, the councilman's last words send ice shards against my heart. "As the rivers Johita and Wocorra join the ocean, so you two have united. Let no man pull asunder what Olah has destined."

The moment the ceremony finishes, Cassandra grins, grabs my hand, and leads me to a nearby table.

As I sit, she places the bowl with soot on the table. "It's time for your binding tattoo."

Knots tighten in my throat as an older man with wrinkled skin and long white hair approaches. He sits across from me holding a sharp pelican bone tied to a stick, which he lowers to the table.

"This is Alf. He will tattoo your skin with a binding engraving."

My breath shudders at the thought. Not because I fear pain. I have endured enough in my lifetime to not fear a tattoo. It's the thought of it being forever etched into my skin. No matter where I run or hide, the mark will always be there—proof that I wed a Bloodstone barbarian.

"It will only hurt for a short bit," Cassandra says, her tone encouraging. She jerks her chin to the left as Gabriel walks past us, heading to a nearby tent. "Gabriel will receive one too."

My brow lifts as I consider the implication behind her words. These Bloodstone people tattoo the men with a binding engraving too?

Kyanite women simply change the color of surcoat they wear when they wed. They don't mutilate their bodies. I'd do anything for that tradition right now.

You can do this.

I stiffen my back and place my right hand against the table.

“No, the left,” the white-haired man says.

I look up, pinning my gaze to the ornament hanging from his neck. In the center of the pendant is an empty socket, where a stone once rested. Giant knots form in my stomach. He might have had Bloodstone magic once. He’s old enough.

It’s only been forty summers. There’s probably plenty of them still alive who once had great magic. Dark magic. The kind capable of touching a well full of water and turning it dark and murky. As well as flinging curses at people.

I do as Alf indicated, offering my left arm to him. He picks up his stick and stabs the pelican bone into my wrist, sinking it enough to carve into my flesh. I grimace and curl my toes, tightening them as he continues etching swirls and lines.

Every time he pierces my skin, I remind myself of my obligation to Mother. This is worth it. This mutilation. This binding.

The white-haired man flips my arm over and continues jabbing my skin until the tattoo wraps around my wrist like a thick bracelet. Ancient words mingle with the lines and swirls. Words that have no meaning to me. They might as well be jumbled gibberish. To them, it must mean everything.

Knowing I wanted this, and I plan to dive completely into their world, I ask Alf a question. “What do the words say?”

He traces them one at a time as he speaks. “Love. Commitment. Honor. Cherish.”

I touch the last two words. “And these?”

He lowers murky brown eyes to the engravings. “Bind. Soul.”

Does he consider my soul now bound with Gabriel’s? It takes everything in me to not laugh feverishly.

This is foolish. All of this is so foolish. I have tied myself to a Bloodstone warrior.

Mother would be appalled. She would tell me to run and never look back.

Mother, please forgive me for this path.

I didn't know what else to offer, to bargain with.

I swallow and muster a smile. "Thank you."

It's probably a sin to encourage this marriage with no intentions of committing to any of the words engraved on my arm. After I fulfill my mission, I'll leave. In the meantime, I have every intention of acting like a good wife. Otherwise, the Bloodstone people might see through me, and I will never get close to my mark.

Alf places the bone on the table and dips his fingers into the soot and dyes. He smears the mixture into the engravings, dying his carving forever into my skin.

My fingers tingle with the urge to scrub at it, to make it all go away. Instead, I bolster my resolve and straighten my shoulders.

After Alf wipes the excess soot away, Kassandra tugs on my arm. "Come with me."

I obey, following her numbly down the pathway to the row of tents until she stops by one with a campfire nearby. Four women with surcoats like hers sit next to the flames, keeping watch over fish cooking on hot rocks.

Kassandra steps inside the same tent that she brushed my hair in. With a wave of her hand, she motions for me to follow her. I trail her inside the tiny interior. It boasts just enough room for a small bed and a table. On top of the table sits a large satchel. Kassandra rummages around with the clothes inside and pulls free a nightdress.

She turns and offers it to me. "You're welcome to have it."

I shake my head. "I couldn't."

"Psh." She places it in my hands. "I want you to have it."

I accept the kind offering and clutch it to my chest. Tonight is my wedding night with a barbarian warrior—the type of man who will climb on top of me, force himself inside me, and pant until he reaches completion.

I blink and try to force away the memories I always try to forget. They will not be suppressed. They crash over me. Each one stronger, more vivid. Each one raising hesitation against my skin.

The men were always the same that came to Father's brothel. They didn't care if the door was open, or if their loud breathing pierced the thin walls. I saw everything. Heard everything.

Gabriel is no different than those men. He's Bloodstone. He's used to taking what he wants. He won't care about going slow because it's my first time.

I raise a fist to my mouth, fighting the powerful urge to voice my dismay. The last thing I want is Gabriel's invasion.

Mother, help me.

Give me strength.

The memory of her smile calms my mind.

There's nothing that could happen tonight that is worse than what she endured at the hand of that savage Roland.

I'll give her the peace she deserves. I'll vindicate her.

First, I must get through tonight.

CHAPTER
FOURTEEN

Torchlight illuminates Gabriel's tent as I undress. Inwardly, I curse my choices that led me here. Caught between being sent back and failing, I made the only decision that would gain the Bloodstones' trust.

Growing up in a brothel never adequately prepared me for marriage. I saw the women there, how they talked to men, lured men. I know everything that happens between a man and a woman in bed except how it feels.

This marriage isn't real.

Even as I think those words, the weight of the vow I spoke feels real. The tattoo etched into my left wrist feels real too. Everything about this day feels real. The fact that at any moment the tent flap will open, and Gabriel will enter, feels *very* real. He will expect me to be his dutiful wife.

My focus shifts to the bed, and my stomach lurches. I exhale and rip my gaze away. Why didn't I prepare better? Surely, one night with a man would have lessened my nerves and allowed me to perform the way Gabriel would expect.

The Seer's words pierce my ears. "*Olah approves.*"

Surely, Olah, the god of all Tarrobane barbarians, doesn't care.

Gabriel is just a man. I'm just a woman.

The flap lifts, and Gabriel enters the tent. The moment he steps inside, and the linen fabric settles into place, the interior seems smaller, and he seems closer. Too close.

He doesn't meet my eyes as he crosses the room and pauses in front of the washing stand. He cleans his hands, then removes his surcoat. I brace for him to undress fully in front of me. It will not be the first time I have seen a man without clothes. I spent enough time in an army full of men to not shy away from their nudity.

Earlier, I had touched him, felt his strength beneath my fingers. Now, I'll finally see the rest of him.

Muscles flex in his arms and shoulders as Gabriel rotates, still wearing his pants and boots. In slow, precise movements, he folds the surcoat and places it on the table.

As I stand and turn toward the bed, those images from the brothel return. I shake my head, trying to shake those memories away. They still blind me. The men pounding the women. The women moaning as if they took pleasure from the invasion.

Maybe some of them did. At least, they seemed to when they talked about their favorites. I move to the mattress and lie flat on my back.

I enjoyed the kisses I shared with Malachi. Things will be different with Gabriel. I'm not here to enjoy sharing his bed.

Gabriel sits on the opposite end of the mattress and speaks in a flat voice. "You should know I have no intention of bedding you."

My mouth parts as his declaration sinks in. "Why?"

"I don't trust you."

"But I am your wi—"

"—you're a Kyanite." Bitterness burns from those three words.

So he has reminded me from the moment he set eyes on me.

I'm Kyanite. He's Bloodstone.

He hates me.

“If you don’t bed me, our marriage will not be real.” *And I will fail.* I pull the bedcovers down enough to reveal the nightdress Cassandra gave me. “You don’t need to trust me to bed me.”

His stare remains pinned to my face. Cool air dances along my exposed arms, my neck, my throat. I keep the bedcover wrenched between my fingers. His eyes never drop lower.

The first flicker of failure digs at my determination. Gabriel doesn’t want to bed me. Now, that’s not something I expected.

“Why are you really here?” he asks, his tone hard.

“I want to belong.”

Shadows linger on his features as his lips thin. “You may have fooled Luc, but you haven’t fooled me.”

I study him, noting the firmness of Gabriel’s jaw, the stiff edges behind the stare he keeps locked on the ceiling. “Then why did you agree to wed me?”

“I told you. Because of the Seer.”

“Surely, that’s not the only reason,” I say, still doubting their absolute faith in the Seer.

“Your mark,” he says, his tone flat.

I roll my arm over enough to observe the cursed serpent. “You agreed to marry me because of a simple mark?”

“No.” Those silver-blue eyes of his stay locked on the ceiling. “There’s nothing simple about it. The Seer guides all Bloodstone. Disobey and chaos will follow.”

“Then,” I begin as more of their traditions click into place in my mind, “the Seer ordained our marriage?”

Without a word, he grabs a dagger from the nearby table and unsheathes it. “Spread your legs.”

My breath hitches, a reaction I’m sure he doesn’t miss. “Why?”

“For the council.”

My mind scrambles as he reaches for my leg and yanks it toward him. I flinch when he pulls my gown to my upper thighs. He pauses with one hand still wrenched around the fabric. I wear nothing under the nightdress. A vein throbs in his temple as he shoves the material between my legs, creating a barrier between my intimate flesh and his gaze.

His mouth forms an even thinner line as he releases my nightdress and lifts his hand. With a quick flick of his wrist, he runs the blade across his palm. Blood drips between my legs and pools in a crimson stain on the bedcover.

“I don’t understand.” The men at Father’s brothel would have never passed on an opportunity to bed a woman. “Why would you cut yourself instead of taking what is rightfully yours?”

Mother may have died when I was young, but I know what’s expected of a wife.

“I will never bed you.” He stands and moves to the washing stand. From the table close by, he grabs a cloth and ties it around his hand.

“Then why wed me? Why pretend like you took my innocence?” I move away from his blood and yank my nightdress down.

“I created an illusion for the council to observe.” With his jaw set, he reaches for his surcoat and pulls it on. “As for my reason for wedding you, I am following my path, the same path that will discover every secret you’re so keen on keeping.”

“What happens after you discover I have no nefarious plans?” The words snap out of me before I think of containing them.

He pulls his weapon belt back on and talks over his shoulder. “Good night.”

With long, even strides, he exits the tent. The moment I’m alone, I exhale as relief floods through me.

Gabriel didn’t bed me. He will never bed me.

Thank Olah. I married a man who has vowed to never touch me.

As quickly as my joy soars, it crumbles into a heap of nothingness. Gabriel doesn't trust me. He thinks I am hiding secrets.

I sigh and roll to my side. I'll never flourish here if he prods at all my secrets.

If succeeding means getting him to bed me, he will.

He just doesn't know it yet.

CHAPTER
FIFTEEN

As I step outside the tent the following morning, a gentle wind welcomes me, as does the bustle of at least three hundred Bloodstone warriors. They move about the camp, breaking down the linen tents and loading all their possessions into wagons.

I look over the encampment, but I don't see the man I'm wed to. Relief surges over me until I remember the way he rejected me. He may dislike me enough to leave me here.

Sunlight winks between thick clouds as I reach for my useless kyanite stone and frown. Gabriel cannot do that to me.

The wind picks up, tugging at the edges of Cassandra's surcoat as she steps from a nearby tent and waves at me. "Good morning."

"What's happening?" I sweep my hand in an arc toward the soldiers.

A broad smile brightens her face. "It's time to go north to the mountains."

"Truly?" My pulse quickens as anticipation pours over me. I may meet the rest of the Bloodstone tribe, and they may lead to Roland.

"Yes. We have finished here. Now, we can travel home."

Home? What does home look like for them?

Before I came here, I read every book I could find about the Bloodstone. None of them mentioned more than the general area of where their homes are.

Everyone knows the Bloodstone live in the north, near the mountains. The Kyanites live in the south, near the sea. The specific locations of the Bloodstone villages and cities are much harder to find.

It probably didn't help that Kyanite people don't care about the Bloodstone people. They most definitely don't write about them. The few books I had read were from an old peddler I met after I left Kyanite land.

Ask Cassandra questions.

Find out more about them.

I knit my hands together and smile. "What did you finish?"

Her gaze whips to the warriors, settling on them for several breaths before she finds her voice. "We left for a greater purpose."

What does that mean?

"What kind of purpose?" I ask, still needing more information.

Pride glints in Cassandra's eyes and echoes in her words as she speaks. "The army you see before you isn't just any Bloodstone army. It's Luc's army. It will do anything to protect the Bloodstone people."

I run my fingers against my surcoat, smoothing the edges. "How long has it been since you were home?"

She shrugs. "I consider this army my home."

"But you do have a home?"

"Of course, but it's been months since I was there."

Then their mission took months?

"Is Astarobane the only Bloodstone city?" I ask, hoping she'll be more insightful than Gabriel.

"It's not." She brushes dust from her surcoat.

Kassandra's gaze shifts to the left as five men approach and work on the tent I shared with Gabriel.

“Get your things and come with me,” Cassandra says, dragging my attention back to her.

I nod and enter the tent to gather my leather satchel. Without looking at the bed, I step back outside. I don't have time to dwell on what did or didn't happen. Yet, thoughts still sink into my skin and taunt my pride.

A Bloodstone warrior spurned me. With one look, he deemed me unworthy. Untouchable.

It shouldn't bother me, but it does.

He had achieved what he wanted with the council. Later that night, they had entered his tent to observe the blood on the bedcovers.

Gabriel is the key. He's unlocking the door to the mountains and the rest of his tribe. Without him, his people would have sent me away, and without him, they will never allow me to immerse myself into their culture.

Kassandra leads me to a nearby wagon, where she shares fresh wheat bread and clean water.

“Thank you,” I say as I tear off a chunk of bread.

“Of course.” She leans against the wagon. “I never dreamed I'd meet a Kyanite who's so kind to me.”

Instant guilt scrapes at my throat. I befriended her because I need her companionship and confidence.

Besides, she's the kind one. Not me.

“We're not all bad,” I say when I can't think of anything else.

“I don't think Kyanites are horrible.” Her stare lifts to settle beyond my shoulder. “It is my people who despise Kyanites. They blame your people for the loss of our magic.”

“That was many summers ago.” I push loose strands of hair from my cheeks. “Forty summers.”

“Yes.” She nods. “It's inane when you consider it. Our tribes hate each other over a rift that happened before we were born. We can be different.”

“We can.” More guilt scrapes at my throat at the facade behind my words.

“It will be our little secret,” she says with another wide smile.

“I love secrets.” Probably too much. Definitely too much.

“Me too.” She settles her stare over my shoulder again, as if gaging whether she’s free to speak. “Don’t allow Gabriel to upset you.”

I pull my cloak closer and consider my words before speaking. “I’m used to men like him.”

“Truly?” She plays with the ribbon binding her braid. “I have always thought he was unique.”

Gabriel, unique? Doubtful.

Instead of showing her my disbelief, I ask a question. “How is he unique?”

“Well...” esteem fills her tone as she speaks. “...he joined the bloodstone army three summers ago, and he rose to first commander in only two summers. Most men take far longer to rise to such a lofty position.”

“Is he below a general?”

“Yes. He’s second to Luc.”

A sudden thought strikes me, so I voice it out loud. “How old is Gabriel?”

She laughs, the sound bubbly and full of mirth. “I thought you would have asked sooner. Gabriel is twenty-eight.”

Then, he’s eight summers older than me. Father was ten summers older than Mother.

“I think he hates me.”

She straightens and brushes breadcrumbs from her surcoat. “I’m sure he doesn’t hate you. He just doesn’t trust easily.”

“That’s wise.” Inwardly, I groan. Gabriel isn’t making this easy for me. “It’s better to be cautious.”

She digs the toe of her left boot into the sand. “Just give him time.”

“I will.”

I take a risk by asking a pointed question. “Have your people always visited the same Seer?”

“No. Not the same.”

I let the conversation end, even though more questions burn my tongue. Mostly, why would a Seer aid the Bloodstone? Later, when I have gained more of Cassandra’s confidence, I will ask more questions.

Leah approaches from a cluster of soldiers. She wears the same leather and mail armor. A broad sword hangs from her hip. Surprise ripples through me at the observation. As far as I can tell, there are no other woman soldiers in the camp.

The mercenary army I was in had many women soldiers. I doubt the Bloodstone do.

She stops in front of us and offers me a quick smile. “I want to personally thank you for saving my life.”

“Of course.” I return her smile as I continue. “I’m glad to see that you have fully recovered.

Using her left hand, Leah shades her face from the sun. “I have thanks to you.”

I glance at the warriors still moving around the camp, still packing for their journey. “Are you apart of the Bloodstone army?”

Humor sparks in Leah’s eyes. “Much to the chagrin of my brother. He would prefer I stay home, marry, and raise a bunch of brats.”

“But you don’t want that,” Cassandra says knowingly.

Leah shudders. “Absolutely not.”

As the two women join the bustle of activity, I stand near a tree with my satchel clutched close. Nobody seems to notice or care.

Kassandra looks out of place next to the soldiers, yet she weaves in and out of them, talking and laughing. Each one greets her with a smile.

As the sun rises higher in the sky, they finish packing and saddle their horses. My heart bangs against my ribs as I gaze at each wagon full of belongings and people. They didn't leave any space for me.

I turn as a black gelding trots through the center of the camp, its lone rider the very man I wed myself to. Heat grips my chest as Gabriel's rejection burns my pride.

Frustration boils inside me, festering the longer I watch him. I don't show it, though. As Olah is my witness, I don't show it.

Luc and the three men who sat on the council ride in front of Gabriel. Their men cheer as they ride past. Without their war paint, they appear normal, but I know what they're capable of. My homeland bears the scars.

Leah rides behind them, collecting her fair share of stares. She cuts a daunting figure, wearing their combination of leather and mail. She may be small compared to them, but she looks just as fierce with her eyes pinned a head and her shoulders straight.

Kassandra guides her mare to where I stand. An older lady rides behind Kassandra. She clutches at the younger woman's waist and stares distantly, as if she has lost the ability to see. Like Kassandra, a red circle marks her surcoat.

"You don't know," Kassandra says.

My brow rises, and my pulse thrashes against my throat. Know what? That they're going to leave me here?

"What don't I know?"

A sheepish smile grips her mouth. "I forgot to tell you earlier. I'm sorry." She points her chin toward Gabriel. "Every married couple rides together on the first day."

I'd rather bathe in a sea full of scorpions.

"Oh, I see." I manage a smile. "How delightful."

“Estrid.” The old lady nods as she repeats the name.
“Estrid.”

“Grandmother, I told you. Estrid isn’t here.” Patience and warmth linger in Cassandra’s words.

“No.” Her grandmother dances her left hand through the air. “Estrid.”

“I know.” Cassandra reaches out, touching her grandmother’s arm. “You loved Estrid very much.”

Tears brighten the old woman’s eyes and trail down her ashen cheeks. “I want to go home.”

“We are going home, grandmother.”

The old lady mumbles beneath her breath and fumbles for the pendant hanging around her neck. Like Alf, it contains an empty socket—one that probably once cradled a bloodstone.

Kassandra returns her gaze to me. “Go to Gabriel.”

With a quick nod, I move through the line of soldiers until I reach the man I’d love nothing more than to shove from his perch. His horse kicks at the sand as Gabriel watches the Bloodstone warriors riding past.

“Gabriel,” I say loud enough to carry above the hum of soldiers. “Kassandra says I’m to ride with you.”

Sunlight shimmers in his silver-blue eyes as he lowers them to me. He doesn’t speak, nor does he offer me a welcoming glance. Warmth burns my ears as soldiers turn to watch us.

The sky above!

If Gabriel makes me walk, I’ll stab him in his sleep.

Beneath the heat of their stares, my pride stings. I imagine what they might think, how internally they’re probably laughing at Gabriel’s obvious disdain for me.

Gabriel blinks and offers a smile that seems more forced than genuine and dismounts his gelding. He nods toward the horse, as if he expects me to know what he wants. Every single part of me screams with the need to snub him.

I cannot. I set my course the moment I left Kyanite land, and this stubborn, tight-lipped, inhospitable man will not make me tremble.

“Will you help me?” The words scorch my lips, as does the sting of him believing I need his aid. I was five when Father first placed me on a horse. I need this man’s help like I need a toothache.

“Put your right foot in the stirrup,” Gabriel says in a flat voice.

I obey, placing my foot in the stirrup and reaching for the saddle. His hands find my backside, and he pushes me upward until I’m sitting on the horse. Warmth scours the area he touched as I try to look anywhere but at the men still watching us.

Gabriel speaks in that same flat voice. “Move forward.”

Again, I obey without question. He mounts the gelding behind me and reaches for the reins. I stiffen at the contact, the feel of his firm body pressing against me.

The sky above!

This journey will be the longest journey of my twenty summers. That is, *if* I don’t encourage the gelding to a gallop and throw Gabriel from its back.

Laughter bubbles up inside me at the imagery of him soaring through the air and landing in the dirt, but I don’t allow it freedom.

Instead, I hunch forward, creating distance between my back and Gabriel’s chest. He’s still too close. His thighs. His arms. His heat searing through my surcoat. Ten pairs of clothes wouldn’t be enough to chase away this kind of warmth.

He shifts to hold the reins with one hand, places the other against my waist, and jerks me against him. I try to wiggle away, to create separation. His grip tightens, keeping me close.

The warmth of his breath brushes against my cheek as he speaks near my ear. “Don’t move. We will ride like this.”

“You’re holding me too tight,” I protest, needing that comfort of distance between us.

“I’m holding you,” he begins, his mouth near my ear again, “the way a husband holds his wife the day after they have wed. You will stay here.”

Tingles shoot through my fingers with the urge to shove him away. Instead, I hold my body stiff, not allowing myself to sink against him. “Our marriage didn’t matter last night when you left me all alone.”

“It matters now.”

I allow my gaze to move, to catch on the soldiers riding past. They watch us. Every single one of them.

Gabriel cares what they think. He cared last night when he cut his palm to fool the council, and he cares now.

He gives his horse lead, and it follows the group of soldiers moving toward the mountains.

I choke back the resentment, the anger, the mortification that Gabriel spurned me and focus on my path.

Gabriel is one tiny bump in a longer road. I can tolerate his presence long enough to get close to his chieftain.

When I do, I’ll sink my vengeance deep into Roland’s chest.

CHAPTER
SIXTEEN

One day of riding with Gabriel consisted of two quick breaks and no conversation. As the sun lumbers behind the trees, we stop and make camp. Rather, the men set up the tents, and the women prepare food over open fires. When I try to help, Cassandra motions me away, stating she has everything under control.

I perch on a rock near the fire, helplessly watching as everyone around me works.

Like Cassandra, the women who labor with her have the same red circles on their surcoats. Proof, they're outsiders too.

Why? What makes them different?

Inviting smells taunt the emptiness gnawing at my stomach, and a lazy breeze plays with my hair as I settle my palms against my thighs. The soldiers continue raising their tents and partially unpacking the wagons. Everyone works together. Even Luc.

I study his features, noting his sad eyes, his firm jaw. Luc embodies strength and leadership as he issues orders to his men. They obey without question.

He doesn't resemble his uncle. If he did, I couldn't abide to look at him.

As the soldiers finish, the cooks serve them dinner in terracotta bowls.

Kassandra brings me some of the soup and smiles as she speaks. "I hope you enjoy."

“Thank you.” I blow on the food and take a bite. The rich flavors in the venison warm my tongue and remind me of home. “It’s delicious.”

Gabriel sits near me and eats in silence. Not that I’m surprised. The man seems incapable of offering small talk.

A group of six men join us, including Luc. Leah joins us too.

I stare at the other men, noting their size, their strength beneath their surcoats. The hissing serpents etched into their coat of arms bleed into my mind, sparking the memories I locked away. Those moments when I hid in cowardly silence. What my eyes couldn’t see, my ears could. What my hands couldn’t touch, my heart felt.

Look away, Sol.

I pin my focus on the ground and exhale the nightmare away. Down, down, down the pain goes. Forever hidden. Forever burning a flame inside me.

At least, for now.

A blond-haired man with friendly brown eyes and a long scar on the left side of his face, addresses me. “Is your name really Sol?”

“It is.”

He takes a quick bite of food and studies me in the firelight. “Is that a common name for a Kyanite?”

“No.” I offer a half shrug. “But my father liked it.”

“You can’t say anything,” a young white-haired warrior with striking, pale blue eyes and illegible tattoos etched beneath them says, “your mother named you Praxis.”

Surprise ripples through me as I take in the white-haired man for a second time. He’s from the Carnelian tribe, a clan with powerful water magic. They all have white hair like his, and they have tattoos beneath their eyes.

I have heard of the ties between the Bloodstone and Carnelian, but this is the first time I have seen them sitting

side-by-side.

Praxis steals the wheat bread clutched in the man's hand. "And yours didn't name you at all. The Seer did."

"Hero." Luc stands and jerks his hand to the left. "Let's check on the horses."

Hero? Truly? Was the Seer sloshed when she named him?

"Yes, Hero. Check the horses," Praxis says with a grin.

The Carnelian shrugs and follows Luc to the horses corralled nearby.

Kassandra's grandmother ambles to where we sit. She mumbles as she shuffles along, her words incoherent until she stops in front of us.

"Hector. Hector," she cries out as she raises her fists to the darkening sky.

Kassandra rushes from her place near a kettle and grabs her grandmother's hand. "I told you, Grandmother. Hector isn't here."

"No." The old lady bats Kassandra's hand away. "The Seer promised me the rising sun."

For a second time, Kassandra reaches for her grandmother, and the old lady bats her away.

Gabriel lifts his goblet and takes a long drink, as if the old woman's rants don't bother him. Praxis and the other men mirror him, sipping their wine and ignoring the woman.

"No!" She skirts around her granddaughter and swings her hand toward us. "Hector is the rising sun, and he will bring magic back."

Apprehension settles like hot embers against my back. The Bloodstone must never practice magic again.

Kassandra speaks gently as she takes her grandmother's hand. "Yes, the Seer promised you many things, and Olah shall fulfill them."

Firelight weaves around the soldiers as they resume talking. Maybe they're used to Cassandra's grandmother.

I settle against the log and cast a sideways glance at Gabriel. If I'm going to win his approval, I must connect with him. Getting him to speak to me will be the first step.

"Do you believe her?" I rest my hands against my thighs.

He takes another drink of wine and settles the goblet against his thigh. "Do I believe what?"

"In the rising sun. Hector? Magic?"

Hues of red and orange dance across Gabriel's face as he stares at the fire. "No."

No emotions crossed his features when he spoke, and his gaze remained pinned. Yet, I remember the words he uttered to Luc only a few days ago. Gabriel declared he was close to finding a stone. Surely, he meant a bloodstone. *Their* stone. There's only one reason I can think of for finding their stone. He wants to cast magic, or he knows someone who wishes to.

"Do you not wish for it?" Even as I speak, I think of my kyanite necklace. Always cold against my skin. Always incapable of heightening anything.

"I don't waste my thoughts on things I'm incapable of changing or doing," he says in a plain voice.

I continue, my tone light, friendly. "I am from a tribe that has great magic, but I'm unable to create a single spell."

His stare flickers over me for several beats. "You are a Kyanite, yet the gods marked your body with a serpent."

My breath stutters at the truth behind his statement. It's true. The inside of my right wrist bears the brand of a serpent, the same kind these Bloodstone warriors wear, etched into their weapon belts, their bracers, and their surcoats.

Unconsciously, my fingers trace the mark. It looks just like theirs. It has the same details, the same markings. The same hissing serpent with its faint detail of scales.

“I don’t know why the high gods gave me this,” I say in a raw voice.

“They need no reason. They cursed you by suppressing your magic and branding you with the mark of the people you hate.” No bitterness fringes his words, yet they bear the weight of a hundred bricks.

“I don’t hate anyone.” Somehow, I speak without allowing my flame to spark in my eyes.

Gabriel rises and sets his goblet on a log. “Come. You will share my tent tonight.”

Share his tent?

Like the first night, or does he mean to make me his wife in more than name?

Warmth nestles in my belly. It shouldn’t be there.

Maybe it has simply been too long. I miss intimacy, stolen moments, glances, kissing.

Is it wrong to want that with Gabriel?

The longer he rode behind me earlier, the more I thought about those things. After all, he wasn’t speaking. It gave me far too long to think, to feel, to wonder why my stomach didn’t tighten or my skin crawl at his nearness.

I even thought about how perfectly I sat in front of him. His chin brushed against my hair. His arms and thighs cradled me.

The men exchange knowing looks before pretending to eat instead of watching as I stand, dust off my surcoat, and follow Gabriel.

The moment we enter the same tent as the night before, he pours a goblet of wine. “I haven’t changed my mind about not bedding you.” He takes a drink and continues. “But it’s important people think we are intimate.”

“Why?” It’s a fair question and one I need to know so I may understand him better. “I am a Kyanite. Why should your people care if you bed me or not?”

“Precisely. You’re a Kyanite, and my people will never accept you if they don’t think I care about you.”

“Do you want them to accept me?”

“Yes, or they will condemn you.” He taps his thumb against the edge of his goblet. “Trust me, you never want the Bloodstone people to condemn you.”

Unease prickles against my skin. “What does condemnation look like?”

“Death,” he says, his word choice far too blunt.

“That is rather harsh.”

“Is it?” He runs a hand across his forehead as if attempting to ease the tension.

“I have no wish to be your enemy, or your people’s enemy.” At least, not yet. When I’m finished here, I’ll be *all* their enemies.

“Good. Then, we’ll let them believe you and I are intimate.”

“You seek the pretense.” I untie the belt cinched around my waist and lay it over the table. “Why not enjoy the benefit of married life?” I have never met a man like him. All the ones that came to Father’s brothel paid a lot of coin to be there. They all wanted the same thing, a woman in their bed. Why doesn’t Gabriel want that?

“Because I don’t trust you.”

Then, he might reject me, cast me out, the way Kyanite men do when they no longer want their wives. Once a Kyanite woman is rejected, she lives apart from her husband. She’s never allowed to wed again. Nor is she allowed to see her children. Her husband is free to remarry.

My throat clenches. If Gabriel rejects me, I’ll have no way to find Roland.

I unlace my surcoat and allow it to slip down my body, leaving only the chemise. “You would rather deny yourself a night of pleasure?”

He takes a long drink before answering. "I prefer not to wake to a dagger in my chest."

If I met him under different circumstances, I might have admired his ability to resist me. As it is, his unrelenting rejection chafes my pride. And it strikes fear into my chest. Real fear. The kind capable of ruining everything I have worked for.

Men bed women they desire. They reject women they don't. At least, that's what I have witnessed over the summers.

His words echo in my ears. "*I prefer not to wake to a dagger in my chest.*"

"Do you think me capable of murder?" I sit at the end of the bed and gaze up at him.

A slight smile touches his lips. "I would prefer to not find out."

I bring back the covers and lie on the left side of the mattress. "If I wanted to murder you, I could do so while you sleep next to me."

"True." He empties his goblet and sets it on the table. "But at least you wouldn't deceive me after I had you."

The mattress moves beneath me as I roll to my side. "You think I'm capable of deception and murder? I'm not sure if I should feel insulted or flattered."

The mattress dips as he sits on the opposite end of the bed. "Feel nothing."

"Is that what you do?" Those words slip out before I consider them.

His mouth tightens a fraction as he runs his hands through his black hair again.

My pledge to myself after he refused to consummate our marriage floods my ears. Flaming his anger will not win his devotion.

"Gabriel." I remember the way the women in the brothel spoke to their patrons and adopt that silky voice. "You don't

have to trust me, like me, or believe in me to obtain pleasure. Let me ease your frustration.” Boldly, I draw closer, allowing my breasts to brush his arm. “At least give me a chance to try to please you.”

It always worked for them. Surely, it will work on Gabriel.

“Why? You are a Kyanite, yet you want me to think you desire my touch?”

“I have needs. The same needs you have. It doesn’t matter who you are, or what you are.”

If I closed my eyes, I would no longer see his coat of arms, and I would just be a woman enjoying a stolen moment.

He holds his thumb against the pulse at the base of my throat. “You’re lying.”

“I am not.” Thank the sky above. The three words come out even and not in a squeak.

Those silver-blue eyes slide over me as he presses in deeper. “You don’t desire me.”

“What you feel is merely my lack of experience. I have never been with a man.”

It’s true. I have never gone farther than I did with Malachi. He was the first man I shared moments with and the last. After I left, I immersed myself in my training. There wasn’t time for anything else.

“Never?” Gabriel asks, as if he doesn’t believe me.

“Yes. Never.”

A smirk pulls at the upper corner of his mouth. “If you say so.”

“You don’t believe me?”

“You offered yourself to me when we first met.”

Warmth scours my skin at the memory. It takes everything in me to not run my fingers across my cheeks and wipe away everything that happened that day.

“I grew up in a brothel.”

His brow rises. “What?”

I look away, locking my gaze to the far end of the tent. “My father owned a brothel.”

“And did you...” The moment his words fade away, more heat stabs my skin, more embarrassment.

“You think I am a loose woman?”

“Does it matter what I think?” he asks in a flat, emotionless voice. Yet, I wonder if he’s hiding his true thoughts. After all, he was unable to finish his question.

“I simply lived there. I didn’t work there.”

Maybe telling him the truth about the brothel is worse. Now, he probably thinks even less of me.

No. Please. No.

He cannot think ill of me.

Boldly, I grab his hand and bring it to the base of my throat again. “What you feel is the pulse of a Kyanite woman who is lying in bed next to her Bloodstone husband, and she’s scared because she doesn’t know what kind of man you are. Will you give her pleasure, or will you simply take from her?” It’s not a lie. It’s the truth. I do wonder what kind of man he is.

Instead of pulling away, he pushes his fingers against my throat enough to feel the throbbing against his fingertips. “Is that what you fear? That I would think only of myself?”

“Yes,” I whisper, my words low, hoarse.

“If I bedded you, I would pleasure you until sunrise.” He frees me and shifts to his back. “But I will not.”

Tightness squeezes around my chest as I rise to sitting, pull my knees forward, and wrap my arms around them. “You don’t desire me?”

The sky above!

I’m like those Kyanite women rejected by their husband’s.

He’ll throw me from this tent.

“This has nothing to do with desire.”

I tighten my grip. “Is it because I’m Kyanite?”

The moment he rolls his eyes toward the ceiling, I frown at him.

“Will you tell me?” I ask, needing to understand his refusal to consummate our marriage.

He rotates to his side, facing away from me. “Go to sleep.”

I shift closer to him, leaving only a breath between us and bring my blanket to my shoulders. “Is it because I have black hair? You favor blondes. If I was blonde, you wouldn’t resist me.” There’s something too vulnerable in my words. Too revealing in my need to connect with him.

If I was Katya, he would have already bedded me.

“I prefer black hair,” he says, his voice so low it takes a moment to understand him. “Like yours.”

Unconsciously, my fingers lift to my hair. *Like yours.*

“Stop touching your hair and go to sleep,” he says in a knowing tone.

I blink and drop my hand. “I wasn’t.”

“I’d believe you more if you lied less.” Even though he speaks evenly, threads of bitterness edge his words.

Guilt constricts my throat as I shift away from him, lying flat to stare up at the ceiling. He’s right.

But I don’t know how to be honest *and* hide my secrets. Not that I needed to hide the truth about touching my hair. I just didn’t want him to know I cared what he thought.

Like yours.

I smile into the darkness and allow my eyes to drift shut.

Maybe there’s hope after all.

CHAPTER
SEVENTEEN

On the tenth morning after we began our journey, we ride into the Bloodstone city. Sunlight hobbles over the houses they chiseled into the mountainside. A sandstone path winds through the streets and cradles the stone shops in the center of Astarobane.

My heart thrums, and my skin warms as people follow us, cheering loudly and waving their hands. Quick breaths escape me as my fingers tighten around the reins. Bitterness grows like sharp thorns inside me, prodding at the ache Mother's death left. I foster it for a moment, then shove it back into its cage. Later, I can accept its lumbering embrace to the hilt of my revenge.

Gabriel rides his gelding next to me. After the first day, I was no longer forced to share the same horse as him. Golden rays sprawl across his strong features, and a gentle breeze plays with his midnight hair.

Hero rides on the other side of Gabriel. The Bloodstone people point at the white-haired man as he rides past.

“...look. A Carnelian.”

The crowd follows us as we pass below a massive arch that is carved into the mountains and overlooks a valley. Their largest building sits nestled behind it—a marble palace stamped into the cliffs.

As we dismount, a procession of people greets us from the front of the palace. They part as a tall man with frigid eyes and

hair as black as a raven walks toward us. He lifts his hand in greeting.

“Welcome to Astarobane.”

My first thought is that he is the man I seek. Roland. Upon a second glance, I realize he’s not the one. Roland has a scar near his mouth. This man doesn’t.

The crowd gathers near and raises their fists toward the sky. “Welcome, brave warriors,” they chant, their voices rising in harmony.

Heaviness assaults my limbs as I dismount along with the rest of our group. Gabriel turns and takes my hand. I flinch and swallow through the ache in my throat. His eyes narrow a fraction, and his fingers tighten, as if daring me to rip free.

I cannot.

As Olah is my witness, I cannot.

The wind picks up, whipping long strands of hair into my face as Gabriel guides me to the man who resembles Roland. The man’s attention flickers to me, and my chest squeezes as if he reached out and clutched me as tight as he could. As quickly as he met my gaze, he looks away.

I look beyond the man’s shoulders, expecting Roland, but nobody else approaches. Luc steps forward, and the man embraces him beneath the watchful stares of their people. The other three members of Luc’s council talk to the man next. Fondness glints in the man’s eyes as he greets each of the men like they’re heroes. Maybe they are to him.

The man I bound myself to steps forward last.

“Welcome to Astarobane, Gabriel,” the man says, his voice searing my skin. He sounds like Roland.

Gabriel tightens his fingers around mine. “Thank you.”

“It’s done,” the man says, his voice low enough I barely hear him.

Gabriel offers a curt nod.

“Who do you have with you?” the man asks.

“My wife, Sol, of the Kyanite tribe.”

The man’s brow rises as he sweeps his intense eyes between us. “Have you gone mad?”

“She bears the serpent mark, Alden,” Gabriel says, his words low and prodding at my composure.

“Impossible. A Kyanite?” Alden asks.

“It’s true.” Gabriel tightens his grip, brings us closer to Alden, and stands behind me, blocking me from the view of the onlookers.

“Show me,” Alden says.

Gabriel brings my hand forward, shoves up my sleeve, and rolls my wrist upward, displaying the mark.

I stiffen, my pretense shattering around me like broken pottery.

No, hide your fire!

Hide it.

Hide it now.

Down, down, down I shove it until I no longer want to yank my hand away.

Alden smiles at me, and what’s left of my heart withers as he speaks. “Welcome to Astarobane, Sol.”



Music stabs my ears, and goblets clink against the tables. I force bites between my stiff lips and will this night to be over. Meeting Alden and having my mark displayed like a butcher showing off its goods left my pretense at its shattering point. Eating with the Bloodstone people yanks me over hot coals.

Gabriel sits to my right. Luc to my left. The Carnelian sits on the other side of Gabriel.

Hero eats in silence and ignores the stares cast his way. The people here in Astarobane act as if they have never seen a Carnelian before.

As I take small bites of my food, I slide my attention over the room, searching for Cassandra. After three thorough passes, I don't find her. After my fourth pass, I realize not a single person in attendance has a red circle on their surcoat. Well, other than those serving the people gathered here. Every single one of those women and men wears a surcoat with that bold red circle.

One of the men sitting at the tables stands out from the rest. The way he picks up his goblet with his left hand and drinks, and the way the torchlight glistens off his blond hair.

Malachi!

I haven't seen him in four summers, not since I left our village. From the distance between us, I can't make out his eyes. I remember exactly what they look like, though. They're the same color gray as the sky before it storms.

As Alden eats, he steals glances at Gabriel and me. My stomach twists as I continue to force bites and resist the overwhelming desire to move away from Gabriel. He's too close. The way his thighs touch mine. The way our arms brush with each bite I take.

I raise my goblet to my lips and welcome the warmth from the wine. After a second, longer drink, I look up to find Alden's watchful gaze on me again.

"Gabriel." He leans forward, dragging the warrior's attention to him. "Show me your dedication to your wife."

A frown wrenches at Gabriel's mouth as he lowers his knife to his plate and straightens. "How should I do that?"

"Kiss her, so we can see how much you esteem her."

My heart falls out of my chest. Well, it should after such shocking words.

Kiss Gabriel in front of all these people. *Kiss him?*

Clouds swirl in Gabriel's eyes as he jerks them to me. I offer a weak smile. It's impossible to give anything more.

"Here?" Gabriel asks, his tone brusque.

Precisely.

Torchlight lolls across Alden's stark features as he nods. "Yes. Here." As he speaks, he swoops his eyes over the room. "If you want our people to accept your Kyanite bride, it must appear as if you adore her."

My fingers tingle with the urge to yank up my stoneware and drink all my wine. In truth, I require a river full of spirits to numb the nerves swimming in my belly.

Kisses are intimate. They aren't entertainment for others to watch, to ridicule, to judge.

"Surely, that's unnecessary," Luc says with a frown.

Alden shakes his head, and Luc falls silent. "It is necessary." His attention shifts to the somber Gabriel. "Gabriel, you will do as I say."

For several long, pointed beats, the men lock gazes. One looks determined and commanding. The other looks like he'd rather bathe with jellyfish than concede to the older man's demand.

A muscle twitches in Gabriel's jaw as he catches my cheek with his hand, bringing my face toward his. I inhale the moment he leans down, touching his mouth to mine. Nerves thrum in my throat at the pressure of his lips, at the tingles, at the waves surging through my veins.

Dismay prods at my mind, reminding me of who he is. *What* he is.

I drown all of it and respond to his kiss—seeking only the heat, the curiosity sprawling through me. After all, I pledged myself to him, and I vowed to win his devotion. Responding to him may be the first step.

Gabriel pulls back, and I catch my hands against the table. My lips burn where they touched his. My skin flames when I think of everyone watching. Especially Alden.

I swallow hard, forcing away the memory, and instead, only allow the hatred toward Roland to burgeon inside me. There's no room for anything else.

There never was.

"Fantastic," Alden says, shattering the rest of the moment. "You will be a father in no time, Gabriel, if you bed her nightly."

Ash scorches my tongue as I pin my stare to the far wall. A baby wasn't part of the bargain.

Not now. Not ever.

A smirk tugs at the corner of Luc's mouth as he glances between me and the stiff man next to me. Gabriel yanks up his wine and takes a quick drink.

As the men fall into conversation, I reach for my goblet, too, draining the contents. It's not enough to forget kissing Gabriel.

I'm not sure anything would be.

CHAPTER
EIGHTEEN

Later that night, the door bursts open, blasting cool air into the room and ripping me from sleep. I blink as Gabriel rushes out of our room with his Broad sword clutched in his right hand.

Dread rises thick in my throat as I gain my feet and reach for my dressing gown. With trembling fingers, I tie the belt around my waist and step to the window. No sounds pierce the night. No people rush about. At least, none I see in the moonless sky. I blink at the shuddering shadows and frown. If I were in Kyanite land, I would have joined Gabriel. I wouldn't have stayed behind.

Here, Gabriel needs to believe I'm weak. Obedient. Not a threat.

Unconsciously, my fingers brush against my serpent mark as I rotate, taking in my new bed chamber. It boasts a bed barely large enough for Gabriel and me, a washing stand, shelves with dried herbs, and an armoire. There's no color, no embellishments, nothing to warm the space.

The bedchamber is as plain and strait-laced as the man I married. Not that Gabriel is plain. However, he's methodical, rarely friendly, and I have never heard him laugh.

Again, I press my hand against the mark and frown as I recall the kiss I shared with him. It's not what I expected. In truth, I wasn't sure what it would be like.

It *was* memorable, and it awakened the curiosity inside me. The curiosity I suppressed after I left Malachi.

I sigh and sit on the left side of the bed. Father would say I am weak for even thinking about Malachi. No. He would say I am weak for marrying Gabriel.

The door groans open, and Gabriel steps back into the bedchamber. He lays his sword on the table and rotates to meet my watchful gaze. "I didn't mean to wake you."

"Is everything all right?"

He nods as he removes his surcoat.

"Something happened, though," I say, still trying to pull the truth out of him.

The mattress dips as Gabriel sits on the bed. "Men tried infiltrating the city, but they didn't reach their destination."

"You stopped them?"

My focus shifts to Gabriel's broad sword. How many people has he killed with that very weapon? How many of them were Kyanites? I swallow and look away.

"No. Guards had already captured them."

I lie flat and stare up at the torchlight shuddering across the ceiling. "Who were they?"

"Kyanites," Gabriel says in a bland voice.

My stomach tightens as I force myself to maintain my position. "I don't understand."

"Don't play coy." Bitterness hovers over Gabriel's tone. "You know your people have been attacking Bloodstone people for summers."

"As you have." Those three words escape me.

"You think I invaded Kyanite land?"

"I..." I dig my nails into my left palm. "I don't know if you have, but your people have."

Gabriel mirrors me, lying flat and staring up at the ceiling. "You're bitter."

"I am not."

“Lies.” Only one word, yet it impales, rips me open, displays everything I try to contain.

Frustration singses my veins. “If I were bitter, I would have never agreed to this marriage.”

“You agreed because you want something.” The mattress moves beneath him as he shifts enough to meet my gaze. “I just haven’t discovered what.”

“I told you. Well, I told Luc. I want to belong to something greater, and I need to be useful.”

“Greater than a Kyanite?” he asks.

“I love my people.”

“Is that why you left them and married a Bloodstone warrior?”

“Are you trying to rile me?”

“No,” he says, his words driving a stake into my chest. “I’m digging at your façade until I uproot all your lies.”

Boldly, and foolishly, I draw closer and speak in a firm voice. “Then enjoy playing with dirt, Gabriel.”

A half smile pulls at his mouth as he sweeps his blue eyes over me. “That’s the second spark I have seen in you.”

For several breaths, I analyze his tone, feeling his words as much as hearing them. Was that admiration I heard?

This is my window, my one opportunity to win his favor. “Is that what you like?” I ask in a throaty voice that sounds nothing like the women in Father’s brothel. Instead, I sound croaky. “A spark?”

He blinks and shifts to lying flat again. “Don’t.”

“Or?” The bedcovers brush against my arm as I draw even closer. “You’ll kiss me the way you did earlier?”

The smile disappears from his eyes, his mouth. “Earlier, I was performing, as you do every time you try to tempt me.”

“I am not performing. I simply have no wish to deny myself.”

Four summers is far too long to wait. Four summers of longing, wanting, thinking of the next touch. The next kiss.

The man in mind never had a face. He was just a hope that somehow, someday I would find time to renew my passion.

Of course, I only allowed such thoughts when I was alone in my bedchamber and the world had darkened around me.

Now, the man who could awaken those desires doesn't want me.

“Good night.”

How final those two words are. How unfriendly. Though, Gabriel has never tried to be friendly.

He'll not deter me. At every push, I'll shove back. At every unkind word he speaks, I'll answer in kindness.

Though, I'll have to stop trying to sound like those women. They knew the art of seducing men.

I obviously do not.

CHAPTER
NINETEEN

Dread weighs heavy against my limbs as Gabriel encourages me from the cottage the following morning. People walk toward the center of the city, where a massive crowd gathers before a big open square.

Five men dressed in blue surcoats with a gold tree emblem stand in the center with their hands tied behind their backs. I don't know the Kyanites, yet it doesn't stop my skin from burning or my throat from clenching.

Everything in me wants to ask. Who sent you? What is your purpose? The words stay as frozen as the man standing beside me. I steal a sideways glance, noticing Gabriel's firm jaw, his tight lips, his eyes locked on the men who tried infiltrating Astarobane.

I spot Malachi among the Bloodstone people. A young blonde woman stands beside him, her hand intertwined in his. I look away and try to ignore the tightening in my belly.

He was *my* first kiss.

Not hers!

I mentally shake my head. She can have Malachi. He's not part of my path anymore.

Ten men dressed in black Bloodstone surcoats and holding bows face the condemned men. My throat clenches even more as Alden walks through the crowd and stops in front of the square. He raises his hand, and an eerie silence falls over the people.

“Last night these five Kyanites stole into our city and tried to infiltrate our homes,” he says, his words like a dagger to my heart. “We will never tolerate such violence against our people. May Olah forgive them. For we do not.”

At his command, the archers raise their bows and release their arrows. Each one strikes at the hearts of the men condemned to die. As they slump to the ground, my soul slumps with them.

Sunlight staggers over the square as the crowd turns away—back to their cottages, their duties, their lives.

I follow Gabriel. My lips too numb to speak. My limbs too shaky to run. My throat too painful to swallow. Even though I knew coming here wouldn't be easy, I was never prepared to watch Kyanites be executed.

Every part of me braces for Gabriel's scorn, his mockery. He offers nothing as we draw to a stop outside our cottage. I brush my fingers against my surcoat, to where my kyanite necklace hides behind the fabric. It provides no warmth. No solace. It's as useless as the dust swirling in the distance.

Several moments pass before he speaks. “I'll see you this evening.”

I swallow through the ash in my throat and lift my gaze to his. “Where are you going?”

“To train.” He points his chin toward the front door. “Meanwhile, you can settle.”

“Settle?” The urge to scoff overwhelms me. I stifle it and instead speak in a plain voice. “I have nothing to settle.”

“You can arrange things how you wish.”

Maybe he's trying to be compassionate. Maybe I would even care if I weren't trapped inside that square, watching those arrows, seeing those dying eyes.

“What did they...” I clutch my fingers together and draw deep within me, pushing away those horrifying memories. “What did they want?”

“Who?”

“Gabriel, please. I just watched Kyanites being executed. Don’t pretend like you don’t know what I’m asking.”

Several breaths pass during which he doesn’t speak. I even think he might not. Then, he finally finds his voice. “They were trying to infiltrate the palace. So, I surmise they want what most Kyanites want. To remove our chieftain’s head.”

My lungs burn, and my skin tingles as I widen my eyes in feigned surprise. “Why? I don’t understand?”

“Don’t you?” he asks, showing the same bitterness as the night before. “In the last thirty summers, we have lost four tribal leaders. And in the past two summers, we have stopped many assassination attempts.”

I clench my fingers tighter and adopt an even tone. “I am a simple healer, Gabriel. I don’t know everything that happens between our people.”

Sunlight weaves around his face and lightens his eyes as he studies me. “I don’t believe you.” A flock of geese flies overhead as Gabriel turns away. “I’ll see you tonight.”

No words pass my lips as he walks back down the sandstone streets. Though, they burn my tongue. Everything I cannot say. Their weight follows me as I step into the cottage.

I consider Gabriel’s words, his admittance that four tribal leaders have died in the last thirty summers. Perhaps if his people weren’t so evil.

Roland and his men plundered many Kyanite villages ten summers ago. Blood ran like a river through the streets. Fires destroyed every building. The people who survived the terror grew thick callouses on their heart and hatred in their bellies.

I step into the stone cottage and exhale. It looks the same as it did the night before. Sparse. Inhospitable. It doesn’t even look lived in. There are no personal items. Nothing that hints that Gabriel lived here before.

Maybe he didn’t.

As I move into the bedchamber, I think about those five Kyanite men. They met with their end in a horrifying manner.

Maybe their deaths should deter me. Maybe it would if I feared journeying to the afterlife.

I prepare tea and think of my passage to success. It's clear that being a Kyanite among the Bloodstone won't benefit me. There's only one way I succeed—by diving so deep into their world I look like them. Act like them. Talk like them.

I must shed my Kyanite ways and become Bloodstone.

CHAPTER
TWENTY

Men like women who try to please them. The best way to please Gabriel, besides sharing his bed, of course, is becoming like the women in *his* tribe. It took me only a day in Astarobane to notice the women often wear flowers in their braids. I pick some and pin them in my hair. They also wear gray and black surcoats. I ask Cassandra for a new surcoat, and she obliges me.

My attempts seem pointless. Gabriel doesn't notice.

So, I focus on what I can control. A clean house. Fresh-baked treats for when he's at home. Tending the barn and all the animals every morning and night.

On my fourth morning after arriving in Astarobane, I decide to increase my efforts. I remove the items from my satchel and study the herbs. Each one differs from Bloodstone herbs. They're more potent, magical, and they were all grown on Kyanite land.

These herbs can help the Bloodstone people. I have seen the people with painful looking boils. I have the seeds needed to cure their infliction, to give them relief. First, I'll need to grow the long, narrow leaves, and then create a poultice with them.

I tuck away a tiny bundle of herbs beneath my nightdresses in the armoire. I'll need those particular herbs if Gabriel ever beds me. They will keep me from conceiving.

A garden space sits idle next to the home I share with Gabriel. I'll use it to grow Kyanite herbs. After all, it can't

hurt to try.

Gabriel probably won't care. He rises with the sun, and I rarely see him before bed.

Outside, a brisk breeze beats against my back as I grab a spade and turn the dirt. Over and over, I dig into the soil, turning and blending.

Kassandra grabs a spade and joins me when the sun is high in the sky. She hums the entire time.

Everything seems calm, the way the birds chirp in the nearby olive trees, and the way swans float over the narrow stream next to Gabriel's cottage.

"What are we planting?" Kassandra asks as she stops to take a drink from the terracotta jar she brought with her.

"Herbs." I point my chin toward the pouch I left on a rock. "From Kyanite land."

She swipes her hand across her sweaty brow. "Magical ones?"

"Yes."

A frown pulls at her lips as she eyes my herbs for a second time. "They will not take here."

"Why not?"

"Magic. Gifts." She shrugs. "Don't work here. They haven't since the high gods took our magic."

I reach for a pouch and open it to find tiny black seeds inside. "What if they did?"

"I don't mind trying. I only thought you should know."

For several breaths, I stare down at the seeds in my hand, then meet her gaze. "These prevent infection."

Sunlight flares across Kassandra's face as she steps closer and smiles. "Let us plant them and see what Olah thinks."

At her encouraging words, I bend down, making rows. She drops the enkantia seeds into the dirt. We bury them together, then move on to the next ones.

Dusk sets over Astarobane before we finish. The hems of our surcoats skim the ground as we walk to the stream and wash our hands.

“Shall you join me for dinner?” Cassandra asks after she finishes.

I lift my eyes to the sandstone street beyond my cottage. Nothing stirs. Not even the man I live with.

Kassandra smiles as if understanding what I didn't say. “I'll make sure Gabriel knows where to find his dinner.”

“He doesn't...” I frown and brush dirt from my surcoat. “He doesn't eat here with me.”

“Do you not cook?”

“I do. But after the second night, I stopped making enough dinner for him.”

Laughter skips in Cassandra's eyes as she speaks. “I would have done the same.” She tugs on my hand. “Come. I'll share the bread I made yesterday and Grandmother's leek soup.”

The wind accompanies us as I follow Cassandra. It laps at our heels as we fall into a silent comradery. Only after we pass by numerous cottages, do I break the silence.

“Where's Gabriel's family? I thought they may visit us, but nobody has.”

Kassandra skirts around a wagon before answering. “He has nobody.”

“Nobody?” I ask. “No father? Mother?”

She shakes her head. “They're all dead.”

Empathy tugs at my chest as I think of him all alone. He must feel so lonely when he returns from battle.

As we walk through the center of the town, people turn their faces away as we pass. After the fourth group of people turn away, I frown.

“Why do they not meet our eyes?”

“Because I’m an outsider,” she says, her words forthright and not tainted by bitterness.

Warmth scours my skin, anger for the way they reject her simply because they deem her beneath them.

“Has it always been this way?”

She nods. “From the moment I was born.”

“Why?”

She waits until we pass the last of the people and are on the outskirts of the city to speak. “Because of my family.”

I raise my brow in question.

She smiles and speaks with candor. “Two centuries ago, there was a civil war among the Bloodstone people. Roland’s ancestors defeated the chieftain, bringing an end to his reign. The old leader and his family were shunned. I’m from his lineage.”

“Two centuries ago? And your lineage is still shunned?”

She nods. “The Bloodstone people cling to their prejudices.”

“It’s nonsensical to shun people simply for their blood.”

“I agree.” Her cloak slips over one shoulder as she shrugs. “But it changes nothing. I am what I am.”

With the warriors in the camp, it was different. They smiled and talked to her.

We pass a graveyard with ancient tombstones before Cassandra turns down a path leading to a long line of tiny cottages. Each one looks more decrepit than the last. Their front doors hang precariously, and their walls lean.

She keeps walking until she reaches the last cottage. As she pulls the door open, she calls out for her grandmother. The old woman turns from her place near a black kettle hanging over a fire, a bright smile lightening her wrinkled features.

“Come. Taste.” She dips her spoon in and lifts it to her granddaughter.

Kassandra crosses the small space and complies. She blows on the soup and takes a bite. “Oh, Grandmother. It’s perfect.”

A toothy smile widens the woman’s face as she returns to her cooking.

The door to one of the adjoining rooms opens, and a woman steps into the main area. Although older, she looks like Kassandra. She has the same brown hair, the same blue eyes, and like Kassandra, a red circle mars her surcoat.

Torchlight weaves over Kassandra’s face as she turns to me. “This is my mother, Averill.”

“Hello.” I dip my head in respect.

“You’re the woman who married Gabriel,” she says without scorn.

“I am.”

Sunlight streams through the window and weaves over her features as she nods toward her daughter. “Kassandra has told me a lot about you. You’re welcome here.”

“Thank you.” I shove loose strands of hair behind my ears.

The front door opens, and a young woman steps into the cottage. Like everyone else, she wears a surcoat with a big red circle. Dark brown curls frame her face and hang to mid back. Her long lashes complement her dark blue eyes.

“This is my older sister, Everly,” Kassandra says.

I smile at her, but all I receive in return is a quick frown. My stomach clenches, and I resist the urge to scowl.

“I believe you are the same age,” Kassandra says.

“You’re twenty?” I ask Everly, hoping she’ll warm up to me.

She offers a curt nod.

We sit at an unfinished table centered in the middle of the room, where Kassandra’s grandmother serves her leek soup.

“I forgot.” The hem of Cassandra’s surcoat snaps against her legs as she lurches to her feet and walks to a nearby shelf. She grabs a loaf of bread wrapped in a cloth. She unwinds it and cuts us thick pieces.

“Thank you,” Everly says as her sister hands her a chunk.

The moment I take a bite, I realize I could never measure up to Cassandra’s baking abilities. I have a second, larger bite and sigh.

“That good?” Averill asks.

“It’s delicious.” I savor another piece and imagine a world where I have something this delicious every day.

“Kassandra has always been a fantastic cook.” A knowing smile pulls at Averill’s mouth. “Why do you think Luc takes her to cook for him and his men?”

Her grandmother waves a wooden spoon. “He take her to wife.”

“No.” Red sears Cassandra’s cheeks. “Luc doesn’t care for me in that way.”

“Luc take Kassandra to wife.” Her grandmother slams her spoon against the table. “He take her.”

“Darla,” Averill begins, her tone gentle. “Luc hasn’t married Kassandra.”

A fierce frown wrenches at Everly’s mouth as she finishes her soup and carries her terracotta bowl to the small washing stand.

Darla strikes her spoon against the table for a second time. “He will.”

Kassandra yanks off sections of bread and eats in quick bites. Her fingers shake as she continues ripping and eating.

“We planted seeds,” I say, recognizing Cassandra’s need for a change of subject.

“Oh.” Averill glances between us. “What type of seeds?”

Knowing she probably wouldn't understand, I lie. "The usual kind."

Kassandra doesn't correct me as she places tiny pieces of wood in a nearby brazier. She lights it, and the sweet tangy smell of cedar fills the air. I inhale as nostalgia sweeps over me, the feeling of belonging, comfort, peace.

I blink, willing it away. It recedes like the tide as I take a sip of wine. If I'm going to succeed, I cannot allow thoughts of home.

Darla lowers her bony fingers to the table and exhales. "I go again."

"No," Kassandra says, her tone gentle, yet firm. "You cannot leave, Grandmother."

"Kassandra's right," Averill says. "She may not be able to find you a second time."

The old woman tsks beneath her breath and rocks back and forth. "I go. I find Estrid. Olah says."

Estrid? It's the second time, the old woman has mentioned that name.

Sadness pulls at Averill's features as she leans forward, capturing the old woman's wrinkled hands in hers. "I know you miss her. We all do, but you cannot run away again."

When darkness fringes the lone window in the cottage, I return to the home I share with Gabriel. Firelight draws me to the man staring into the flames.

"I..." I swallow and continue. "I was with Kassandra."

He doesn't glance up from his fire gazing. "You don't have to tell me where you go."

I sit on a chair near him and study his stern jaw, his tight lips, as if he hasn't smiled in days. He probably hasn't. "What do you do while you're away?"

"Train." He rises to refill his goblet. Instead of wine, he pours mint tea into the terracotta pottery.

"Every day? That must get tiresome."

Shadows dance across his face as he returns to his seat. “I enjoy it.”

My eyes trail over him, noting the breadth of his shoulders, the thickness of his arms, the expanse of his chest. It’s impossible to build strength like his by sitting idle all day.

“What else do you do?”

“I forge weapons.”

My brow rises. “You make weapons?”

He nods.

My conversation with Cassandra passes through my thoughts, the one where I asked about his family. “Do you have siblings?”

“No.”

The earlier empathy returns, that tugging of understanding and of mutual loneliness. “I’m sorry.”

“Why?” He takes a long drink of tea. “Plenty of people have no siblings.”

“Because it is lonely.” No words have felt truer. My world has been lonely since...

I pry the thought from my mind, locking it in that place where sadness and grief lives.

Think of something else to talk about.

Think, Sol. Think.

“Is the Bloodstone army large?”

“Large enough,” he says in the same curt manner.

I draw a circle pattern against my leg. “Cassandra says there are other cities. Will we visit them?”

“Eventually.”

I glance around the sparse room, the one containing no personal items of his. “Where did you live before?”

“Before here?” He sets his goblet on the table next to him.

“Yes.”

“Tarra.”

My brow wrinkles as I consider the name. “Is it farther in the mountains?”

“It is. Why do you ask?”

“I want to understand your people better.” It’s not a false statement. If I understand them, I can infiltrate them better, and when the end nears, I’ll know how to escape.

Gabriel scoffs and raises his goblet to his lips.

“Is that so impossible to believe?”

“Kyanite women are never interested in the inner workings of Bloodstone people unless they have an ulterior motive.”

“What would my motive be, Gabriel?” Frustration teems my words as I continue. “I’m here in Astarobane, and I’m married to you.”

Firelight weaves over his face as he shifts to stare at me. “You could be a spy.”

I laugh and shake my head. “Do I look like a spy?”

“No, but that means nothing. Those who don’t look the part make the best spies.”

Is that why Malachi is here, to spy for the Kyanites?

The thought reverberates through my being, turning and twisting until I will it away.

I don’t possess enough fortitude to worry about him, to dread the moment I see him face the executioner the way those Kyanites did.

“I’m wounded, Gabriel. All I want to be is your friend, and you keep vilifying me.”

“You’ll stay wounded, Kyanite.” He stands, drains his tea, and sets the goblet on the table. “I will never trust you. Therefore, I’ll always be suspicious.”

Frustration grips me. Why does he insist on not calling me by my name?

“My name is Sol.”

“I know.” He disappears into the bedroom we share.

Never trust.

Always suspicious.

My heart pounds as his words pierce my ears over and over. By all accounts, he’s winning this battle to not accept me. A normal man would have already bedded me.

I clutch my fingers together and frown. Gabriel is a dagger to the heart of my destiny.

Still, tomorrow when I wake up, I’ll try to be the kind of wife who pleases him. Otherwise...

Olah help me. I don’t want to think about otherwise.



Fire surges through the floorboards and licks at my feet. I jerk them away, but the flames keep building and building until they attack my legs. My chest. My face.

I scream and thrash.

The fire doesn’t relent. It burns brighter. Hotter.

“Mother!” I plead for her to hear me and rescue me.

But she doesn’t answer.

Nobody answers.

There’s only charred remains here.

“Wake up.”

A sob wrenches from my throat as that voice comes again, calling out to me.

“Wake up.”

I reach for that source, that sturdiness, that peace away from all those flames. Warmth slides beneath my hands. *His*

warmth.

Gabriel brings his hands to my back, and instead of pushing me away, he brings me tighter. I bury my face against his chest and meld into that comfort.

“It was just a dream,” he says, his tone soothing my tattered nerves.

If only that were true.

It’s the same nightmare that has plagued me since Mother died.

The remnants of the nightmare fade into the far crevices of my mind as I focus on the things around me. The bed. The man who could have pushed me away. The heat of his body. The sound of his heart drumming against my ear.

How evenly it beats. How solid he is.

Outside these walls, there are shadows, plagues, death. In here, there doesn’t have to be any of those things. In here, there can be harmony.

He cradles the back of my neck. “You’re safe.”

Those are the same words he spoke the night the man with the bone necklace attacked me. That night it broke through my fear.

Tonight, it allows me to breathe evenly, and my eyes to drift shut.

I’m safe.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-ONE

Every day, I tend my herb garden, pulling weeds, watering, and checking them for their growth, but that's not the only reason I spend time outside. I observe, watch, and take mental notes of the occupants of Astarobane.

The blacksmith works at his craft until the baker's daughter walks by with bread. Then, he always stops and speaks to her, and she answers cheerfully as she meanders by.

I predict an arrangement between them by winter. If they're not already lovers.

The cobbler arrives at work early and doesn't leave until nightfall sets on the town. He moves with a limp, and battle scars slash across his face. He was probably once a great warrior.

He's not someone I want catching me on my quest.

People stroll the streets, stopping by the different shops. Some visit once a week. Others daily. Most seem innocent. Some of them look like they're placed there on purpose. As if they guard the city from unnamed threats.

They're the ones I watch carefully, observing their habits, timing their daily trips. I must never take them for granted.

I must gain full entrance into their world. A fish doesn't notice other fish that look the same as them, but if I swim like a shark and look like a shark, they'll see through me.

So, each day, I don my gray surcoat, tend my garden, and smile at people who walk past. Few even acknowledge me, but

I hold to my course.

As I walk through the city, I pay the closest attention to those who act important. They dress in silk surcoats. They walk with their chins lifted. They bark orders at people. And they always head toward the palace when they're finished.

On one particularly humid day, when sweat clings to the most annoying of places, I move closer to one of the important looking ladies. She talks to the butcher about Alden's wife preferring leaner cuts.

Alden has a wife?

Now that's not something I expected. She probably loathes him. I would if I was wed to him.

"Here, Deborah," the butcher says as he hands the woman a linen wrapped package.

Deborah?

The name fits the auburn-haired woman with her ivory skin and green eyes.

As Deborah walks away, a thought hits me. None of the people I have spied on these past few days have given me the information I seek. At least, nothing pertaining to Roland.

Where is he?

As I journey back to the cottage I share with Gabriel, it strikes me that he may be in one of those other Bloodstone cities.

Frustration gnaws at my chest as I step into my cottage and push the door shut with my foot.

I am in the wrong city.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-TWO

Twenty-one days after I arrived in Astarobane, the Bloodstone people gather in the same square they executed the five Kyanites in. A lively atmosphere fills the space where death fell only a short while ago.

Instead of their usual black or gray, the women don colorful surcoats. Thankfully, Kassandra warned me in advance. The day before the Mona Festival, she handed me a scarlet surcoat, and she admitted she had made it for me.

As I walk through the celebration, I admire the way the material feels against my skin. The way it hugs my curves, then flares around my legs.

Gabriel keeps me next to him as he greets people and shakes hands. At every smile and forced word, emptiness follows me. I perform for him, my destiny, and for myself, yet it stings that he only needs me near when he wants to prove something.

Every morning I wake, believing it will happen. Gabriel will see all my efforts and his attitude toward me will change. It never happens. He wants me as much as he wants a wart on his finger.

Leaves skirt across the sandstone streets as Luc joins us with a young girl, who looks no older than six summers. He introduces her to me as his daughter, Adelaide. The young girl with her curly blonde hair and green eyes flashes a bright smile at me. I can't help but respond. At home, I always had a group of children visit me at the apothecary. They were mostly

orphans, and they would stop by to talk about their day. I always made sure they left with full bellies.

Gabriel stops at one of the merchant's booths and buys stick candy for Adelaide. Between eating the sweet, she grins at him and rattles on about the pony her father promised to buy her.

Over the throng of people, I glimpse Cassandra walking toward us, and some of the tension eases. Her friendship has meant everything. The way she helps with my garden, brings me bread, and gives me such fine clothing. Without question or judgment, she welcomed me into her life and home. The rest of the Bloodstone people haven't been as friendly. Few smile at me. Even fewer speak to me.

Her sister, Everly, trails her but cuts away to talk to Cenric. From the distance between us, I cannot hear their conversation, nor can I see his eyes—those cold, lifeless eyes that had no hesitation in killing those four Malachites.

For a second time, my attention lowers to the surcoat Cassandra sewed for me. I have never owned anything this elegant or soft. Lightly, I run my fingers over a sleeve, admiring her ability to sew neat stitches.

She admitted that sewing is how she earns a living, and that she crafted my surcoat from leftover materials from one of her wealthier clients.

Luc turns to Gabriel. "Keep an eye on Adelaide. I need to talk to Cassandra."

Gabriel's brow rises as he takes the young girl's hand. "About?"

A tic forms in Luc's jaw as he shakes his head. Maybe because he doesn't wish to speak, or he doesn't want to, knowing I'm standing here.

Emotions flicker across Gabriel's tight features, emotions I find impossible to read. "Luc..."

The edges near Luc's mouth soften as he slaps his hand against Gabriel's back. "Cheer up." He leans closer and drops his voice a fraction. "What I do, I do for all Bloodstone."

“I wouldn’t a—”

“—you don’t need to.” Again, Luc smacks Gabriel’s back, offers a quick smile, and disappears into the crowd of people.

I look between Gabriel and the little girl now clinging to his hand. “What does Luc want from Cassandra?”

Kassandra has become dear to me in ways I never imagined a Bloodstone would.

“He didn’t say,” Gabriel says as he continues walking through the rows and rows of booths.

“But you understood him.”

“It’s no concern of yours.” Gabriel turns us down a path filled with food merchants.

“Kassandra is my friend,” I say tersely.

Clouds darken Gabriel’s eyes as he speaks. “Then you’ll rest easy, knowing Luc will do nothing more than what your *friend* already wants.”

“You know?”

A taut smile pulls at Gabriel’s mouth as he nods. “I may be just a warrior to you, but I’m not blind.”

“I have never thought you were *just* a warrior.”

Adelaide tugs at Gabriel’s hand. “I want to see the animals.”

“And you shall,” he says, his tone gentle as he speaks to the young girl.

Our conversation is forgotten as Gabriel takes Adelaide to see the animals. She pets goats, sheep, and calves before riding a pony.

With Adelaide around, I observe a gentleness in Gabriel that he doesn’t show with others. The way he takes her from animal to animal and talks with her. He kneels to her level and holds eye contact. In return, she clings to his hand and chatters endlessly.

As I wait for Gabriel and Adelaide near a large olive tree, I observe Praxis speaking to Alden. As the younger man speaks, he throws his hands wide and talks faster. I make out one word—one *very* pointed word. *Father.*

My breath hitches as I jerk my gaze around. Nobody else seems to notice their conversation.

Alden is Praxis' father? Why didn't anyone say so before?

I try to remember what I know of the young warrior, but other than that one time, I haven't been around him.

When the sun yields to the moon, Luc fetches his daughter. Happiness skips in Cassandra's eyes as she keeps pace next to him. I try to read those cues as they walk away with Adelaide.

"Did Luc..." I swallow and start over. "Will they wed?"

Gabriel leads me to a wall away from the bustle of people and dancing couples. "Maybe."

"Do you not know?"

He shrugs.

It takes everything in me to not stomp Gabriel's foot. "Why are you being so vague?"

Emotions impossible to decipher cross Gabriel's features. "Luc's wife has only been dead a summer, and he adored her."

That explains Luc's haunted eyes. They haven't changed even after speaking to Cassandra.

My mind whirls as I consider how much Cassandra cares for Luc. She shouldn't be in a relationship with a man who adores another. "If Luc doesn't care for Cassandra. Then why wed?"

"The same reason everyone weds," Gabriel says in a flat voice. "To procreate."

"That's a lonely way to think of marriage."

"Did you expect sonnets?"

I really am going to stomp his foot.

Instead of giving in to the urge, I pluck up a goblet of wine and take a long drink. Though, it doesn't stop me from speaking freely. Probably too freely. "Procreation is obviously *not* the reason you wed me."

Torchlight frames him as he shifts enough to meet my gaze. I raise my goblet in a silent salute and take an even greedier drink.

When he continues to stare in sullen silence, I speak. "Is something amiss, Gabriel?"

"Your tongue is too free."

A scoff escapes me. "Shall you bridle it, then? Olah knows you have no other use for my tongue."

A passing couple gawks at my words as Gabriel's brow rises nearly to his hairline. He deserved my curt response.

"Are you trying to vex me?"

Raising my goblet to my lips, I take another long draw and step closer to him. "I'm trying to make you feel something."

It's been too long since we really spoke, and even longer since I vowed to win his favor.

"Anger?" Those silver-blue eyes trace over me, and my skin warms as his attention shifts to the surcoat Cassandra made me.

It's the first time he's *really* looked at me since the day in the sweat lodge. It awakens the part of me stifled by his rejection and wounded by his lack of interest.

"Would that flame your desire?" I run my fingertips down the front of his surcoat. "Would you touch me?" When he doesn't answer or try to push me away, I flick my nails upward, scraping them along his throat. "I wonder what that would feel like to have you stroke me."

Lured by the wine, perhaps, I draw even closer. "Gabriel." I lift to my tiptoes and sink my fingers into his thick hair, drawing his mouth downward. "I want to taste you."

The warmth of his breath teases my skin as his gaze lowers to my lips. Need flares through me as I rise even higher, seeking the taste, the hint of wine, of everything he keeps from me. The moment our mouths connect, a stirring awakens deep in my belly. A stirring subdued by summers of training and denying myself.

Now, here it is very much alive and begging for more. More. More. More. Of this. Him. It doesn't matter what he is, or who he is. Not when that stirring dives deep within me, rousing my desire.

Warmth heats my veins as he concedes, kissing me back with an intensity that drives us backward against a tree and sends need throbbing between my legs. His hands grip my hips as he clutches me tight and gives in to the fervor, the passion surging between us.

I push aside everything else. My mission. His reluctance to deepen our relationship. Our differences. Instead, I focus on just being a woman giving herself to her husband.

It doesn't last long enough, him caving to his lust. He pulls away, leaving a rush of air between us. I stumble against the tree and shove my hair behind my shoulders.

Several breaths pass before he speaks, his tone even and not affected by our encounter. "Follow me."

I blink at the request and jerk my gaze around me. Nobody seemed to notice our embrace, yet my skin burns as if a thousand people stare and silently judge me for giving myself so ardently.

"Follow me," Gabriel repeats, drawing my focus to him.

Numbly, I do as he requested, following him through the throng of people. He walks so fast, I must take two steps to his one.

I glance up at him the moment we stroll in the street alone. Moonlight skims his taut features as he continues guiding me toward the cottage we share.

The Kyanite in me knows I shouldn't have encouraged him. The mere woman tingles with thoughts of more.

“Shall you bed me now?” I ask as we step through the front door a few moments later.

Silence imbues him as he pours a goblet of wine and drinks the entire thing.

I lick my bottom lip, still tasting him. “Gabriel.”

Torchlight flares in his eyes as they settle on me. “Did you think if you kissed me, I’d change my stance?” He sets the goblet down with a thud.

“I hoped.”

“I haven’t.” He reaches for the jar of wine, refills his goblet, and downs that one too.

My brow rises. “Are you planning to get sloshed?”

“No. I just like wine.” As if silently challenging me, he lifts the jar and drinks from the terracotta pottery.

“I see. Perhaps you should grow grapes to keep up with your obsession.”

His knuckles tighten against the jar as he tips it back for a second time and drinks.

My breath hitches as reality strikes me. *His* reality. I affected him earlier.

“Gabriel.”

He lowers the pottery to the table with another forceful thump. “Don’t. Not tonight. I...” A tic forms in his jaw. “Not tonight.”

Why? Because tonight you’re teetering on the edge of your control?

What would happen if I lured him right over the edge?

The hem of my gown brushes the stone floor as I step closer to him. “Make me your wife, Gabriel.”

Those silver-blue eyes meet mine, and my pulse quickens. Fire burns in those depths. Fire for me. Fire for more. Fire for another kiss.

“I want this,” I say, my voice low, needy.

It's not a lie. It's the truth I discovered the moment I tasted him at the festival.

I move close enough for my body to touch his. It's merely there, a breath, a whisper, a promise of more if he relents.

“Will you?”

He lifts my chin, and I exhale, knowing he'll kiss me. Tonight, everything will change between us.

Our breaths mingle as he leans closer, hovering his lips near mine. “No.”

I blink against the bluntness of that word as he releases me and steps back.

“You're a tease,” I whisper, my words too revealing. Too hurt by his refusal to consummate our marriage.

“No. That role belongs solely to you.” He lifts the jar and takes another, longer drink. At this rate, the warrior will soon be unable to walk.

I scrub my fingers across my burning cheeks, wishing I didn't want him. Wishing things were different. Wishing Luc had found me a humble farmer to marry. Not this stubborn man.

“You're angry with me.” I continue, my tone bruised and chafing from his rejection. “Because I'm a Kyanite.”

“Yes.” He shakes the jar, allowing the liquid to slosh together. “I am.”

Frustration ricochets through me as I crumble into a chair and sigh. “So, you'll punish me and keep me from pleasure?”

“Pleasure yourself.” He disappears into the bedroom with his jar of wine and shuts the door.

“I will,” I say, loud enough to carry to him. “In bed next to you.”

My breath falters as the door rips open, and Gabriel frames the opening with his broad shoulders and his impressive height.

“What did you say?” he asks, his voice a husky rasp, or maybe I just want him to sound that way.

I stand and face him. “I said, I will pleasure myself next to you.”

A full smile widens his mouth, catching me unaware. I should have prepared for it, but there was never any preparing for how it softens his features and makes him so very beddable. I dig my heels into the ground instead of obeying my carnal instincts.

For all my bravado, I am not equipped for what he says next. “Show me.”

The sky above!

I really should learn to bridle my tongue.

“What?” I ask, still not believing he said what he did.

“You heard me. Show me how you’d pleasure yourself.”

“Do you think I’ll back down?” I reach for the hem of my surcoat and yank it to my thighs. “Or do you really want to watch?”

A vein throbs in his temple as I inch the surcoat higher with one hand and bring the other to cradle the silky undergarments at the juncture between my legs.

“Do you want to touch me here, Gabriel?”

A knock at the front door shatters the moment as his attention shifts away, and I drop the material. Warmth scours my cheeks as I flee to the washing stand, wet a rag, and yank it along my flushed face. I have never touched myself there in front of anyone before.

He drives me to a place no man has ever driven me. At first, it was the simple matter of gaining his favor. Then, it was about my pride.

Now...

It’s a matter of chasing the unattainable, sating the desire he invokes, tasting the forbidden wine. For that is what he is. Forbidden.

But that doesn't mean I cannot enjoy what he offers. At least that's what I tell myself as familiar voices float to me. Luc and Cassandra.

Though, their words are indiscernible, I make out one. Betrothed. After a few more dabs against my cheeks, I exit the bedchamber to congratulate a beaming Cassandra.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-THREE

Birds chirp outside my window as I wake three days later to an empty bed. I dress, clean the cottage, then in a completely foolish move, I reach for a jar of wine. Instead of grabbing a terracotta goblet, I drink straight from the jar like Gabriel did, tipping it back over and over.

It's easier to drink away my frustrations than to focus on everything I haven't accomplished since I arrived in Astarobane. I still don't know where Roland is.

I sing one of Mother's favorite songs as I bake bread. Over and over again, I sing the same song and tip back the terracotta jar.

Once the bread is in the oven, I perch on a chair and slow my consumption to sips. After all, a deep fog settled over the cottage. Or the mist surrounding me is just my imagination. It probably is.

The front door swings open, and Gabriel steps inside. Torchlight sprawls over his features, illuminating his stiff jaw, his tired eyes, and the way he presses his lips together. He does that often, as though he internally prepares himself for a battle when he's near me.

"Hello." Clumsily, I salute the air in front of me.

His brow rises.

"I have been drinking." With determination, I reach for the jar and lift it for him to observe. I even give it a little shake, allowing the liquid to slosh. "See. I like wine too."

His brow furrows as he sweeps his gaze over me.

A giggle spills from my lips as I stumble to my feet and laugh again. “Would you like some?”

He shakes his head.

“More for me.” I draw the jar to my mouth but miss terribly, spilling the wine down the front of my surcoat. “Oh.”

His boots echo against the floor as he crosses the room and takes the jar from me. “You don’t need anymore.”

“Give it back, Gabriel.”

Determination glints in his eyes as he holds the jar from my reach. “Later.”

I doubt he means to give it back.

“I need...” I let out a loud hiccup, “...more.”

“You *need* sobering.”

“Shall you help me?” I loop my arms around his neck. “You’re so good.”

When he reaches for my hands, I grip him tighter. His warmth sinks into my surcoat. His scent invades my senses, a mixture of leather, smoke, and cherry wood.

“I have a secret,” I murmur against his neck.

He lowers the jar to the nearby table and turns to lift me into his arms.

“Oh.” I settle my head against his shoulder. “You feel nice.”

My body brushes against his as he crosses the room and steps into our bedchamber. Four steps carry him to the bed, where he deposits me in the center.

“I’ll make you some tea.”

A wave of dizziness hits me when I try to rise. So, I settle against a pillow.

He disappears back into the main room, his voice trailing back to where I lie. “Are you burning something?”

“My bread.” My eyes widen as I hurry from the bed and land flat with my face smashed against the stone floor. “Oh, that hurt.”

His footsteps trail to where I lie. “Why didn’t you stay on the bed where I put you?”

“I’m not a child,” I grumble as he helps me back to the mattress that I foolishly left.

“I doubt even a child would spill wine all over their clothes and fall on their face.” Something shifts in his expression, a softening as he runs his thumb against my cheek—right where he stitched my skin weeks ago. “You’re already bruising.”

“Gabriel.” I lick my bottom lip. “Do you want to hear my secret now?”

“What secret?” He allows his thumb another pass, his touch stirring.

“I dream of you at night. Imagine what it would be like for you to kiss me again.”

He holds my gaze for several beats before he looks away, breaking contact and splintering the moment.

“Do you think of me too?” I ask, my question vulnerable. Needy.

I cannot wish the words unsaid. Maybe tomorrow I will. Maybe tomorrow I’ll regret a lot of things. Not right now. Not when he’s still here.

“Sometimes,” he admits.

Just one word. One single word, yet it has the power of thousands.

“Do you bed me when you think of me?”

Those vibrant eyes return to mine, and even though he doesn’t break contact, clouds immerse them, clouds that hide everything he thinks, feels, wants, needs.

“Say it,” I whisper, my tone raw.

Instead of answering, he swipes his thumb across my cheek for a third time, his touch tracing over that raised scar before dropping away. “Stay here while I prevent our cottage from burning down.”

“No,” I say the moment he stands and disappears into the main room again.

Smoke carries to where I lie, burning my nose and stinging my eyes. His curses follow.

I sigh and stare up at the ceiling, regretting I couldn’t make him bread like Cassandra.

He steps back into the bedroom a moment later and opens the window. “Your bread nearly burnt the cottage down.”

“I was making it for you.”

He settles his gaze on me. “You shouldn’t.”

“Why?”

A smile curves his mouth, lessening the sternness of his jaw. “Because you’re terrible at it.”

“Oh.” A laugh escapes me as I clutch at my bedcovers.

“Vow to me.” His eyes twinkle as he continues. “That you’ll never bake again.”

“I cannot.” I play with a loose thread on the bedcover, looping it around my fingers, then releasing and repeating the action. “I’m determined to make bread like Cassandra.”

“Nobody makes food like Cassandra.”

He’s probably right. It doesn’t make me any less determined to try. Tomorrow or the day after, I’ll attempt bread again. I will not drink.

At least, that’s what I promise myself.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-FOUR

“**D**o you know why I like the color red?” Mother had asked as I sat at her feet trying to write the letter A on a piece of slate.

“Because flowers are red. Fruit is red. Everything good is red, Sol,” I say, repeating what she had said to me for summers.

Happiness gleams in her eyes as she nods at me. *“So, you do listen to what I say.”*

Mother’s voice accompanies me as I pick red flowers along the path leading to Cassandra’s house. The moment I look down, catching my gaze on those crimson petals, my heart shudders. For the Bloodstone people red means something different. At least, red poppies mean something different.

I lift my hands, allowing the petals to fall. I would never bring red flowers to any of them. Nor would they understand why I picked them. It was a brief connection to Mother, a memory of better, happier days.

Just like the day I walked next to Cassandra, people don’t meet my eyes as I move past them. Instead of allowing them to bother me, I enjoy the gentle breeze and the cloudy sky.

Only four days have passed since Cassandra’s news. I long to speak to her about Luc and thank her again for making me such a fine dress for the festival.

The sound of cheering fills the air as I draw closer to the center of the large town. It thrums a beat of disharmony

through the sandstone streets, striking at my chest. With each step, it thrums harder and harder, drawing me in like a spider, ensnaring its victim.

As I round the last bend, I come to a sudden halt, where a thick crowd of people lift their fists and shout. “Stone her. Stone her. Stone her.”

Trepidation trembles down my back, raising ice along my skin. Instead of turning away, I move closer, still lured by that spider, that need to see, to know.

Through the crush of people, I press forward, avoiding shoulders, arms, legs. Sweat beads my brow and dampens the back of my surcoat as I keep pushing my way through the crush of bodies.

I must see. I must know who they are stoning.

When I get a clear view, I stop and let out a quick breath. A young woman lies on the ground, her body broken, her surcoat torn. Palm-sized rocks lie around her spent form as three women continue to throw stones at her. They pummel her body and pelt the ground around her. The red circle in the center of her torn surcoat clashes against the blueness of the sky.

The women yell the same word as they rear back with all their strength and continue attacking the woman. “...whore. ...whore. ...whore.”

I think of stepping forward, shielding the woman from their onslaught. It would be futile. She’s already staring vacantly. Her body is already beyond repair.

My heart bleeds for her. It doesn’t matter that she’s Bloodstone.

A small child, no more than nine or ten summers old, bursts through the crowd and spills a handful of crushed red poppies at the woman’s feet. The crowd cheers louder, elated by the child’s offering, an offer of death, of finality.

My heart wilts as I stumble back a step. The crowd moves closer, crushing me in a swarm of sweaty bodies.

Olah, help me!

I summon determination, grit my teeth, and push through the people until I reach the outskirts of the mob. It's still not enough distance. Nothing is enough.

The scene haunts me as I dig my fingers into my palm, sinking pain into my skin instead of the people who carried out this monstrosity. These people thirst for blood, for violence.

I shudder at the sight of a crushed red petal clinging to my sleeve. Wildly, I shake my arm until it flutters away and sinks to the ground.

A sob wrenches from my throat as I take off running. Back toward the home I share with Gabriel, and the safety of its walls.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-FIVE

I burst through the front door of my cottage, expecting to be alone, expecting to curl up in a dark corner and not think about what I just witnessed. Instead, I hurry through the opening and straight into Gabriel. As I lurch into his body, he brings his hands up, steadying me.

“Has something happened?” he asks, real fear in his voice. Fear for me.

The crowd roars in my ears. “*Stone her. Stone her.*”

They are Bloodstone.

This man *is* Bloodstone.

I stiffen and shove with all my strength, surprising Gabriel. He frees me, and I stumble away, searching for my escape, my freedom, my reprieve from that woman’s vacant eyes.

Olah, have mercy!

They continued stoning her even after she was dead. Continued yelling at her. Hating her.

I flee to our room and lie face first on the bed. Those leers keep coming. Those cheers. Those stones keep pounding the hot street.

“Are you all right?” Gabriel breaks through my fog as he sits on the bed, but he doesn’t touch me. Maybe he knows it’s better not to.

I bury my face against the bedcovers and clench them around my trembling fingers. Everything in me screeches, *I*

want out. I need out.

I cannot speak. Mother would be disappointed. *I* would be disappointed.

“*Please*, I need to be alone,” the words choke out of me. I couldn’t have held them back if I wished it.

The bed creaks as he stands. “I’ll be in the other room.” His footfalls echo against the stone floor and fade.

Maybe he meant his words as an invitation to go to him if I want. Maybe I would care if I weren’t mourning the death of a stranger.

Anyone could be next with a crowd like that.

I could be next.



The sun fades on the horizon before the world returns. For a while, I remained where I was, lying face down on the bed. There were no tears. No sobs. Only a stark reality, stabbing me in the chest.

These Bloodstone people don’t care about me. They don’t care about outsiders. They will pick up rocks and throw them at anyone.

They will kill anyone.

Maybe that’s what Roland bred into them. Maybe hate is all they know.

Olah, help me.

I don’t want to be like that, so full of hate, I have lost my ability to love, to care, to comfort.

Like Cassandra. Sweet, kind, cheerful Cassandra. I always want to have room in my heart for someone like her. Her heritage doesn’t matter.

Her grandmother's voice echoes in my ears. During our journey here, Darla rambled a lot of nonsense. Though, one statement rose above the rest. She declared Hector the rising sun, and she said he would bring magic back. He cannot. The Bloodstone used to cast dark, unthinkable magic. The kind capable of destroying thousands with a mere flick of their wrists. If they had magic again, their cruelty would not stop with the stoning of one single woman like today.

If Darla is right, and the Bloodstone people regain their magic, they would destroy every Kyanite in retaliation for what transpired decades ago. They would destroy my home. My people. Father. The women at the brothel.

I cannot allow that to happen.

If Roland's son is the key, then Hector must die too.

I write the words on the walls of my heart.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-SIX

The mattress dips in as Gabriel sits near me. “Something has seriously shaken you. Tell me, so I can mend it.”

“You cannot mend it, Gabriel,” I say, my tone soft, heartbroken.

Mending it would mean changing his people, and I learned a long time ago, you cannot change people who have no wish to be different.

“At least give me the opportunity. Tell me what has upset you?”

Grittiness burns my eyes as I roll over to see him sitting at the edge of the mattress, close enough to reach out to touch him if I wish.

I don’t.

“*Your* people,” the words fall like venom from my lips, “stoned a woman today. They threw rocks at her until she ceased to breathe, to feel, to hope.”

A muscle jerks in his jaw as he lowers his hand to my arm, his touch tentative at first, as if he fears me ripping away. I don’t move.

He doesn’t reply.

How I wish he would. How I wish he would assure me he sees things the way I do.

“Do you not care?”

“I care,” he says, his voice low, hoarse.

“Then why don’t you do anything? Why doesn’t Luc?”

“I’m a stranger to them.” The muscle jerks faster as he looks away, pinning his gaze beyond my shoulders. “And their hate is deeper than a ravine. I don’t know how to change it.”

“Surely, the council can change things.”

“The council is new. Most of the Bloodstone people don’t accept it. At least, not yet.”

“What do they accept?” I ask, needing to understand them.

Again, Gabriel’s focus shifts beyond my shoulders, pinning to a different place. Perhaps, a different time. “Roland.”

My chest squeezes at that name. Said curtly. Said, as if it pained Gabriel to speak his leader’s name.

“Where is he?”

Gabriel stiffens and stands. “Not here.”

“Obviously, he’s not here. I want to know why.”

“There are other cities,” Gabriel says, his tone flat.

Where is a map when I need one? I must learn about these other cities.

“Are you saying you don’t know? How are you on the council, and you don’t know where your leader is?”

“Why do you care?” Gabriel asks.

I shift to sitting and pull my knees forward. “Because I am living here with you. I want to know the world I may someday bring children into.” The last words sour against my lips, the lie even hard for me to say. To breathe life into. To give voice to something that was only a thought before now—a thought I never planned to be a reality.

It would be wrong to have a baby with a man I don’t intend to stay with.

“Children?” Gabriel hikes a brow and allows his gaze to slide over me.

“Yes.” I smooth my crumpled surcoat over my legs and make myself stare into those silver-blue eyes. “Have you ever thought of yourself as a father?”

He smirks, and my first thought is to kick him. My second thought is to look away from the obvious mirth in his eyes.

I do neither.

“Are you offering to give me children?” he asks.

“I am your wife.”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“You ignored mine,” I say with a lift to my chin.

“I have thought about being a father.” He moves to the table and pours us both a goblet of wine. As he hands mine to me, he speaks. “I think six or seven children would do.”

I gasp, as he smirks again.

One more smirk, and I will pour my wine all over his arrogant face.

“I’m jesting with you.”

“Of course.” I shrug. “You will not bed me. Therefore, you will not give me a baby.”

He taps his thumb against the edge of the stoneware and studies me for several breaths. “It would only take once.”

Is he offering?

I shouldn’t react. Shouldn’t feel.

My body doesn’t care what I should or shouldn’t do.

Warmth floods my stomach at the thought of him climbing on the bed with me. It deepens as I imagine his mouth against mine. His hands pulling away my clothes.

“Once?” I allow my gaze to slide over his body. Slowly. Thoroughly. “You must have a remarkable set if you think you can give me six children and only bed me once.”

He returns the thoroughness of my gaze, staring long enough to cause more heat to flood my stomach. “We would

start with twins.”

Twins?

I cough my wine back into my goblet as his smirk reappears.

Shift this conversation.

Shift it now.

I don't listen to my own reasoning. “Do you have twins in your family?”

“Not yet,” he says so confidently, so assuredly, I think he means it.

He doesn't.

He's jesting with you.

“Now you're the tease.” I walk to the basin and dump my wine into the pottery.

He moves to stand next to me and reaches for my left hand, the one with my binding tattoo. Gently, his fingertips brush against the raised skin as he brings me around to face him.

“You don't know me. Nor do you know what I want, so don't think I'm merely teasing you.”

“But you said you would never bed me.”

“I know what I said.”

This is foolish, a conversation meant for a couple who intend to stay wed.

It's not for someone like me. Or someone like him.

If he were normal, he would have already bedded me.

“Gabriel...”

He brings me into the cradle of his arms and meets my eyes. “You and I are at the foothills of our journey. Neither of us trust each other. When we do—” his fingers wrap around my wrist, right where that binding tattoo sits, “—everything will change.”

My pulse throbs in my throat. Is he talking about forever with me? Promising a future different than the one we have right now? Or is he pledging to someday bed me?

As quickly as he touched me, he lets go, and turns away. Leaving behind his warmth and the hint of something else. Secrets?

Gabriel is keeping things from me as ardently as I keep things from him. I feel it in every fiber of my being.

I sink to the edge of the mattress. "I don't understand you."

The shadow of the doorway frames him as he pauses near it. "You will."

CHAPTER
TWENTY-SEVEN

A flock of birds flies overhead as I stop in front of Cassandra's cottage the following afternoon. She opens the door on my third knock and ushers me inside. Averill smiles from her place in a chair near the lone window where she sews what looks to be a dark gray surcoat.

"Hello, Sol. Did you enjoy the festival?" she asks.

"I did."

My skin warms as I recall the way Gabriel kissed me. He may not have initiated the moment. He responded, though. Oh, how he responded.

Averill smiles and continues sewing tiny stitches along the hem.

Kassandra cuts me a thick slice of bread and leads me into her bedroom, a cozy looking space large enough for her bed and a washing stand.

We sit on the edge of the mattress, where she speaks first.

"I'm so happy, Sol." A wide grin spreads across Cassandra's mouth and shines in her lively blue eyes.

"Your grandmother was right." I tear off a piece of bread and take a bite.

"She's always right." A frown wrenches at Cassandra's mouth. "I mean, about things like this. She rambles about many other things that haven't made sense in summers."

"Like Hector?" I ask, testing the waters.

The famed warrior seems more a myth than a reality.

Kassandra nods. “Yes, like Hector.”

“Your grandmother seems to like him.” Something else stands out from the festival, something I overheard Praxis say. “Are Praxis and Alden related?”

She smiles and nods. “Alden is Praxis’ father, and yes, they’re both related to Luc.”

“But Luc and Praxis aren’t brothers?” If only I had learned more about Roland’s family before I came here.

“No.” Kassandra shoves curls from her cheeks. “Cenric is Praxis’ brother.”

“Oh.” Inwardly, I frown as I think of the long-haired warrior. “Where is Luc and Leah’s family?”

Sadness stretches across Kassandra’s features, thinning the lines near her mouth as she frowns. “Their mother died giving birth to Leah. Their father...” Kassandra exhales. “He was murdered over ten summers ago.”

Empathy wells in my chest. Empathy for Luc and Leah.

“There used to be a lot more of them. Before...” Kassandra stares down at her hands and shakes her head.

“Before?”

Sadness glints in her eyes before she glances up. “Before the other tribes started murdering Roland’s family.”

My chest tightens at the reality of her words. At *my* reality. I’m here to do the same.

The door opens, and Everly steps into the tiny room wearing a black surcoat with the ever-present red circle. I swallow and try to not see that other woman lying broken in the streets.

“I finished your necklace, Kass,” Everly says.

Kassandra stands and accepts the gift. “Thank you. It’s lovely.”

A frown pinches at Everly's mouth as Cassandra slips the thin silver chain over her head and allows it to settle against her surcoat.

"Is something amiss?" Cassandra asks after several moments.

Everly pushes the door shut and turns to face Cassandra. "Call off the wedding to Luc."

An instant scowl curls Cassandra's mouth down. "I will not."

Everly lets out a quick breath and reaches for Cassandra's hand. "You cannot marry him. People like us don't marry people like him."

"I'm in love with him." Cassandra lifts her chin and clenches her fingers together.

Inwardly, I smile at Cassandra's determination to wed despite her sister's misgivings.

"Love doesn't matter." Everly stabs her hand toward the door and speaks in an embittered tone. "Those people will never allow an outsider to marry someone below their class. Go to Luc and tell him you cannot marry him."

The crowd returns, their voices hissing in my ears. "*Stone her. Stone her.*"

I blink, trying to make it stop. Trying to not see the darkness inside them. They stoned a woman simply because she was different.

Kassandra squeezes her sister's hand and releases. "Luc and I will change the prejudices against outsiders."

A scoff escapes Everly as she shakes her head. "You will change nothing."

"I wish you'd try to understand." Desperation echoes from Cassandra's words. Desperation for her sister to believe her.

"I understand. You admire him. You have always admired him. But it doesn't change what we are."

Everything in me wants to interject for Cassandra, but I cannot pretend to understand their ways, their culture, their traditions. Maybe Everly is right, and she only wants to protect her sister.

“I will marry him, Evie.” Determination grips Cassandra’s tone as she continues. “And you will stand proudly next to me because you care for me.”

Tears glisten in Everly’s eyes before she rubs them away with her sleeve. “You know I will.”

Our conversation shifts after that. They talk about what kind of dress Cassandra wants to wear, and who will do the sewing.

Everly’s words stay with me even after I journey home, wash, and change for bed.

As I lie on the mattress next to Gabriel, I think about what Everly said, and I think about those red circles.

Maybe Everly was right. Maybe being an outsider will prevent Cassandra from being happy with Luc.

Moonlight glistens through the window before I roll to my side and speak to Gabriel. “Will Luc suffer backlash for marrying Cassandra?”

Gabriel shifts next to me. “Why?”

“Earlier today, Everly was concerned about Cassandra’s decision to wed Luc.”

“It’s not done,” Gabriel says in a plain voice. “People like Luc don’t marry outsiders.”

“Then why did he ask her?”

Shadows play across Gabriel’s face as he settles back against his pillow and stares up at the ceiling. “They have always been friends, and Luc doesn’t care about the prejudices against outsiders. He never has.”

“I see. Will *she* suffer backlash?”

“She could.”

Everything in me wants to raise a fist to the high gods and protest the unfair world we live in. It shouldn't be this way. Everyone should be equal.

I clench my fingers around my bedcovers. "Couldn't Luc's father—Roland—" the words sour against my lips, but I force myself to continue, "—change the rules?"

"No."

The immediacy of Gabriel's reply strikes at my chest. Does Gabriel not care about the way his people treat outsiders?

"Why not?" The material bends beneath my fingers as I tighten my grip. "He's your leader."

"You cannot snap your fingers and make people change their prejudices." No emotions border his words, no bricks to build a foundation upon. How can I understand him if he offers me no insight into his thoughts? His world? His beliefs?

What happened to the man who seemed to care the day before?

"Yes, but your leaders could guide by example. Remove their red circles. Accept them fully into your culture."

"You want the laws and rules to bend to your way of thinking."

"I want people to stop shunning good people simply because of their lineage," I say in a rush of frustration.

"Kassandra's father was a Kyanite." Even though Gabriel speaks in an even voice, I detect threads of bitterness. It builds, echoing his words like a never-ending tune. *Kassandra's father was a Kyanite. Kassandra's father was a Kyanite.*

Maybe that's why we get along. Part of her is like me. Kyanite. Enemy to the Bloodstone. Enemy to the darkness.

Light cannot abide darkness.

At least, that's what Father used to say. I never really understood what he meant.

I rise on my elbow to meet Gabriel's gaze. "Why didn't you say something sooner?"

"I didn't know I needed to."

"Kassandra's father is a Kyanite? Where is he now?"

Gabriel shrugs. "Dead for all I know or care."

I shove my hand through my hair and sigh. "Can you not address the prejudices against outsiders in the next council meeting?"

"I cannot."

"Gabriel."

"Things have been done this way for centuries. Don't shake the trees, Kyanite. You may not like what falls out of them," he says, his tone steady, and heartbreaking at the same time.

There it is—proof he simply doesn't care.

He's the only pigheaded tree I want to shake. He sits on the council. He could affect change. Except, he doesn't care to.

"I thought you wanted to see change. What happened?"

"An infected tree is incapable of healing its branches," he says in a flat voice. "It's futile to try to mend something that refuses to be mended."

I hiss through my teeth and resist the strong urge to throttle him. "So, you're going to just let people keep hurting others?"

"No. *I* am going to go to sleep."

"Gabriel!"

"Kyanite!" He rises enough to pull me against him, to feel his heat burning through my thin nightdress. Tingles raise goosebumps along my skin as I try to not think, to not feel drawn to the stubborn man lying next to me.

"Sol," I say, my voice low, but loud enough for him to hear me.

There's something I must know. "Do you care enough to protect Kassandra? Would you defend her?"

“I *will* protect, Cassandra.”

If he’s not going to talk to the council, how does he intend to keep Cassandra safe?

“How?”

“By leaving this damn city,” he says bitterly. Revealingly.

My brow rises. “You hate Astarobane?”

“It is *his* city,” Gabriel says, his voice lined with resentment.

“Whose city?”

When Gabriel doesn’t reply, I decide to shift the subject back to my friend. “When will we leave Astarobane?”

“As soon as I can convince Luc and the others to leave.”

I’ll have to be content with that. After all, I didn’t come here to change their traditions. Olah knows, I don’t agree with all of the Kyanite’s traditions either.

If things were different, and I planned to stay, I’d try to alter this for Cassandra. I would rip those red circles away with my bare hands.

But I’m not here to stay.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-EIGHT

Sunlight spills through the cracks in the walls of the barn the following evening. The same damp, musty smell hits me as I enter.

My conversation with Gabriel last night hasn't faded. Neither has my concern for Cassandra. As I went about my duties this morning, a hollow sensation settled in the pit of my stomach. No matter where I went or what I did, it never left.

As I take my third step into the barn, unease ripples down the back of my legs. I pause and dart my eyes around. Nothing seems out of place. The animals are in their pens. The tools are where I left them the day before. Yet, the feeling doesn't ease.

I try to ignore it as I go about my duties: collecting eggs, feeding the animals, and petting Gabriel's horse. I offer Hale a carrot and turn as I'm overwhelmed by a feeling of not being alone.

My fingers itch to reach for a weapon, but I haven't carried one with me since Luc kidnapped me. He removed my daggers, and I never replaced them. Gabriel would have questions if he caught me with them. So, it was easier to go without.

Until now.

A thick-waisted man steps from around a large bale of hay, animosity blazing in his black eyes. My stomach squeezes as I dart a quick look around, making sure nobody else joins him.

"What do you need?" I ask curtly.

The man smiles, showing off even white teeth as he leans against a beam. “Hello, Kyanite,” he says, his words slurred.

“What do you need?” I repeat, my tone laced with edges sharp enough to pierce him.

He traces his gaze over me, his stare a lazy prowl over my body. “I heard a rumor.”

Instead of replying, I fold my arms, shielding myself from his lustful view.

“Someone told me you have the serpent mark.” He straightens and allows another pass over me. “Show me.”

I dig the heels of my boots into the soft dirt and inwardly groan.

“I said it was impossible,” the man says. “The gods would never give our mark to a Kyanite. I came to see for myself.”

I don't have time for this.

I cut to my left, heading for the front of the barn and escape. The man follows, his footsteps heavier and quicker. He snags my upper arm and yanks me around to face him.

“It's rude to walk away when someone is having a conversation with you,” he growls.

My upper lip curls into a sneer as I react the way I was trained, yanking my arm down and using my left hand to break his hold. Surprise glints behind his stare as I jerk back the moment he clumsily reaches for me again.

“Touch me again, and you'll die,” I say, my words laced with all the venom I have smothered since arriving in Astarobane.

“Feisty.” A wide grin spreads across his mouth. “I like that in a woman.”

I fold my arms again and level him with an icy stare. “Go, and I won't tell my husband to kill you.”

“Your husband?” The man sneers. “Gabriel married you because of your mark. Trust me, he wouldn't have married a Kyanite otherwise.”

The truth in his statement steals my breath, the reality that Gabriel wouldn't have wed me.

I don't care.

Even as I think the words, that hollow sensation increases.

"I thought you said you didn't believe the rumors?" I ask after a moment.

"I didn't until you broke my hold. Then, I saw the mark plain as day. You are the redemption. How does that make you feel?"

"The only thing I feel is irritation that you won't leave."

"See, that's the thing about leaving." He scratches at his jaw, peppered with days of growth. "I'm not planning to go alone."

Trepidation slips down my body, as if the man trails his filthy, jagged nails along my back. Instead of showing it, I scoff.

The man's eyes blaze as he steps closer and pulls out a worn dagger from the cracked leather belt at his waist. "You're worth a lot of coin, but more if you're alive. I'll try not to scar your Kyanite face."

He lurches toward me, his steel aimed for my arm. I jerk away, but not quick enough. The edge of his blade slices through my sleeve. I slam my right foot into his legs, dropping him to the ground. He grunts and stares up at me with enough hatred to level an entire city. It curls around my feet, travels up my body, and dives deep within me.

I have seen that look reflecting in the looking glass when I think about Roland.

The man stumbles to his feet and wipes at his mouth. "You're no simple Kyanite, are you?"

Something shifts in his expression, a hardening as he strikes toward my face. I duck and punch him in the gut. He crumbles to the ground, breathing in quick, jerky gasps.

“Do you even know why you’re here?” he asks between labored breaths. “He’s only going to use you.”

Who?

Gabriel?

Doubtful. He’s rarely around.

The man staggers to his feet and reaches for me. I avoid him with a quick cut to my right. He whirls around and waves his dagger toward my neck. I strike his arm, and the weapon falls to the dirt.

He growls. “Stupid bitch!”

I step back and glower at him. “Leave.”

Instead of heeding me, he stumbles around until he reclaims his pitiful weapon. Sunlight glints off the steel as he waves it around like a lunatic.

“The only way I’m leaving this barn is if you come with me. You can either go quietly, or I can slit your throat and drag you out of here by your hair.”

“Tough choices,” I say, my tone even. “But I’m afraid I must decline both.”

Red blazes across his cheeks as he attacks with all his fury, his frustration, his skill. I avoid him over and over again. Still, he keeps coming, his anger fueling him.

Olah is my witness, I try to just stay alive. But the man is relentless and surprisingly fast, given his intoxicated state. One wrong move, and I’ll end up dead. So, I do the unthinkable, the one thing I promised I wouldn’t do here.

I strike back.

I pick up a pitchfork, duck one of his many attempts to murder me, and ram the weapon deep into the man’s chest. His eyes bulge, and his mouth gapes open. I yank the weapon free, and blood pours from his wound as he crumbles to the dirt floor.

Revulsion swims in my stomach as I drop the makeshift weapon and jerk my gaze around. Nobody stirs, yet my heart

races, as if a crowd watched me murder the man.

I drop my focus to him as he twitches and stills. He wears a cracked leather belt. Battle marks mar the fabric of his surcoat. Scars blot his hands and face.

Surely, he's one of their warriors. Today, he was sloshed, and I bested him, but he may be a hero to them.

Frustration thrums inside me as I kneel and grab his feet. After a firm tug, I drag him only a few inches. I let out a quick breath.

Gabriel is probably home by now. He'll catch me with the body. He'll condemn me before all Astarobane. The Bloodstone people will execute me like they killed all the people before me.

I stumble to a nearby haystack and plop to my bottom. This isn't the way I planned to spend my evening.

I peer across the barn, taking in the body again and frown. Even if I managed to drag him, I don't know where to hide someone, and I couldn't bury him without someone walking past.

No. There's only one thing I can do.



The fireplace draws me into the main room and to the chair Gabriel prefers. I swallow and step closer to my husband.

“Gabriel.”

He doesn't stir.

I take two more steps into the room and exhale. “Gabriel, I require your aid.”

At those words, he finally turns enough to observe me standing there with my dirty, bloody surcoat. His stare moves over me before he rises to his feet.

“What did you do?”

“What did I do?” I brush at the loose strands against my cheeks. “*He* attacked me.”

A fierce scowl prods at Gabriel’s mouth and flashes in his silver-blue eyes. “Someone attacked you?”

“Yes, in the barn.” I clear my throat and continue. “I killed him.”

I blink against that reality. *I* killed a man today. For the first time in my twenty summers, I killed a man. Not in war, not in saving my village, but because he refused to leave my barn.

Gabriel glances between me and the front door like he didn’t quite comprehend what I said to him.

“I tried to drag the body, but he’s too heavy,” I admit.

Olah, help me.

Please, help me.

Gabriel walks to where I stand and slides his gaze over me again. “You’re hurt.”

Instead of scolding or yelling, like I imagined he might, he pulls on my sleeve enough to observe the laceration on my arm.

“I’m well.”

“No, you’re not. You require stitches.”

“I’d like to remove the body first.” Otherwise, people will know what I have done. They’ll come for me. They’ll murder me.

Stop.

Gabriel’s brow rises. “Who was he?”

“I don’t know.”

Gabriel turns and heads toward the barn. My heart pounds, slamming against my ribs. What if he doesn’t believe I acted in self-defense? What if this is the end for me?

No.

As I follow Gabriel, the fading sun mocks me through the trees, the barn, and to the man sprawled on the floor. Gabriel kneels near the stranger and examines him.

I shift my weight and brace myself for his fury, his accusations.

After several intense moments of silence, Gabriel glances up. "You killed Lucian. He was once a well-trained soldier until he turned to drinking. Now, he's rarely sober." Gabriel straightens. "What did he want with you?"

"My mark." I hold up my arm for Gabriel to observe the serpent.

Shadows glint in Gabriel's eyes as he studies the hissing serpent. "Your mark?"

"Yes. He said someone told him about it, and I am worth a lot of coin." The words taste bitter against my tongue. Lucian said many hateful things.

Gabriel balls his fingers into fists and curses under his breath.

"I have made you angry." I swipe a hand across my cheek.

"No." Gabriel shoves his fingers into his weapon belt and shakes his head.

"Are you angry I killed Lucian?"

Fierceness flares across Gabriel's face and echoes in his words. "No. I would have killed him had you not."

"For breaking into your barn?"

"For daring to touch you," Gabriel says, his tone lined with steel.

He would kill for me? *Me?* The Kyanite?

Gently, he takes my hand and pulls me toward the door. "Go back to the cottage. I'll take care of the body."

"I could help you."

He squeezes my fingers and releases me. "No. I'll take care of it."

Beyond this cottage, a lot of Bloodstone homes stamp the hillside. The people who live in them wouldn't hesitate to condemn a Kyanite who killed one of their own.

My stomach tightens as I clear my throat and voice a question I must know. "Will I face repercussion?"

"Nobody will know."

Surprise ripples through me as I stare up at him. "You would do that for me?"

"Yes." He lowers his gaze to my arm. "When I return, I'll take care of your wound."

A shudder ripples through me. Followed by another. It's not the first time I have been attacked, endured a beating, but there's something different about this time. Gabriel seemed to care. Father had only ever ordered me to bathe and gave me a cream to rub on my skin. He never even called a healer.

I grip my arm and leave the barn behind. The sun trails me back to my stone cottage and to the fireplace, where I wait for Gabriel.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-NINE

Firelight frames Gabriel's features, highlighting the high cheekbones. His straight nose. His close cut beard. That full mouth of his.

As he tends to my wound, I think about everything that transpired from the moment Lucian showed up in the barn, and I think about Gabriel's reaction. It's not what I expected. I thought he would yell at me for killing a Bloodstone warrior.

After Gabriel finishes stitching my injury, he rubs one of my salves on the wound and wraps a clean cloth around my arm. I settle against my pillows as he stands to pour me wine and brings it back to me.

"Where did you learn to fight?" he asks.

Images of my training flash before my eyes, those months I spent learning before I was allowed to fight with the mercenary army. Gabriel wouldn't understand why a simple Kyanite woman would join a force like them. Nor can I tell him.

"Our villages were always being attacked. It was either learn to fight or die." It's not a false statement. Our villages *were* attacked. I did learn to defend myself from a young age.

He sits on the opposite end of the bed with a second goblet of wine. "I was five the first time the city I grew up in was attacked. I was eight the first time I stabbed someone."

"Eight summers old?" I ask, trying to picture him as a young innocent child forced to defend himself.

“My grandfather was being murdered, and I desperately wanted to defend him,” he says, his voice low.

“Did you?”

Shadows play across Gabriel’s features as he looks down and shakes his head. Something in me wants to pull him close, to comfort him, but I resist, knowing he probably wouldn’t welcome my touch.

“You watched him die.” Empathy prods at the corners of my heart, the place where I shelter my bitterness toward the Bloodstone people.

“Yes.”

“I was ten when Mother was slaughtered in front of me. I didn’t help. I hid like a coward.” I choke out the last words.

“You were a child,” he says, his tone empathic.

“As you were, but you tried to defend your grandfather.”

Gabriel shifts closer to me and catches my cheek in the palm of his hand. His thumb traces the scar left by Esmund’s attack. “I wasn’t an innocent child by the time I was eight. I had already seen enough to haunt an adult. Like the brutal execution of my mother. Trust me when I tell you, hiding is the normal thing to do.”

“Your mother was executed?”

A muscle jerks in Gabriel’s cheek as he frees me and sinks back against the headboard. “Yes.”

“Why?” I ask, desperately wanting to know him better and understand why he’s so distant.

He stares down at the gold ring on his pinky. “My father accused her of infidelity and convinced the council of her guilt.”

“Oh, Gabriel.” Pain wells up in my chest as I think of him losing so much.

An exhale escapes him as that muscle jerks faster in his cheek.

I couple my fingers with his. For a while, he even allows my comfort before pulling away and rolling to his side. He always falls asleep so quickly. I'm the one left reflecting on everything that transpired.

I think of him as a boy watching his mother being executed for something she probably didn't do, and I think of him trying to defend his grandfather.

I close my eyes, willing away the compassion, the sympathy. It refuses to fade.

A sigh escapes me as I glance at his back again.

I'm supposed to hate him, but the more time that passes, the harder it is to hate.

CHAPTER
THIRTY

Everything that happened the day before weighs heavily as I work on my garden, pulling weeds and checking on the growth of the seedlings. Soon, they'll be thriving plants.

Maybe I can use them to offer healing services. Maybe people will open up more to me and share the information that I need.

When I move to the last row, Cassandra approaches. I glance up, taking in her pale face and the trembling fingers she clutches against her soiled surcoat. Rotten tomatoes and cabbage mar the fabric and stain her bruised cheeks.

Worry pounds against my chest as I sweep my gaze over her. "What happened?"

She stops in front of me and rubs a shaky hand against her ruined clothes. "It's nothing."

"It's not nothing." I step closer to her and take in her misty eyes. "Did someone throw spoiled food at you?"

Her bottom lip trembles as she nods. My attention whips to the sandstone streets beyond my cottage. If I were in Kyanite land, I wouldn't hesitate to confront the people who did this.

I grab her hand. "Come with me."

She allows me to guide her inside my cottage and to the washing stand. I add herbs to the water and wet a cloth. She remains silent as I clean her face, neck, and arms.

"Nobody should have done this to you," I say, my voice raw and filled with the disgust I cannot hide.

“I’m all right, Sol.” Assurance immerses Cassandra’s tone, assurance for me when she is the injured one.

I find her a clean surcoat in my room and hand it to her. She says words of gratitude and steps behind a screen to change.

My heart thrums in my ears as I grab the basin and dump the dirty water. How dare people do that to her? Criminals deserve food thrown at them. Not innocent women. Not someone as kind and caring as Cassandra.

I ball my fingers into tight fists and try to calm my breathing. Right now, she needs a friend. Not someone angry and vengeful.

She steps back into the main room and runs her fingers down the front of her borrowed surcoat. It fits her almost as perfectly as it fits me.

“Thank you, Sol.”

She smiles, and a corner of my heart lightens at her bravery, her ability to rise above what just happened to her. Many women would be frantic and sobbing.

“Of course.” I walk to the fire, where I prepared venison stew earlier. “Would you like something to eat?”

Her brown hair brushes against her shoulders as she shakes her head. “I need to get back. Mother will be worried. And Evie.”

Kassandra’s conversation with Everly hums in my ears as I shift back to face Cassandra. It would be pointless to bring their conversation up now. Pointless to mention the repercussion of marrying someone who isn’t an outsider.

Instead of voicing my concerns, I offer to walk her home. She accepts, and I accompany her to her tiny cottage tucked away from most of the city. Nobody bothers us on the way there, or on my journey back, yet the weight of what happened to her doesn’t leave me.

I think about it so much that when I lie beside Gabriel that night, I cannot keep silent. “Did you know someone threw

rotten food at Cassandra today?”

“What?” he asks, his voice rising above my pulse hammering in my ears.

“She came to me today after someone threw food at her. Did you know? Does Luc know?”

Gabriel rotates to his back. “I didn’t.”

I ball my fingers into fists and wince at the throbbing in my arm. My injury still hurts. “Surely, that’s not acceptable. After all, she’s to marry the nephew of your leader.”

“It’s not acceptable.”

“What are you going to do about it?” I cannot act, but Gabriel can.

“What would you like me to do?” No mockery lingers from Gabriel’s words. Only sincerity.

In one fluid motion, I roll to my side and prop myself up on my elbow to get a better look at him. “Kill them!”

His brow rises. “You want me to murder someone because they threw food at Cassandra?”

Of course, I don’t actually want him to murder people for throwing food.

“It was rotten,” I say through my teeth. “And it upset her.”

“You...” He brushes his fingers against my jaw. Slowly. Tenderly. “...are full of spite and vengeance.”

“I don’t actually wish them dead.” I grab his hand, holding it against my cheek. Tingles spread through me at the gentle contact. “I just want you to make an example out of them.”

“How would you like me to do that?” He pulls away and rotates to his back.

I roll my eyes. “Must I think of everything?”

“If I allowed you to think of everything, I would have to murder an unnamed offender,” he says dryly.

“I said I don’t want you to kill them.”

“I know.” Sarcasm lines his tone, as if he doesn’t believe me.

“Tie them up.” I punctuate each word with a jerk of my hand. “Parade them through the city. Then, lock them in the pillory for the night.” In a pillory, they would be forced to remain standing. Their arms would be shoved into wooden slats. They wouldn’t be able to move. Wouldn’t be able to protest when people walked past and threw insults their way.

“It shall be done,” Gabriel says, his tone sincere and forthright.

That easily?

Is he jesting with me?

I inch back a fraction and study his face. Genuineness shines in his eyes. Determination deepens the lines across his forehead.

“Truly?”

“Yes,” he says with a nod. “I will look for the people responsible, then I will carry out your wish.”

Can he do that?

“They will let you?”

A smirk tugs at the corners of his mouth. “*Let?*”

“Will you have to ask Alden for permission?”

“Why are you full of so many questions?” Gabriel asks, his voice a tease, a reminder that I’m not supposed to be so revealing.

A sigh escapes me as I sink back against my pillow and stare up at the ceiling. “Why are you so evasive all the time?”

He doesn’t answer. Not that I believed he would.

“Gabriel.” I shift closer and brush my fingers against his arm, the one covered from shoulder to wrist in a tattoo. “Will we leave Astarobane soon?”

A side of me longs for it, longs to grab Cassandra and never look back. The other side would mourn the garden I

have tended so faithfully. But I would leave a thousand gardens behind if it meant protecting Cassandra and getting away from this horrid place.

“I haven’t convinced Luc or the rest of the leaders,” Gabriel says after a moment.

“Why?” Lightly, I trace one of the ancient words etched into Gabriel’s skin, marveling at the details.

“There are other people to consider. We cannot just leave them behind.”

“Who can’t you leave behind?” I continue touching him, feeling those lines. Those words. Those symbols.

He grabs me with his left hand, stopping my movements. “Praxis, for one. His family is here. And they are very attached to this place.”

“Why do you have this?” I pull away from him and allow my knuckles to skim over the tattoo.

He shrugs, grabs my hand for a second time, and removes it from his arm.

Embarrassment floods my cheeks. “Am I not allowed to touch you? I didn’t make the same vow you did.”

“I’m well aware.” He rolls away from me, presenting his back. Shutting me out.

“Gabriel.” Sadness grips my chest at his rejection.

He doesn’t speak.

Again, I shift to stare up at the ceiling. He’s as cold as a statue. As unfeeling as a pile of ash.

“Must you be so calloused?” The question comes out small. Fragile. “Do you hate me? Is that why you push me away?”

“I don’t...” He exhales and starts over. “It is better if you don’t touch me.”

“Why?”

“I haven’t been with a woman in months,” he says, his voice almost gruff.

“Oh.”

Then, my touch *does* affect him.

The knowledge burrows into my heart. I smile at him, even though he has his back turned. I reach for my blanket and jerk it to my chin as another smile widens my mouth.

Maybe he feels something too, and I *am* hard to resist.

CHAPTER
THIRTY-ONE

“Sol.”

I stop milking Jersa, the cow, the following day, and turn to that familiar voice. I haven't heard him speak my name in four summers. Four, long summers.

“Malachi.” I straighten and smile at him, taking in his blond hair and his storm-colored eyes.

“So, you *do* remember me?” Mirth twinkles behind his stare as he grabs a stool, places it opposite me, and sits. “I was beginning to think you didn't.”

“How could I forget you when you were constantly in my barn when we were children?”

He allows his gaze to rove over the barn we currently sit in. “Kind of like this one.”

“Yes, except...” *This one is Bloodstone.*

My stomach clenches against the reality of our situation. I'm here to avenge my mother. He's here to...

I cannot ask, cannot force him to say. Not knowing is better than knowing.

“We're in Astarobane.” He picks up a piece of straw and twists it between his fingers. “Where *everything* is different.”

“I know.”

Several moments pass where he doesn't speak, he just stares beyond my shoulder. When he finds his voice, it's low, bordered with sadness. “Why did you leave?”

My chest aches at his question. It's a fair one, and he has every right to ask. One moment, I had been in Lanvilla, the village where we lived. The next, I was gone. I didn't tell anyone I was planning to go. Not even Malachi.

"I had to."

Emotions play across Malachi's face. Emotions that increase the ache in the pit of my stomach. "I thought... Rather, I feared something bad had happened to you. I nearly came undone when I saw you riding into Astarobane with those warriors."

"I'm sorry, Malachi." Those words have burned against my tongue enough times. It's nice to finally say them.

"All is forgiven, Sol." He offers a reassuring smile. "I am just pleased that you are well."

"Who is the blonde woman I have seen you with?" I ask as I return to milking Jersa.

"My wife."

My gaze snaps to Malachi. "You're married?"

A smile breaks across his mouth. "Why does that surprise you?"

"I just..." I force my hands to keep moving.

Malachi is married. *Married.*

I keep picturing him at seventeen summers. He was tall, gangly, and gentle. Malachi had always been so gentle.

"How long have you been married?" I ask in a surprisingly normal voice.

He scratches at his jaw. "Six. No, seven months."

"What is her name?"

"Ella." Torchlight weaves over his face as he shifts and places his hands against his thighs. "And you're married to Commander Gabriel."

I quicken my movements and nod.

"How did that come about?"

“The same way most marriages come about.” I shrug.

“Come now, Sol,” Malachi says. “You forget I know you. You wouldn’t just marry a Bloodstone warrior.”

It’s true.

He knows it. I know it. But I cannot show my cards to anyone. Doing so might mean death.

“And you wouldn’t just marry a Bloodstone woman, yet here we both are.”

Malachi nods after a moment. “I suppose neither of us care to divulge all our secrets.

I finish milking Jersa and stand. “I have no secrets, Mal.”

“From me?” He stands and picks up another piece of straw. “Or from your husband?”

From your husband.

I cringe at that reality. That truth. I *am* keeping secrets from Gabriel. The kind of secrets a wife should never keep.

But I could never admit these things to Malachi.

It’s my truth, and my truth alone.

I make my way to the front of the barn. Malachi follows and holds the door open for me.

“You don’t have to stay here, you know,” he says, his words low and lined with caution.

My fingers tighten around the terracotta jar. “Yes, I do.”

“There’s something...” His gaze shifts to the left, where he studies the far line of trees beyond the cottage I share with Gabriel.

Alarm brushes against my skin as I follow his stare but discover nothing stirring. At least, not anything I can set my eyes on.

Malachi’s expression shifts, his eyes turn hard, his mouth thins as he offers a smile that never moves beyond his mouth. “Good day, Sol.”

“Wait.” I tighten my grip on the jar and stare up at him.
“What are you not saying?”

“Nothing.” He nods and walks away, leaving me to the alarm firing along my skin, the trepidation trembling down my back.

Obviously, something bothered him enough that he sought me out. He was here to warn me.

But of what?

What am I failing to see?

Why is Malachi really here?

He married a Bloodstone woman. That means he’s all in just like me. Whatever drew him here, he cannot say, and I cannot ask.

As I walk to my cottage, I focus on that line of trees, wondering what Malachi had seen that shook him. Whatever it was, it kept him from revealing his real reason for visiting me today.

I must discover it.



That evening, I sit near the fireplace, trying to repair one of my surcoats. The hem ripped while I was working in the barn, and I was too embarrassed to go to Cassandra. She gives me such nice things, and I mess them up. This is the third rip in as little as a week.

Gabriel had kept his word about punishing the people who threw rotten food at Cassandra. Two women were paraded through the streets, and they did spend the day locked in a pillory. One of them was Deborah. The woman I followed through the city.

Her eyes had burned with fury as she hunched there pitifully. I felt no empathy for her plight. Neither did most of the people who walked past.

After being released from the pillory, the woman were removed and forced to spend time in a sweat lodge. Maybe the Bloodstone people thought it would purify their sins.

Gabriel sits next to me, staring into the flames, as he often does. Occasionally, I glance up from my task, studying the solemn man. He always seems so forlorn when he's sitting there, as if the weight of the world rests solely on his shoulders.

When he's outside of this cottage, he performs with the best of them. He trains daily. Attends his men. And disappears to his forge.

In here, next to me, he's different. He's distant. Serious. Morose. If he weren't, he wouldn't stare so intently into those flames with his brow pinched and his mouth tight.

"I made you something." He reaches to the table next to him and grabs a small dagger.

He pulls the blade free of its leather sheath to reveal the Damascus steel.

"For me?" I ask breathlessly. Nobody has ever made me a weapon before.

It's small—barely larger than my hand. The grip is overlaid with twisted steel wire.

He slips it back into its sheath and holds it out to me. "This one is small enough to hide on your body."

"Gabriel." I take the dagger, tug it from its guard, and stare at the wavy design on the steel. "It's incredible."

He shrugs.

"No." Warmth settles in my chest as I return the dagger to its casing. "You are talented."

"It's just a dagger." He reaches for his goblet of mint tea and takes a drink.

“It’s an incredible weapon. There are no bends. No weaknesses.”

He stands and places his goblet next to the basin. “Good night.”

“Wait.” I stand next to him and resist the strong urge to throw my arms around him. “Thank you.”

Those silver-blue eyes meet mine for a breath. Then, he nods and walks away, leaving me with the incredible gift. I stare down at the dagger. It’s one of the finest blades I have ever seen.

Thank you, Gabriel.

CHAPTER
THIRTY-TWO

On a windy morning, I stroll through the city of Astarobane. I keep to my tradition of listening, observing. Nothing stands out. There are still no paths leading me to the city Roland or Hector live in.

As I stop near the fruit stand, I spot Deborah out of the corner of my eye. She walks toward me wearing a dark purple surcoat.

Anger sparks in my veins. Anger for Kassandra.

It takes everything in me to not draw my dagger and teach Deborah to not touch my friends.

“Kyanite,” she says loudly, as though she thinks I’m deaf. “Alden wishes to see you.”

My heart roars against my ribcage. Why would Alden want to see me? Have I done something wrong?

My mind does a quick backtrack, but I discover nothing that stands out. Well, other than removing Lucian from this world. Surely, Gabriel didn’t tell anyone.

Instead of voicing any questions, I simply nod and follow Deborah through the sandstone streets. She doesn’t speak to me. Not that I thought she would.

She thinks she’s above her company with her jewels and silk clothes. She keeps her chin lifted as she walks. Nobody speaks to either of us as we walk by, but they stare. Oh, how they stare. One of their own is walking next to the Kyanite.

The moment she approaches the palace, my heart pounds faster. What if Malachi spoke against me? Or what if Gabriel is tired of me?

Surely, he wouldn't have crafted such a lovely dagger for me if he was tired of me. It rests inside of my right sleeve, waiting to be used, if needed.

Worry floods through me as Deborah continues leading me closer to my Fate. I would do anything for Cassandra's comforting presence. When I am with her, I feel safe, accepted, cared for. With Deborah, there's only smallness and fragility.

Oh, how fragile my lungs are. My legs. My breath.

As we approach the front door of the stone palace, a guard swings it wide. We step inside to the bustle of activity. Servants scurry by. Guards patrol the halls. Groups of people stand in small circles talking.

The interior of the large palace is as grand as the outside. The walls, floors, and ceiling are all made of the same rose-colored marble. The rich veining reminds me of art—the way those lines splash their way across the hard surface.

Deborah leads me past all of them, down a long, wide hallway and to a thick iron door. "In here."

She nods, and another guard pulls the door open.

Deborah swings her hand toward the opening. "You may go in."

Quick breaths escape me as I follow her request, stepping into the unknown. My Fate. The room with Alden. The man who looks just like Roland. The man who could condemn me with a single glance.

He looks up from where he sits at a round table. "Hello."

"Hello," I say as I cross the room.

It's every bit as grand as the rest of the palace. Someone hand crafted the furniture—carving into the wood with fine attention to detail. They hung silk tapestries and built an elaborate fireplace made of marble and walnut.

With a smile, Alden points to the chair opposite him. “Please sit.”

I do as he requested, sitting and folding my hands in my lap.

He looks the same as when I last saw him. He has the same raven-colored hair. The same vibrant blue eyes. The same short beard. The same lines across his brow, hinting that he’s at least fifty summers.

“Tell me about yourself, Sol.”

My breath hitches at that question. A reaction I’m sure he doesn’t miss.

Breathe.

Just breathe.

You can do this.

I inhale and slowly exhale. “I’m Sol of the Kyanite tribe. I am...” The words stick in my throat. I force them out anyway. “...a healer.”

“Is that all you are?”

What more does he want from me?

“Yes.”

“I have been doing a little research into your background,” he admits.

My heart falls to my feet.

Olah, help me.

“Would you like to know what I have discovered?”

No. “Yes.”

“You *aren’t* a healer. Your mother is dead. Your father owns a brothel.” Assurance and frankness bleeds from his words as he continues. “And you ran away from home when you were sixteen.”

My mouth falls open before I snap it closed.

The room grows hotter, more confining, as though it reaches in, suffocating me.

Breathe.

“Would you like to know the most troubling part of all of that?” When I fail to answer, he continues anyway. “There are about four summers unaccounted for. Four summers where you could have been anything. Done anything.” He leans forward, locking his eyes with mine. “Tell me about those summers.”

I lace my fingers together and draw on my inner calm. “I traveled across Tarrobane, and I worked at different taverns as I discovered a world beyond Kyanite land.”

“Why?”

“I craved adventure.” It’s true. I did crave adventure. I craved a life beyond being incapable of casting magic.

“I see.” Slowly, Alden drums his fingers against the table. “Why do you lie about healing?”

I lift my hand to the kyanite stone tucked into my surcoat. “It’s easier to lie about not being able to heal with magic, than to admit that I cannot.” I adjust positions and take a deep breath before continuing. “I am a healer, just not in the traditional sense of Kyanite healing.”

“Fair enough.” Alden shifts the subject. “What do you know of Gabriel?”

“I don’t understand?”

“What do you know of the man you have married?”

Does Alden seek to trap me by asking about Gabriel?

“I know he’s a commander.” A deep breath escapes me as I think of the last few weeks with Gabriel. He’s not always cold and distant. He’s warm when he wants to be. “He’s kind. He’s empathic.”

Does Alden expect more? Should I gush over my husband?

“Is that all you know?” Alden asks.

“Should I know more?”

Alden stacks his hands together as he speaks. “If you knew him, you would understand my question.”

That’s not fair.

It’s impossible to truly know Gabriel. He’s so elusive. So frustrating.

The Seer’s words to Gabriel echo in my ears. “*Trust is as flimsy as a seedling flailing in the breeze. Never reveal what is yours to hold close.*”

What does he hold close?

“What else is there to understand?” I ask, desiring to know more.

Alden slides his hands apart, only to stack them together. “He’s fiercely loyal and fiercely devoted. He will slay anyone, condemn anyone, if he believes they will hurt his people.”

“Have I done something wrong?” I cannot help but ask.

Why else would Alden call me here? Is he warning me or threatening me?

“I only want you to know what kind of man you have married.” Alden locks his eyes on the wall behind me. “For his people, he will sever the heartbeat of agitation ... and he has.” The chair creaks beneath him as Alden shifts his focus back to me. “It would not be wise to test him.”

“I don’t plan to.”

Alden studies me to the point I squirm and swallow through the ash in my throat. “You look different than I imagined you might.”

He imagined me?

My brow rises. “How did you imagine me?”

He shrugs. “Different.”

A thought occurs to me, so I ask a question of my own—one I hope isn’t too forward. “Are you the chieftain of the Bloodstone people?”

It would make sense, especially since I haven't been able to discover more about Roland, or Hector for that matter.

Alden lifts his hand to his shoulders and pats. "Do you see a gold livery around my shoulders?"

The livery of office? The one all Tarrobane chieftains wear?

When Roland murdered Mother, he wore the thick, gold chain around his shoulders. In the center hung their pendant. Their serpent.

"No," I say after a moment.

"Then, I am not the chieftain."

"You lead Astarobane, though."

Alden nods.

"Do you care about what people are doing to outsiders?" Maybe I have said too much, but I cannot help but think of Cassandra while I'm sitting here.

Alden runs his hands across his brow. "Of course."

More boldness grips me as I voice another question. "Then why not remove those red circles?"

"You want me to undo something that has worked in our tribe for well over a century."

"It doesn't work." Bitterness lurches from me as I continue. "It hurts good people."

Shadows darken his eyes as he sweeps them over me. "Why do you care? You're not one of them."

"Because some of them are my friends."

"I see." Alden stands, rotates toward the door, and calls out. "Caldum, escort Sol back to the city."

I don't object as a young guard with no lines or wrinkles, leads me away from Alden, the room, the palace.

The guard cannot be a day over eighteen summers. I'm not sure why the realization surprises me. Maybe because most of their soldiers are older.

Caldum doesn't speak to me. A fact I'm thankful for. The silence gives me time to think of my conversation with Alden.

Alden was trying to warn me of something. I feel it in the deepest corners of my heart.

Gabriel is brimstone and fire. He'll burn anyone that gets in the way of his people. At least, that's what Alden seemed to be saying.

And well, Alden clearly doesn't trust me.

I run a hand along my cheek and frown. Should I be more invisible?

Olah, help me.

I don't know how to be invisible and good at discovering more about the Bloodstone.

I'm a simple woman. A want-to-be healer. A brief warrior.

I am not a spy.

If only I were.

CHAPTER
THIRTY-THREE

The windows tremble as the door bursts open the following day. Luc and Gabriel carry a wounded Praxis between them. Blood stains Praxis' surcoat and drips from a corner of his mouth.

My breath hitches as I rush to my feet and meet Luc's haunted eyes. Fear burns there. It smolders from him, gripping me around the neck.

"Heal him," he says, his tone low, guttural.

Words knot in my throat as Gabriel shoves items from the table, sending them toppling, before placing the dying man on top. I step close and place my fingers against Praxis' neck, feeling a faint beat.

In quick, jerky movements, I cut away his surcoat and gasp at the amount of blood oozing out of the deep gouges in his chest. It looks like something with large claws sunk into his flesh and ripped. Gabriel thrusts a clean cloth into my hand, and I press it against the injury. Praxis lets out a rattling breath, but he doesn't moan or thrash against my hold.

Olah, help us!

He's too far gone.

After a moment of holding the material against the wounds, I pull it back, noting the deep gouges, the torn flesh.

Dread finds a home deep within me. "You should have taken him to your healers." Then they cannot blame me when he doesn't make it.

“I brought him to you,” Luc growls. “Heal him.”

Regret pierces my veins, my bones, my useless hands. I should be more effective, different, an actual Kyanite healer. Instead, I was an errand girl in the apothecary, the one who hung on their every word. The one who listened with rapt attention as they talked in their healing tongue.

I planted herbs with the best of them. I studied until the light faded from my windows. Still, I could never wield any gifts. My magic was always useless.

“I’m not what you think I am, Luc.” Ragged breaths escape me as I shake my head. “I don’t have magic. I have never had it.”

Gabriel shouldn’t have encouraged this. I didn’t hold back the truth from him.

“You’ve been planting herbs. Yes?” Luc asks. “Go pick some.”

My posture slumps forward as I speak, my words raw, defeated. “They’re not ready.”

And even if they were, they couldn’t heal Praxis. Only an actual Kyanite healer could help him now.

“Then you’re useless,” Luc grumbles as he slams his hands against the table.

“Leave us, Luc.” The firmness of Gabriel’s tone sends surprise rippling through me, as does Luc’s compliance. After a quick look at the dying Praxis, he quits the cottage with his shoulders slumped and his face downcast.

Frustration grips me as I meet Gabriel’s gaze. “I can’t help Praxis.”

“You can.” Gabriel turns to the shelves and collects more rags. “Say the words of your people.”

Heat singses my cheeks as I shake my head and pull the cloth free, taking another glance at the gaping lacerations and the blood seeping from the wounds. Praxis has lost too much, and the cuts are too deep to sew. Even if I managed to bind the torn flesh, an infection would kill him. *If* he lived long enough.

Gabriel places his right hand over mine. “Say the words.”

My breath escapes me as I lay trembling fingers against Praxis’ shoulder. For many summers, I have struggled to draw on my magic, and it never happened.

Now this.

I’m disappointing the one man I have tried so hard to please.

“I can’t.” The truth escapes me in a broken whisper as memories haunt me—all those summers of never being good enough.

Assurance glimmers from Gabriel’s eyes as he speaks in a firm tone. “You can.”

More warmth scours my cheeks, my veins, my heart, even the part of me that desperately wants to heal Praxis.

Say the words.

Gabriel’s determination burrows deep within me, to the inadequacies, to the failures, to the incompleteness. I draw on his determination the way fire inhales air, whispering in the tongue of my people, chanting those healing verses. Bringing life to dying weeds, decaying deserts, barren oceans. Calling forth Olah to aid me on this quest, to heal, to renew, to bring back what was.

By the time I finish, my pulse thrashes in my throat, and my fingers tremble. I clasp them together as Praxis inhales, and I cringe, waiting for it to be his last breath. He exhales, and the walls spin. The floor tilts.

Fire scorches my wrist, traveling downward to wrap around my hand, my fingers. I gasp as pain sears through my serpent mark like tiny needles stinging my flesh. I stagger forward, catching myself against the table.

“You healed him,” Gabriel says, his tone low, hoarse, awestruck, as if he can’t quite believe it happened.

“That’s impossible.” I inhale and exhale quickly, breathing through the throbbing, willing it away, willing the walls to stop spinning and the world to soften around me.

The pain ebbs as Gabriel moves to the washing stand and wets a cloth. He returns and wipes the blood covering Praxis' chest. On his second pass, the wound disappears, leaving behind a faint scar. I step back and shake my head.

"This is impossible." Weakness overtakes my limbs. My arms. My ability to stand. I lean against the wall, using it for support. "I don't heal with magic. I have never healed with magic."

Gabriel continues caring for Praxis like I didn't speak. Maybe he knows arguing would be futile.

I shift my focus to the window, watching the swaying olive trees, the clouds darkening the sky.

This is Astarobane. People don't use gifts here.

"Gabriel, listen to me. This doesn't happen," I say, desperate for him to understand. To listen.

After he finishes doing the best he can with rags and water, already stained red with blood, he lifts his gaze to me. "I know." How simple he says those two words, as if we talk about the price of wheat.

I jab my right thumb into my left palm and stare down at Praxis. He still lies there with his eyes closed and his face pale.

"Why isn't he awake?" I ask.

Gabriel's attention shifts to the man lying across our table. "I don't know. You're the healer."

Think, Sol. As hard as I try, my thoughts remain jumbled. *Breathe. Think.* I inhale and exhale, drawing calm to me, like the shore pulling waves inward.

Clarity returns, all those months of training, all those moments of sitting by patients after a Kyanite healer cured them.

"People often take time to recover after their wounds are healed with magic."

“Then, perhaps, that’s why he hasn’t awakened.” Gabriel moves to the door with the basin and disappears through the opening.

Sticky strands of hair cling to my cheeks as I shuffle to the sofa and sink against the cushion. Gabriel returns and refills the terracotta bowl with clean water.

“This is Astarobane.” My stomach tightens as I continue. “People don’t cast magic here.”

“No, Bloodstone people don’t cast magic in Astarobane,” Gabriel says plainly. “Nobody ever said an outsider couldn’t.”

“I’m an outsider?”

“You know what I meant.”

“No, I don’t,” I say honestly. “Can people use magic here?”

Kassandra said they cannot.

“Yes.”

I search Gabriel’s face for deceit. He gives nothing away. No twitching. No glancing away.

The gods must have cursed me. Nothing else makes sense. Why else would they only allow me to heal while I stand among Bloodstone people?

How ironic. How frustrating. How...

I glance up, catching Gabriel’s stare. Gratitude shines there. Not hate. Not scorn.

“Thank you, Sol.”

My name.

My actual name.

I look away, unable to face whatever it is he must be thinking.

It’s cowardly, weak. I’m neither of those things. But right now, I’m all of them.

I’m a Kyanite.

He's a Bloodstone.

We hate one another, or at least, we're supposed to loathe one another.

Now this. Acknowledgement. Gratitude. My real name!

"You must forgive Luc," Gabriel says after a moment. "Praxis is his cousin, and he has very few people left that he cares about."

"I understand," I say, my voice soft. "And I cannot fault him."

I know what it's like to only have a few people I care about. Mother was my light, and the nights have been so dark without her.

"Sol." Gabriel's tone draws my attention back to him. "You cannot tell people about using gifts here. At least not yet."

I rub my cheek and nod. "I know. Otherwise, everyone would run to me for all their ailments."

It would become overwhelming. I have seen it in villages I visited. A Kyanite healer showed up, and people came from miles seeking healing.

Torchlight dances across Gabriel's face as he speaks. "Partially, yes."

"What is the other reason?"

Loose black strands fall over Gabriel's forehead as he hunches forward and stares down at Praxis. "Most Bloodstone people fear magic."

"Oh. I don't want them to fear me." I lick my bottom lip and continue. "I want to earn their respect."

I have no choice. Without their respect, I'll never get close enough to their leader to carry out my mission. It doesn't matter what I really think about them. Nor does it matter that I want to avenge their cruelty toward Cassandra. All that matters is sticking to my course. I have come too far.

“Then keep this a secret for now.” Amber shadows play across Gabriel’s face as he pours a goblet of tea and sits near the still sleeping Praxis.

A comforting silence falls over us as I join Gabriel. I shut off the questions ricocheting inside me, all the ones mystified by healing Praxis. I can analyze everything later. Instead, I focus on Gabriel and smile.

He called me Sol.

CHAPTER
THIRTY-FOUR

Warmth devours every inch of my skin. At least, that's the way it feels, like a devouring. I exhale, relishing in the heat.

As a child, I spent winters tucked close to my younger sister, Aniah. She'd always sneak her arm around me during the night. Often, I'd protest. Until one morning, she didn't put her arm around me, and she didn't keep the icy cold from touching me. She was the icy cold.

My breath suspends as I tuck away those thoughts. Her memory cannot touch me here. It's too raw. Too painful.

Instead, I open my eyes and stare at the man next to me. Golden rays spill through the windows, framing his strong features. Gabriel is always gone by now, as if at the sight of sunlight, he cannot abide to stay near me.

I don't dare move my legs from his. If I do, he may pull away and gaze at me with condemning eyes. He'll think this is all my fault, even though he's the one lying in the center of the bed. Usually, he sleeps close to the edge.

Jealousy seizes me at the way the sun skips across him, highlighting the muscles on his torso. My fingers itch to follow the same path, to touch him, to feel his skin beneath my fingertips.

He called me Sol.

A smile pulls at my lips as I think about the moment the day before. Something changed in him. Something no longer

seeing me as a threat. Or at least, he seemed to let go of his battlements. Gone was his shield, his hatred, his bitter tongue.

Hair spills over my shoulders as I rise to get a better look. War scarred him, leaving patchworks of bravery on his skin. Each one tells his story. He has a long, faded scar on his chest and a scattering of smaller marks across his shoulders.

As if feeling my gaze, Gabriel's eyes open, catching on mine, and my pulse thunders in my ears.

"Good morning," I say in a soft voice.

"Sol." He runs his fingers through his dark hair, unsettling the strands.

"Did you sleep well?"

He blinks and lowers his eyes to our tangled legs. A wild thought grips me as I wait for his reaction. What if I yank up my nightdress and straddle his lean hips? Would he object?

A vein throbs in his forehead as he meets my stare for a second time. No accusations burn there as I worried. Only things I find impossible to decipher in those blue depths. If only I understood him. If only he lusts the way other men do. They're easy to read. Gabriel isn't.

"Gabriel," I say, my voice low, but audible enough for him to hear my desire.

For a beat, maybe two, his eyes lower, taking in my mouth, my throat, my thin nightdress before ripping away.

Disappointment grips me when he curses and bounds from the bed, robbing me of his heat. Muscles flex in his back and shoulders as he moves to the washing stand, cleans his face, and reaches for his surcoat.

He speaks as he continues dressing. "I moved Praxis to the other bedchamber. Don't let anyone see him yet."

"Gabriel." I rise to sitting as he pulls on his weapon belt and pauses long enough to glance at me. "Must you go?"

"Yes. I'm already late." He runs his fingers through his hair again and leaves the room.

I blow out a frustrated breath and move from the bed. The cold floor sends ice racing up my legs. After adding dried freesias to the water, I wash my face and body. Visions of lying close to Gabriel tease me as I dress in my gray surcoat, tie a belt around my waist, and leave the room.

Hesitation grips me like a fawn taking its first steps as I move to the other bedchamber. I peek around the door, studying the man lying on the bed. Like the day before, Praxis still sleeps.

Olah, help me.

The prayer strengthens me as I take a tentative step into the bedchamber. I need assurance, real assurance that my healing didn't harm him further. Not that anything could have harmed him further. He was at death's door.

I stare down at my hands, expecting something different, needing something different. They're the same calloused hands. I clasp them together and shake my head. Mother would be amazed and proud. She always believed in me when others didn't.

Yearning swells inside me, the desire to hear her voice one more time. Roland stole my heart the day he ripped her from me.

Now, I have healed a Bloodstone warrior, a man who has probably killed Kyanites.

The flame of bitterness scorches my stomach and flares through my veins as I flee the bedchamber. Near a wall in my room, I sink to the floor and let out quick breaths. I yank my kyanite necklace from my bodice and grip it.

Roland took Mother from me. I don't need someone to draw a tapestry scene to remind me of his treachery. He stitched every moment against my chest.

I bring my knees forward, hunch my body, and bury my face against them. Now, I desire a Bloodstone warrior—Gabriel. He's surrounded in mystery, yet he stirs me.

I should loathe him.

His sword. His legacy. His battle marks.

When I first met him, I was determined to conquer him. Now, I'm left wondering who's doing the conquering.

“No!”

Bitterness bites into me as I slam my fingers against my left palm, remembering the pain of watching Mother being slaughtered. She's my reminder to never forget my path. It's mine. Nobody can ever take it from me.

Not even Gabriel.

CHAPTER
THIRTY-FIVE

Dust kicks into the air as I step outside later that day to find a bustle of activity. Bloodstone warriors ride through the streets with battle marks slashed on their faces. The sun glares off those black lines as my lungs squeeze. Over the throng of men, I spot Gabriel riding next to Luc, Leah, and Hero.

I shade my eyes with my hand as Gabriel rides toward me and dismounts.

“Keep Praxis here and don’t allow anyone to see him,” he says in a low voice.

“What’s happening?”

Fierceness smolders behind his eyes as his gaze jerks to the warriors riding past. “Malachites attacked our southern villages last night.”

I clasp my hands together and fight the urge to protest him leaving. He could be injured. Or worse...

My stomach clenches at the thought of worse.

“I’ll watch over Praxis,” I say when I can think of nothing else.

“Sol.” Gabriel steps closer, catches the curve of my cheek, and lifts my face to his. “I haven’t properly thanked you.”

“You have.” Instead of the strong, convincing tone I hoped for, my words come out in a whisper.

Lightly, he traces my jaw with his thumb and smiles. “You have my sincerest gratitude.”

With another light trace, he frees me and steps back. I blink, willing away the tingles.

A fierce wind whips at the hem of my surcoat as I turn away, and he rejoins his men. Instead of preparing to avenge Mother so ardently, I should have taken a lover. Any lover. Maybe if I had, I wouldn't desire Gabriel.

Frustration brands me as I step back into the cottage and curse. One touch, and I'm willing to do anything he wants. Preposterous. No man should affect me this way. I scrub at my cheek, willing away the memory, the need.

He hadn't felt the same. Nothing stirred behind his gaze but gratitude. He's leaving, and I'm left tending to his friend.

I walk to the spare bedchamber and peek around the door to find Praxis sitting up in bed. "Oh, you're awake."

"May I have water?" he asks, his voice raspy from lack of use.

Quelling my frustration with Gabriel, I fetch clean water and bring it to Praxis. He takes the goblet and raises it to his lips, drinking greedily.

"Careful," I say. "Sip it."

He obeys, drinking the water slower. After he finishes, he rests against the headboard and exhales.

I take a seat near the bed and eye the lounging man. "You are fortunate to have such dedicated friends. They refused to give up on you."

The warrior runs his hand through his blond hair. "Family takes care of one another."

"Luc was so distraught."

Praxis offers a tired smile. "My cousin." Admiration hangs over his words as he continues. "He's devoted to our people. Both are."

"Gabriel?" I should know the answer by now, but my husband has been so evasive, and the longer I'm around him, the more I realize I don't understand him.

Lines deepen across Praxis' forehead as he studies me for several beats. "Gabriel is as devoted as anyone I have ever seen."

"You admire him too."

"How could I not?"

Praxis reaches for his chest, to the area now scarred. "Did you heal me?"

"I..."

A wide smile pulls at his mouth. "I have never been healed by magic." He stares at the scars for several more breaths. "You have my gratitude and my devotion. My sword is yours."

"I don't need—"

"—among the Bloodstone, if someone saves your life, you owe them your loyalty. Until I repay your gift, my sword is yours."

Knowing it's useless to argue, I nod.

"How were you injured?" I ask.

Automatically, his hand goes to his chest, to where the scars now mark his skin. "Hunting. Luc was determined to find the bear who killed one of his horses."

"Oh."

Praxis' attention shifts to the window. "I heard horses earlier. Did the army leave?"

"Yes."

Disappointment flares in Praxis' eyes for only a beat before he banishes it with an even wider smile. "Good. I would never get to know you with Gabriel around. Do you have family, Sol?"

"A father." I rise to refill Praxis' goblet and return to catch his gaze on me.

"That's all?"

"Yes." I don't bother telling him about the women at the brothel. He probably wouldn't understand my closeness to

them. Nor do I bother to tell him about the little sister we buried before she reached her eighth birthday. I never speak about her. It's too painful.

"To have so little family must be lonely." He studies the window as he continues. "I grew up with endless cousins. Uncles. Brothers."

Aniah's face slips into my vision again. I exhale, willing away the sharpness I get in the center of my chest when I remember her. She was so young. So cheerful. She always hummed. Always danced.

Then, one day, she didn't.

Shadows pass over Praxis' face as he rubs a hand across his jaw. "Then again, I have lost more than anyone should."

"Haven't we all?" I ask, my words low, bordered with sadness.

More shadows move over Praxis' angular features. "Yes."

I stand and move to the door. "Would you like some potato soup?"

"Yes."

Frustrating thoughts gnaw at my mind as I serve soup into a terracotta bowl. I didn't come here to make friends, or to heal Bloodstone warriors. I did it anyway. First, I befriended Cassandra. Now, I have healed Praxis, and he's offering me his sword.

Somehow, these Bloodstone people keep working their way into my heart, my feelings, my empathy. Before I came here, I hadn't imagined such a thing was possible.

I rejoin Praxis and hand him the bowl. Gratitude shimmers in his eyes as he reaches for the soup, blows, and takes a sip.

"Thank you. It's delicious." After Praxis finishes, he straightens and speaks in a serious voice. "You're the first."

"What do you mean?" I ask as I take the terracotta bowl and set it on the table next to the bed.

“Nobody has cast magic in Astarobane since the gods took Bloodstone magic.”

My throat clenches as my conversation with Gabriel pierces my ears.

He lied to me.

The clenching increases, squeezing around my neck with spidery fingers. Why would Gabriel lie about this?

“Nobody?” I ask, needing confirmation.

“Nobody.” A lopsided grin pulls at his mouth as he speaks. “Olah must think I’m special for a Kyanite to heal me.”

For a breath, I stare down at my hands, wondering why everything changed. I came here to avenge Mother, not heal Bloodstone warriors.

“It’s ironic,” Praxis says, his words low, bordered with caution, as if he treads lightly. “Kyanites are responsible for taking our magic, yet a Kyanite woman sits among us and heals a Bloodstone warrior.”

I blink and glance up at him.

He raises his hand. “Please, I mean no offense. I am as baffled by the gods as you are.”

“Your people had dark gifts.” I am no longer willing to keep my mouth shut.

Praxis nods. “I know.” He studies the window as he continues. “Bloodstones ruled all Tarrobane before the gods curbed our magic. My ancestors didn’t achieve such victories without walking over the backs of innocent people. But that was forty summers ago. Why should we be punished for something we didn’t do?”

“Maybe they know giving your people magic again would cause a ricocheting effect.”

Instead of replying, Praxis keeps his focus locked on the window. The longer he remains silent, the more it gnaws at my chest, digging a well of dread.

“Do you believe your magic would be different?” I ask when I can no longer bear the quiet.

“We are different people.”

He didn’t answer my question. He merely skirted around it.

“What of your people’s cruelty toward the outsiders?”

“That’s Astarobane. Things are different here.”

My brow rises. “What do you mean?”

“Not every city is like Astarobane. Nor is every Bloodstone like the ones you see here.”

“Are you different Praxis?”

“I would like to believe I am.”

“What of Tarra?” I ask as I remember the city Gabriel mentioned.

“Tarra is different and full of a lot of former warriors.” Praxis runs his fingers through his hair as he speaks. “You will not encounter the same prejudices in Tarra.”

Something Gabriel said to me strikes at my thoughts. He said Astarobane was someone’s city. But whose? Who enflamed the prejudices here?

“Do you believe the Bloodstone tribe should rule Tarrobane?” It’s a fair question—one that has nagged at the back of my thoughts since Luc kidnapped me.

Taut lines appear near Praxis’ mouth. “We are the chosen bloodline.”

No!

His words curve a line of fear deep into my heart. The Bloodstones cannot revive what their ancestors did. They killed thousands. Burned many villages. Most of Tarrobane was charred black with their greed.

The high gods intervened and took away their magic. Then the other five tribes revolted. First, the Kyanites. Then the

Malachites, followed by the Carnelians, Hematites, and Calcites.”

“Is that what your people want? To subject all the Tarrobane barbarian tribes to your authority again?” Somehow, I ask the questions without allowing my bitterness to show.

Praxis shifts, pulling his covers closer and shrugs. “I’m not privy to what the council wants.”

Olah, help us all. I cannot allow that to happen. I’ll kill Roland first, then their tribe will be left reeling.

The rising sun will rise. Cassandra’s grandmother’s voice hisses in my ears. I try to suppress it, but it repeats like a never-ending nightmare. *Hector is the rising sun, and he’ll bring magic back.*

No!

Hector must die too. I knew it weeks ago, and I know it now. He must die, or the other five Tarrobane tribes will feel the sting of my failure.

To save all Tarrobane, I must be a hawk—diligent and dedicated in finding my prey.

It’s the only way.



On the fourth morning after Gabriel left Astarobane, I wake early, tend to my garden, and see that Praxis is fed. He continues engrossing me in conversation, and the more he speaks, the more I understand their world.

Well, what little of it he reveals. He’s almost as evasive as Gabriel.

I try asking about Roland and Hector, but like the rest of his people, he skirts the truth. Instead, he tells me about the history behind Astarobane, and how the Bloodstone people

built it after their fall from the gods' grace. In the blink of an eye, they went from rulers to bottom feeders.

For decades, the other five tribes have retaliated by taking out the Bloodstones' tribal leaders. In Praxis' lifetime alone, he has lost his grandfather and uncle to assassinations.

I take in Praxis' words with a placid expression and fire in my belly. It's never going to leave until I carry out my duty and save the other tribes.

As much as my heart feels empathy for Praxis' loss, I must keep to my mission. Before I leave this place, he'll lose more family.

Maybe he and Luc will be better rulers than their predecessors. Maybe they won't destroy entire villages. It's my hope that a new sun will settle over the Bloodstone people, and they accept they will never rule Tarrobane again.

The thought has become my constant companion as I go about my duties in Gabriel's absence. Soon, he'll return, and I'll have to engage him more.

It's the only way. The only course.

Then, why does it make my chest ache? Why does it make that hollow sensation return?

It's there every day. Every moment. Every night as I lie awake thinking about everything that has led me to this place.

Maybe it's good that it's there. Maybe it means I'm not callous. I care about taking the lives of people. Even Roland.

But it doesn't mean I can stray from my course. Olah wills it. Mother deserves my faithfulness.

For her.

Always.

CHAPTER
THIRTY-SIX

Loud, obnoxious knocking wakes me from the throes of a rather enjoyable dream. I startle, sitting up in bed as the sound comes again—the pounding of a fist against wood.

I heave a sigh, throw my feet over the side of the bed and stand. A wave of dizziness assaults me as I gain my bearings. In quick movements, I yank on a nightdress, tie the belt, and grab the dagger Gabriel made for me from the table by the bed.

My fingers curl around the grip, and my heart eases to a slower rhythm. With the dagger clutched in my right hand, I angle toward the front door and call out.

“Who’s there?”

“Briley.”

The soft voice surprises me. I expected a man to be pounding at my door in the middle of the night.

“What do you want?”

“Praxis, my husband.”

My pulse throbs in my ears as I dart my gaze to the bedroom I left Praxis in. Gabriel said to not let anyone see him.

“He’s not here.”

“Liar. The butcher saw Luc and Gabriel carry him here. I demand to see my husband.”

I exhale and shift my weight from foot to foot. If he were my husband, I would want to see him.

“I’m sorry.” I continue in what I hope is a convincing tone. “But he’s not here.”

She pounds again, shaking the door with her fury. “I want to see my husband. Now!”

“He’s not here,” I repeat.

“I swear to all the gods,” she shouts. “If you don’t open this door, I will ram it down.”

Moonlight trickles through the windows as I step back and eye the sturdiness of the door. It won’t come down without a battering ram.

“Good night, Briley.” With determined hands, I tie my dressing gown tighter and turn toward my bedroom.

“Sol,” she calls out, her tone desperate. “Please, I cannot give birth without my husband.”

Oh, the sky above. I cannot do that to her.

With the dagger still secured in my hand, I unlock the door and ease it open. Torchlight bathes a petite woman in an orange glow. She holds it higher, revealing her rounded abdomen and the coat of sweat on her forehead.

Her long red hair streams out like ribbons behind her as she hurries into the cottage and jerks her gaze around. “Where is he?”

As I turn to face the bedroom door, it opens, and Praxis fills the opening. Briley rushes to where he stands and embraces him. They pull apart the moment she lets out a loud moan and bends in half.

The warrior’s eyes widen as he reaches for his wife. “Briley, are you all right?”

“No,” she says between pants. “I’m going to have this child tonight.”

“Sol, will hel—”

Briley throws up her hand and speaks in a rush of harsh words. "I don't want Kyanite scum to touch me."

Before I muster a reply, she lets out another loud moan. Uncertainty fills Praxis' eyes as they dart to me. I push aside my frustration at having been awakened during the night and hurry to where they stand.

"You don't have time to leave." Without waiting for her reply, I take her by the arm and guide her to the spare bedroom.

Worry drums against my heart, not because I doubt my ability to help her. I have attended hundreds of births. Instead, I dread something bad happening and her blaming me simply because I'm a Kyanite.

She settles on the bed and curls her fingers around the bedcovers as she grunts and bears down.

Hades! She's already pushing.

Forgetting my worries, and her hatred for me, I move into healer mode, yanking up her nightdress and dressing gown to prepare for the child.

"Grab cloth," I say to Praxis.

He fetches a clean cloth and returns to Briley's side, holding her hand and encouraging her.

On her fourth push, she delivers a tiny baby, and I bring him to her stomach.

Tears fill Briley's eyes as she touches his red hair. "My baby."

I work on cutting and tying the cord as Praxis reaches for a cloth and lays it over his son.

"Rub his back," I say.

Praxis follows my order, rubbing the linen against the boy's back. After a moment, the tiny infant's wails pierce the small cottage.

"Oh, Praxis," Briley says as she brings the child closer. "He's perfect."

Gauging the quickness of the birth, I wonder if she has more children. Most women push for a long time to deliver their first. I shove aside those thoughts as I take in the sight of mother, father, and child. It never gets old—welcoming a new life into the world.

“Praxis.” Happiness shines in Briley’s eyes as she raises her son’s arm. “He has the birthmark.”

Shock ripples through me as I stare at the same serpent mark as my own.

“It’s back.” A wide smile spreads across Praxis’ mouth. “I knew it would happen. I always said it would.”

“What’s back?” I ask.

The smile deepens on Praxis’ face. “Bloodstone magic.”

As he leans forward to kiss his wife, my veins freeze, turning to ice inside me. This cannot be. A mere child cannot bring so much evil.

It takes everything in me to not race from the room, gather my meager belongings, and flee. Instead, I take a deep breath and garner the strength to speak.

“What makes you think that?” Somehow my question comes out even, disguising the whirlwind building in my chest.

Praxis lays his hand against his child’s head, cradling the life he created with Briley. “The Seer predicted children born with serpent birthmarks, but only after magic returned to Bloodstone people.”

Ash thickens in my throat as I force myself to go through the motion of delivering the afterbirth, then cleaning and wrapping the baby.

After I finish, I move toward the door to give the couple privacy.

“Sol,” Praxis says, drawing my attention back to him. “Thank you.”

For what? Catching a child with Bloodstone magic? For ruining everything?

How those words scorch my tongue. I suppress them with a smile and nod. "Of course."

I step from the room, shutting the door behind me. This cannot happen. I came here to right a wrong, to scourge the earth of an atrocity, to give Mother peace in the afterlife. Instead, I healed a warrior and caught a baby with Bloodstone magic.

Praxis could be lying, but nothing else makes sense. The birthmark was as vivid as the spot on my skin.

Moonlight bathes me as I step to the window and raise my wrist, displaying the hissing serpent placed there after Mother died.

Father said the gods cursed me.

Maybe they did.

I am cursed, and I have brought a plague upon this earth.

Or ... I *am* the plague.

CHAPTER
THIRTY-SEVEN

Torchlight casts a warm glow around me as I tarry in a hot bath. It took a while to heat the water and pour it into the wooden tub, but every moment was worth it.

Praxis and his family left the day before. Probably far earlier than Gabriel intended, but I couldn't convince Praxis to stay a moment longer. Besides, I'm sure Briley would have rammed my door down if I hadn't allowed her husband to leave.

I kept expecting their son to exhibit signs of magic and to burn the cottage with his gifts. Of course, he never did. He's just a baby. Yet, I braced myself for the inevitable. Nothing has made sense since I healed Praxis, and I don't hold it past the gods to give Praxis' child incredible magic.

Have the high gods gone mad?

They gave the Bloodstone back their magic. Or at least Praxis is convinced they have regained their gifts. I searched for signs of it as I tended my garden yesterday. Nothing changed about the city. The people are precisely the same as they have always been.

Still, I wonder if my time limit here has altered. Instead of weeks, I might only have days to carry out my mission.

I curl my fingers into the herb infused water and sigh. Even a bath cannot make me forget why I'm here, as much as I wish it could.

If I were normal like Briley, I might have what she has. Praxis stares at her with such affection. The child is the

fulfillment of their love for one another. I'll never have such bonds with anyone.

I lean back, encasing myself to the shoulders, and sigh again. My destiny was written in the sands the moment Mother's blood soaked them.

My unattainable desires cannot override my judgement, my destiny, my dedication to Mother.

Determination bolsters me as I finish washing and rise from the tub. Water runs in rivulets down my body, cooling my skin.

I step out of the tub as the bedroom door swings open. A gasp escapes me as I pivot to face the intruder.

Gabriel!

His blue eyes widen. Instinctively, I throw my arms across my body, shielding myself from his view. Still, for a beat, his gaze took me in—every sopping, cold inch of me.

“I didn't know you had returned,” I gasp out and shiver.

Lines deepen across Gabriel's brow as he pins his stare beyond my shoulders. “Why did you allow Praxis to leave?”

An instant frown pulls at my mouth. “I had no choice.”

“You had every choice. You should have kept him from leaving.”

“Are you blind?” I stand a little straighter and deepen my frown. “I am petite, and he's huge.”

Gabriel exhales and shoves his fingers through his hair. “I gave you one task, and you couldn't even do it.”

I wrap a drying cloth around my body, move to the armoire, and talk over my shoulder. “You gave me an impossible task.”

“It wasn't impossible. You simply didn't do it.”

As I rummage around in the armoire for a nightdress, the drying cloth slips. I yank it back and continue searching. When it slips again, I allow it to drop to the floor.

“Hades, Sol. Put on clothes.”

“You’re welcome to look away.” I turn with a nightdress in hand. “Or stare. Whichever you prefer.”

“Hades!” A muscle ticks in his jaw as he turns his back to me.

“Disappointing choice.” I yank the nightdress over my head and tug it down my body. “Are you certain you’re not broken?”

Ice molds over his eyes as he turns back to face me. “If you’re asking me if I have ever bedded women, the answer is yes.”

A sliver of jealousy finds a home deep within my chest. As much as I will that sliver away, it finds kindling. Another woman—well, probably more than one—enjoyed Gabriel’s touch. And yet, he doesn’t want me. Doesn’t touch me. Doesn’t want to make me his proper wife.

I sit on the edge of the mattress and observe him still standing by the door. “Do you have a lover? Is that why you don’t touch me?”

“No,” he snaps out, as if he takes offense to my suggestion.

“You can admit it.” I take my normal side of the bed. “I don’t care.”

Liar.

“I don’t require a lover.” He moves to the washing stand, strips off his surcoat, and washes his hands with clean water from the basin.

Impossible. I never met a man who didn’t require relief.

I take him in. The way firelight glistens over his firm body—all those taut plains, ridges, and lines marked from summers of battle.

He looks virile, like the kind of man that needs a nightly romp between the bedcovers.

I pull my blanket to my chin. “I don’t believe you.”

“You don’t need to.” He widens his stance and folds his arms. “I made a vow of celibacy.”

My mouth falls open before I snap it closed. “Why would you do such a thing?”

He shrugs. “It’s easier than becoming entangled.”

The truth hits me, the reality I hadn’t seen before now. “Who was she?”

Clouds immerse his eyes as he turns away and walks to the window.

“Did you love her?” I ask softly.

The muscles tighten in his back as he props his hands against the window frame and doesn’t answer.

“You must have. She is the reason you will not touch me.” Pressing Gabriel will not get me what I want. I bite the inside of my lip and decide to change the subject. “Did you see Praxis’ son?”

Gabriel shifts enough to glance at me. “He has a son?”

“Yes. I helped with his birth.”

Creases appear across Gabriel’s brow. “Is the child healthy?”

“As healthy as any newborn I have ever seen.”

Surprise flickers in Gabriel’s eyes. “Briley has lost three babies. They were all born sleeping.”

“Oh.” Tiny prickles of apprehension settle against my skin. Maybe there are some truths to what Praxis said about their magic returning. “I didn’t know.”

“You couldn’t have.”

I pick at a loose thread in my bedcover. “The baby has a mark just like mine...”

My husband’s gaze jerks to the closed door. “Are you certain?”

“Yes.” Unconsciously, I run my fingers against my cursed mark. “Praxis thinks magic has returned to your people.”

From the table, Gabriel yanks up his surcoat and pulls it back on. "Stay here."

"Wait." I rise to sitting. "Don't leave."

"I'll be back later." Without waiting for my reply, Gabriel leaves the bedchamber.

I exhale and frown at the door. There's something he's not saying. There has to be.

But what?

I roll my wrist, staring down at the mark. Gabriel married me because of this. It burned when I healed Praxis.

Now this, a child born with the same serpent on his arm.

What am I missing?

I lift my hands, rubbing my aching temples. Maybe I would have all the pieces if Gabriel told me everything. He said people can heal in Astarobane, yet Praxis said, I am the first.

Gabriel is intentionally keeping things from me. Vital things.

I must discover them.



The moon rises high in the night sky before Gabriel joins me in the room. The mattress dips beneath his weight as he settles on his side of the bed. I wait for the warmth that accompanied me the last time he was beside me. It never comes.

It takes everything in me to not roll over and check if he lies at the edge of the mattress. He probably does.

Frustration flares inside me. Frustration for everything I still don't understand about my cursed mark and the Bloodstones' magic. Frustration for still not setting sight on

Roland and his successor. Frustration for not winning Gabriel's favor.

I stood in front of him naked, and all he did was ask me to put clothes on. What more does he want from me? Should I climb on him? Maybe then he'd consummate our marriage.

Or maybe he doesn't find me beautiful. Desirable. Touchable.

Maybe his heart still belongs to that woman who hurt him. She shattered him and left me to pick up the pieces.

Jealousy sprouts to life in the center of my chest. It shouldn't be there. I should pluck it out and never allow it to grow.

Even though I haven't found a way beneath his skin, he has thoroughly found his way beneath mine. I want to kiss him again like the night of the festival. There's passion buried beneath all his masks. So much passion. If only I knew how to chip at it until he gives into his desires with me.

I turn enough to catch sight of him, to watch the up and down movements of his back as he sleeps. I want him to like me. Really like me. Not because of my desire to win. No. I want him without any barriers. Any ties. Any past. Any future. I want him for a breath in time. A flash of sunburst against the bright sky. I want him the way a woman wants a man.

Though, I have no right to ask. No right to want any of this. I ball my fingers into a fist and shove it against my mouth. When I decided to marry him to stay here, I never thought it would be so hard.

He is Bloodstone.

I am Kyanite.

It should be easy. All of this should be easy.

Instead, there's this growing tightness in my chest. This growing guilt festering inside me.

If only everything were different.

If only *I* were different.

CHAPTER
THIRTY-EIGHT

Father made me callous. The day Mother died, he forced me to dry my tears. He yanked me from our home and moved me into the brothel he owned. He didn't comfort me. He didn't hold my hand.

Instead, I was left to my own devices. It took one of the women in the brothel to teach me to read and write. And when the Kyanite healers took me into their apothecary and taught me to heal, he never visited me. Not even once.

Two months after arriving in Astarobane, the Bloodstone people throw a large celebration in the middle of the town square again.

I spend most of the evening next to Gabriel. When he's near people, he holds my hand and keeps me close. When nobody is looking, he practically ignores me.

Instead of showing my irritation, I smile and act like I'm exactly where I want to be. After all, I cannot fault him for his distance. I wear masks too. So, how could I ever be angry that he dons one when we're in public? I cannot.

As moonlight straggles across the square, Gabriel encourages me to find a seat in one of the chairs near the fringes of the celebration.

I settle in my chair and observe the dancing couples. Most seem enthralled with one another. A few look like they would rather be anywhere but dancing with their partner.

My gaze catches on Leah on the far side of the square. She doesn't dance. Instead, she talks to a small group of men.

Out of my peripheral vision, I observe Gabriel speaking with Luc and Hero. The Bloodstone people stare at the Carnelian the same way they always do, as if he's a rarity.

"Did you hear the most recent rumor?" Hero asks dryly.

Luc gazes over the crowd, his attention caught on Cassandra talking to Everly.

"You're not listening to me." Hero nudges Luc with his elbow.

"What?" Luc asks, his attention still locked on the woman standing on the other side of the room.

A rare smile forms on Gabriel's mouth. "He's more interested in Cassandra than what you have to say."

Humor sparks in Hero's eyes. "I noticed." He nudges Luc again, finally gaining his attention. "Did you hear what I asked you?"

"No."

"I asked if you heard the most recent rumor about Hector?"

Fire threads along my veins as I sit up a little straighter and try to not lean toward them. After all, I don't want to be revealing.

"What rumor?" Luc asks.

"They are saying he wields two swords in battle, and he has the blood of a serpent running through his veins."

"That's ridiculous," Gabriel says as he plucks up a goblet of wine from a nearby table.

"I wasn't speaking to you. I know how you feel about *Hector*." The Carnelian smirks, gaining a quick frown from Gabriel.

"He's a coward." The sharpness of Gabriel's tone surprises me.

"This is why I wasn't talking to you," Hero says.

“Don’t disparage Hector. He’s the future.” Luc smacks Gabriel’s arm, then moves to where Cassandra stands.

She smiles up at him, admiring him as she accepts his hand and follows him to the dance floor.

Malachi joins me at the table, sitting across from me. The lines near his eyes crease as he grins, easing some of the tension in my chest. “Hello.”

“Hello.” I reach for my goblet and take a long drink.

“How are you coping being wed to Gabriel?”

“Well enough.”

Empathy glints in Malachi’s eyes.

I take a rare opportunity to lean forward and ask a burning question. “How did you come to live among the Bloodstone?”

“It’s no secret.” Using his left hand, Malachi traces a deep groove in the table. “I saved Alden’s life.”

My mouth pops open before I snap it closed. “You did? When?”

“About two summers ago. We met in a village south of here. Someone attacked him, and I saved his life by stepping in front of a dagger meant for him.”

Why would Malachi do such a thing? Maybe he didn’t know who Alden was at the time.

“That’s mighty heroic of you.” And foolish. Oh, so foolish.

Malachi shrugs. “It was instinct.”

I witnessed Malachi protecting his younger siblings from his abusive father when he was younger. Maybe being heroic is part of who he is. He has always felt the need to protect.

“Sol.” A somber expression encases Malachi as he continues. “I heard a rumor, though I don’t know how true it is, but I thought you should know.”

My breath catches. “What is it?”

Malachi hunches forward and waits until Gabriel and Hero disappear into the crush of the crowd to speak. “Rumors have

carried to the cobbler I work with. Rumors that speak of a scheme to murder Roland.”

Ice slides into my veins, freezing my chest, my lungs, my breath.

“I don’t understand,” I whisper.

“Jasper, the cobbler, believes the scheme worked. Roland is dead.”

It cannot be true.

Roland is supposed to die by my hands.

“Surely, it’s not true.”

Malachi hunches even closer. “Astarobane is Roland’s city, and he’s been gone for well over six months.”

Astarobane is Roland’s city?

Oh, the sky above!

Gabriel said it weeks ago. I was just too blind to notice who he meant.

Alden said he would wear a livery if he was the chieftain. If Roland were dead, surely, he’d be wearing the gold chain.

Every time I mentioned him, these stubborn, tight-lipped people never said he was dead. Why?

Dismay prods at my mind, my hopes, my dreams. I try to quell it, to shove it down, but it keeps digging deeper and deeper.

I jerk my gaze around the room. Alden sits at the main table. Luc sits next to him. Everyone goes to Alden when they need something.

I denied the truth when I arrived, convinced myself that Roland was simply in a different city. The entire time I was living a lie. The last ten summers have all been a lie. All those months of planning. All those days. Those nights.

It was all for naught.

I am too late.

I grip the table with both hands, trying to find my calm. It remains an elusive shadow. An illusion. I inhale and exhale, trying desperately to not panic.

“Sol.” Malachi places his hand over mine. “It’s not too late to get out.”

Those seven words sink into my being, breaking through the fog immersing me.

I cannot leave yet. Not after the child born with the same mark as me. Not after I healed Praxis. I swallow through the sudden sour sensation in my throat.

I loosen my grip against the table. “No.”

Over the throng of dancing couples, my eyes meet Gabriel’s. Fierceness burns behind them as he watches us, and his jaw looks locked, as if he grinds his teeth together. He probably does.

“Sol,” Malachi says in that same low voice. “This place is a lethal tomb. Leave before it’s too late.”

With Gabriel watching me, I know I shouldn’t turn to look at Malachi. I do anyway. Looking at the man I once cared for. The one I shared my first kiss with. The one I told everything. The one who, with just a few words, could write my Fate in blood.

“I can’t.”

“*Please*, Sol. I beg you.” Desperation glints in his eyes. “You’re not safe here.”

My stomach twists into giant knots. Malachi has never sounded more afraid.

The day in the stables flashes through my thoughts. That day, Malachi was trying to warn me of something.

Is this it?

“Why do you say that?”

Malachi swallows and shakes his head.

“Mal. We’re friends. You wouldn’t keep something like this from me.”

“This.” He leans forward and taps my wrist through the fabric of my sleeve, right where that hissing serpent mark tarnishes my skin. “Will kill you.”

“What do you know?” The words choke out of me.

Memories pierce my thoughts, dragging me back to the night my mark appeared. I ran to Father. Showed him the hissing serpent. Anger marred his features as he grabbed my arm and shoved it toward the light of a single torch.

“It’s a curse,” he shouted.

“Why?” I had begged.

“Because you are of her. You have always been of her.”

“Father.”

His slap against my cheek had silenced my next question. I learned not to ask anymore. Instead, I hid the mark, as he demanded. Except for Malachi. One day, I showed him, and I told him what Father said.

It is my blemish.

Never once have I understood it.

Sadness sparks in Malachi’s eyes as his gaze shifts over my shoulders. I turn, meeting Gabriel’s intense stare as he walks through the couples. They jerk out of his way as he moves with long, determined strides and stops in front of us.

“Dance with me,” he says, his tone commanding.

My first thought is to deny him. Knowing his people would observe my rejection, I simply nod.

He offers his hand, and I accept, allowing him to bring me into the middle of the dancing couples.

We only move to the beat of the music for a few moments before he leans down, speaking near my ear. “Why were you talking to Malachi?”

“He spoke to me. I spoke back,” I say evenly.

Gabriel lowers his hands to my waist and draws me even closer, close enough to feel the power beneath his surcoat. “You looked different.”

“I didn’t.” The denial scorches my lips. Things *are* different with Malachi. They always were.

“I have known you long enough to know when you look different. What is your relationship with him?”

“I have no relationship with him.” At least, not for four summers.

Gabriel scoffs. “He’s not Bloodstone, and he’s only been here for a few brief summers. So, again, I ask you. What is your relationship with him?”

“He’s not Bloodstone?” I lift my gaze to Gabriel’s and raise my brow in a questioning manner, feigning naivety.

Warmth sears my thin surcoat as Gabriel tightens his grip. “Stop pretending and speak plainly with me. What is your relationship with him?”

Anger rips through me as I stand taller, barely managing to reach Gabriel’s shoulders. “I have no relationship with Malachi.”

“Hades!” Gabriel comes to an abrupt stop and reaches for my hand. Before I process his actions, he leads us through the dancing couples.

They scramble to move out of his way as he guides us down the center. I clench my lips together and try to keep my chin lifted, but I know how pitiful I must look being led by the angry warrior.

I don’t protest as he leads us away from the square. Away from the people. The stares. The wide-eyed looks. Away from Malachi and all our secrets.

Gabriel opens our front door and beckons me inside. Frustration seeps through me as we step in our cottage, and he shuts the door. I did nothing wrong. I simply spoke to Malachi. Gabriel acts as if I allowed Malachi liberties.

I stand with my back to the wall and meet the fierceness still burning in Gabriel's eyes.

"Has he kissed you?" The question comes out in a lash of anger and jealousy.

I rub a hand across my burning cheeks. "Surely, you don't mean that."

Coldness embraces Gabriel's eyes, his words. "I assure you, I do."

"I am here every day. And if I'm not here, I'm with Cassandra. Where would I have even had a chance to meet with Malachi?"

"I don't know what you do all day. Besides, I'm not certain that you didn't know him before."

I cross my arms. "You're being ridiculous."

"You aren't denying it."

"Why should I? You don't touch me. Don't bed me. Yet, you're jealous at the thought of another man kissing me."

Gabriel's eyes flash as he steps closer. "I am angry at the thought of another man touching what is mine."

This time I scoff. "You haven't had the stones to make me your proper wife."

"Do you think I'm incapable?"

Incensed by his anger, his jealousy, his leading me through the crowd like a possession, I step against his body and meet the fury in his eyes. "I think you lack the stones."

He grabs my shoulders and whirls me around until the front of my body is pinned against the wall. I exhale as he grabs my surcoat and hauls it to my waist. With a quick move, he pushes his thigh between my legs.

"There's nothing wrong with my ability to bed you."

I place my palms flat against the wall and speak in a surprisingly calm voice. "Then do it. Bed me, Gabriel."

He breathes in quick, uneven breaths as he grips my hips and brings me back against his thigh. Molten heat surges through my veins at the pressure against my core.

The sky above! This was supposed to be about him. His jealousy. His vow to not bed me. Not this. Not him making me burn.

“G-gabriel.”

“I—” he rocks me against him again, this time harder, “—am the only one allowed to touch you.”

The sharp retort burning my tongue escapes me as he continues rocking me against him. I imagine more. His mouth against my neck, my breasts. To the area that burns the more he teases me.

I moan and thrust my head back the moment I near the pinnacle, the one that hovers far above everything, but offers a well of pleasure the moment it's summited.

Then, he does the unthinkable. He releases me, removes his thigh and steps back, leaving me panting against the wall and aching for my summit.

“Lie to me again,” he says in an erringly composed voice, “and I will never teach you about real pleasure.”

I swallow and keep my position against the wall but lower my hands to my sides. “Don't do this to me.”

“I have done nothing.”

“Gabriel.” I try to find my composure. Instead, I cannot think past that ache, that need, that urge to finish what he started. *“Please.”*

His footsteps echo against the floor and stop. Probably because he settled on the bed like he didn't just rob me of my release.

“Turn around,” he says in a tone that leaves no room for objecting.

The Kyanite in me wants to stab him for his bossiness. The woman awakened obeys. Oh, how she obeys. I shift to face

him, and as I thought, he sits on the bed, watching me.

He slides his eyes over me. “I always wondered what you might look like not quite sated. Now, I know.”

“You’re cruel.”

“And you’re not? You’re constantly trying to tempt me.”

I squeeze my fingers together. “Well, you won then. I am thoroughly inflamed. And I have never once invoked desire in you.”

“Is that what you think?” He lowers his hand to the bulge between his legs. “I am hard every night I lie next to you.”

“Then act on it. Bed me.” I remove my surcoat and chemise.

Those eyes heat, lock on me, then rock over my body. Every inch of my skin tingles in anticipation.

He doesn’t reach for me.

“Gabriel, please. Nobody will care if you bed me.”

A vein throbs in his forehead as he allows another slower pass before ripping his gaze free. “Put something on.”

Stubbornness prompts my answer. “I will not.”

Frustration flares across his features. “Well, you cannot sleep like that.”

I most certainly could.

I walk to where he sits and stop when my thighs brush the mattress. “The only way I’m putting on a nightdress is if you finish what you started.”

A muscle jumps in his jaw as he works to swallow. “Put your nigh—”

“—no.” I climb on the mattress and sit, straddling his lap. “Finish what you started.” This time, I am the one leaving no room for objecting.

Boldly, I dive my fingers into his hair, feeling those soft strands beneath my fingertips. I should have touched him sooner.

He grips my hips and shifts me to his thighs. “I have never met a woman who is as bold as you are.”

“That’s because I am a Kyanite.”

He allows his fingers a slow trail down my hips, over my thighs, and back up. “Do you want to finish?” he asks in a husky voice, one thick with need.

“Yes.”

As soon as the word leaves my mouth, he rotates me until I’m lying on my back. He spreads my legs wide and trails his fingertips up my thighs. “Then we do it my way.”

“Your way?” I ask, my voice a breathless whisper.

He allows his fingers another lighter pass, his touch teasing my skin and awakening the throbbing in my core.

“You don’t join. Don’t speak. Don’t move.”

“W—”

He presses his fingers against my mouth, silencing my question. “I said don’t speak.”

I bite down on my bottom lip, keeping myself from talking as he touches me between my legs. Slowly, purposefully, skillfully, he teases me. Awakens the passion. Takes me to the edge of my summit. Only after I teeter there does he allow me to soar.

I tighten my fingers around my bedcovers, relishing in the pleasure coursing through me. It’s the first time anyone has made me reach my completion. It leaves me wanting more of him. His heat. His touch. His body inside mine.

I don’t voice any of it as he frees me and rolls to his back. It’s more than I thought he would give me yesterday, and I cannot be selfish.

As Gabriel’s breathing evens beside me, my mind whirls. Especially with how close I came to warranting Malachi’s death. One slip of the tongue, and he would have been dead. The Bloodstone people would show a spy no mercy. Surely, there’s no other reason that would have brought Malachi here.

Speaking to Malachi sparked old memories. He was the only person who cared, who promised me a future after Mother died.

I couldn't reveal the truth to Gabriel. Doing so would have ended Malachi's life. I have never been surer of something.

I cared for Malachi once. Loved Malachi. I even thought we might marry someday.

But he is my past.

Gabriel is my now.

There are no other choices. My Fate was written into the sands as vividly as the tears that stained them after Mother's death.

Roland is dead.

Dead!

Everything I worked for cannot be in vain. For ten summers, I endured unspeakable pain, ridicule, failures.

It wasn't for naught. It cannot be.

The opportunity to avenge Mother is gone. But there must be a reason why I'm here. I'm sure of it. I can still honor Mother by stopping the Bloodstone tribe from regaining their magic.

And I will.

Malachi's words echo in my ears. *"This will kill you."*

It takes everything in me to not scratch the mark from my skin. If only that were possible. If only it wasn't there.

If only, I had all the answers.

CHAPTER
THIRTY-NINE

The mid-afternoon sun beats against my back as I sit next to Cassandra in the garden. Luc's daughter, Adelaide, plays with a rag doll next to Cassandra.

Only three days have passed since the celebration and my conversation with Malachi. And well, finding out my world has altered.

Roland is dead. *Dead.*

Even now, the reality sinks into my bones.

"You're good for him, Sol," Cassandra says, pulling me from my thoughts.

I glance over at my friend. "What do you mean?"

"You're good for Gabriel. He needed someone like you."

Lumps thicken in my throat, stealing any words I might have said. The tightness returns. Squeezing my chest. My lungs. My breath.

She hunches back and runs her hands together, freeing them of the dirt clinging to her skin. "After he was betrothed to Ravenna, and things didn't end well, I thought he'd never marry."

"Gabriel was betrothed?"

Kassandra nods. "Yes. One summer ago."

I brush dirt from my surcoat. "What happened?"

A fierce scowl wrenches at Cassandra's mouth. "Ravenna broke off their betrothal and married someone from her tribe."

Is she the one who stole his heart and shattered it?

Intense empathy wells up inside me. Empathy for Gabriel. Empathy that someone would be so callous.

A taunting voice hisses in my ears. *You're going to hurt him too.*

Olah, help me.

Please help me.

I don't want to hurt Gabriel or cause him more pain, but I cannot stop the way I feel. Nor can I stop fearing that the Bloodstone will gain back their magic. It's as vivid as fire. As painful as a whip against flesh. As real as the dirt beneath my feet.

Nothing about my world alters or changes because I have allowed a bloodstone warrior to slip beneath my skin. Tomorrow, when I wake up, the six tribes of Tarrobane will still be here. They will still quarrel.

And the Bloodstone people will still try to gain back what they lost. I heard it in the way Praxis spoke. If the Bloodstone people regain their magic, they will try to rule Tarrobane again, and they will crush the other five tribes beneath their feet.

"Sol," Cassandra says, drawing my attention back to her. "Are you all right?"

"Yes." I wipe my hands across my brow, brushing away the sweat clinging to my skin.

Adelaide lurches to her feet and rocks her rag doll like a baby. Her soft hums fill the air and draw a smile to my face.

Children have always tugged at my heart. Maybe because I was the happiest when I was a child. Mother was alive, then.

"What tribe was Ravenna from?" I ask after a moment.

"Carnelian."

Gabriel was betrothed to a Carnelian?

“I didn’t know.”

“Gabriel doesn’t speak about her. Nobody does.”

What a fool that woman was. Anyone that has tasted his passion would be a fool to let him go.

Like you?

The thought mocks me, digs at my truth, my reality.

“Have you been making plans for your wedding?” I ask.

She nods. “Yes, and I nearly have my dress finished. Well, Mother is sewing my dress. She’s much more talented than I am.”

That must be nice. To have a mother around—one that can sew for you. Love you. Encourage you.

“Sol,” Cassandra says, tugging my attention back to her. “Shall we have something to drink?”

I push away my melancholy thoughts and focus on my friend. “Would you like some lavender and chamomile tea?”

“I want tea.” Adelaide steps close to me and pulls on my hand. “May I have some?”

“Of course.”

Delight dances in Adelaide’s eyes as she tightens her fingers around mine. Warmth nestles against my heart.

If things were different with Gabriel, I might have those twins he teased me about. I even picture them with his blue eyes.

Kassandra follows as I walk with Adelaide inside the cottage. As I heat water and add the tea leaves, Cassandra’s revelation rings in my ears.

Maybe Gabriel doesn’t hate me as much as I feared. Maybe he’s simply guarding himself.

He’s no different than I am. I have spent summers guarding the ache in my chest.

Maybe we're more alike than I first thought. Maybe we can even learn to trust each other. Fully trust each other.

As quickly as the thought hits me, I reject it. Gabriel should never trust me fully.

CHAPTER
FORTY

Early morning light wanes through the open barn door. I left it ajar while I attend to my chores. Birds belting out a melody strum to where I sit, milking Jersa. The cow happily chomps on hay as I collect milk in a terracotta jar.

The door creaks as it opens wider, and Everly steps through. My breath catches at her disheveled hair, and her surcoat covered in dust, like she ran to this barn.

Her wide eyes meet mine, and my heart sinks. “It’s Cassandra. She’s really upset. Will you come and speak to her?”

“Of course.” I finish with Jersa and secure the barn door before following Everly.

As we walk through the town, we receive the same shunning as usual. We might as well not exist. To these people, we are nothing. No, we are less than nothing.

The moment we stop in front of the tiny, run-down cottage, I am struck by the red circle splattered in paint across the front of the house. The stain covers the entire expanse.

Red poppies scatter the grass, driving a dagger of fear into my heart. I try to not show it as I follow Everly into the cottage, but those damn flowers and what they mean for the Bloodstones will not leave my thoughts.

Red poppies mean death.

No!

I dig my nails into my palm, sinking pain into my skin. It doesn't ease the waves of trepidation billowing around me. Everything in me wants to race back to the grass, pick up every poppy and throw them at the people who dared to put them there. No, everything in me wants to punish the people responsible.

My fingers burn with the urge. I clasp them together as I trail Everly into the room she shares with Cassandra.

Kassandra sits on the center of her mattress, her gaze locked on the far wall, her eyes void of emotion.

I sit next to her and try to think of any words she'd find comforting. Nothing comes to mind.

After a while of sitting in silence, Cassandra speaks. "I cannot wed Luc."

"Oh, Kass," Everly says.

Kassandra jerks her hand across her eyes and speaks in a voice riddled with pain. "For as long as I can remember, Luc is the only man I thought about. The only man I wanted. The only man I could see myself having children with." She sniffs and stares down at her hands. "Our people will not let me have him."

Everything in me wants to tell her to ignore them. Those red poppies keep me silent. Those flowers are a warning as deadly as if they left a cobra in her bed.

"They're not my people," Everly says bitterly.

"Oh, Evie." Cassandra shakes her head. "Don't speak that way."

Everly tugs at the red circle on her surcoat. "If they were my people, I wouldn't wear this. If they were my people, they wouldn't turn away when I walk past. We are nothing to them, Kass."

Kassandra sniffs again. "I wanted to be the change."

"They will never change," Everly says bitterly. "They're incapable of change."

“I was removed from my training,” I say, my voice pitched low as I reveal a truth I never speak of, “because I couldn’t heal with magic like the rest of the people in my tribe.”

Kassandra’s eyes widen. “You cannot heal with magic?”

I open and close my fingers as I recall everything that happened with Praxis. “No. I couldn’t. I was shunned, ridiculed, and removed like a dead limb from a thriving tree. Everyone around me had powerful gifts. I had none.” I take a deep breath. “People are the same everywhere. Not just here.”

Everly stares at the far wall as she speaks. “I would live alone in a vast wilderness if I could.”

“I think that would be a glorious existence,” I admit.

“You have a husband,” Everly says. “It may be difficult for you to just disappear.”

One day, I *will* disappear.

My throat tightens. The thought never made me so forlorn before.

Kassandra falls back against her mattress and sighs. “I want a husband. I want Luc.”

My stomach twists into a giant knot. If only I could give Kassandra what she wants.

Everly lies beside her sister. “We can be old spinsters together.” Her gaze moves to me. “The Kyanite can join us when she grows tired of Gabriel.”

“You think I’ll grow tired of him?” My thoughts shift to the other night. How he touched me and gave me such pleasure.

“He’s not much different than all the other men.”

Kassandra frowns. “Evie, that’s not true. Gabriel is the second best man I know.”

Everly rises enough to meet my gaze. “He has secrets, Sol. Has he told you?”

Kassandra snaps to sitting and glares at her sister. “Be silent, Everly.”

My attention jerks between them. “What secrets?”

Frustration tugs at Kassandra’s brow as she places her hand over her sister’s mouth. “He doesn’t have secrets.”

Everly pulls away her sister’s hand. “Do you even know what he did to your arm?”

“My arm?” I roll my right wrist over, staring down at that serpent mark.

“No, your binding tattoo.”

My breath hitches as I raise my arm and stare down at those brown lines, those swirls, those words I wouldn’t have understood if Alf didn’t tell me.

“What do you mean, Everly?”

A frown pinches at Kassandra’s mouth, but she doesn’t speak.

“This...” Everly brushes her fingertips along the engraving on my skin. “...is the ancient magical binding tattoo of the Bloodstone people.”

“Magical?” My throat turns dry. “But magic doesn’t work here,” I say, repeating what Kassandra told me.

A voice pierces my ears, a mocking voice—one that reminds me of what I did for Praxis.

I slam it away, not willing to give it a second thought. At least, not right now. Not when I cannot process everything at once.

“It won’t work,” Kassandra says with a frown. “So, I’m not sure why he chose that particular design.”

“He chose it?” I ask, needing to understand.

It doesn’t make sense. None of this makes sense.

Kassandra nods.

“If it worked,” I ask slowly, “what would it do?”

“It would bind you to him,” Everly says. “Emotionally. Physically. You’d be incapable of ever looking at another man with lust. He’d feel the same way about you.”

Why would Gabriel pick such a design? When we first met, he loathed me, distrusted me, yet he was willing to do this?

Why?

Maybe he knew the magic wouldn’t work anyway, and he just liked the way this tattoo looks.

Praxis’ voice hums in my ears. *Magic has returned to my people.*

No. It’s not true.

It cannot be.

It takes everything in me to not roll my wrist over and stare at the hissing serpent.

I have been unwilling to test my magic for fear it is somehow tied to theirs. What if I healed someone else, and another child was born with the mark, and I inadvertently gave them back their gifts?

I would never forgive myself.

“What else?” I ask, desperately needing answers.

Kassandra shakes her head. “There’s nothing. Everly is just angry with Gabriel.”

“Why?”

Everly rises to sitting and clenches her fingers together. “He has so much potential, and he doesn’t use it.”

“With weaponry?” I ask as I think of the dagger he crafted for me.

Long, dark hair falls into Everly’s face as she shakes her head.

Kassandra bounds from the bed. “Who wants bread?” Before her sister objects, she grabs her hand and yanks her from the room.

I follow them and settle at the table where Cassandra brings her latest loaf of bread. She slices us thick pieces and settles in a chair opposite of where I sit.

She stares down at her bread for several breaths before finding her voice. “Sol, I want you to keep what happened here today a secret.”

My brow rises. “Why?”

“I want...” She wraps cloth around the loaf of bread and sighs. “I want to speak to Luc first.”

“I understand.”

Hesitation grips her voice as she continues. “That means you cannot tell anyone. Even Gabriel.”

What’s one more secret?

Even as I think the words, they fester inside me. I am already keeping so much from him. And this is hard because every fiber of my being wants to run to him and tell him everything. Then, he could punish the people responsible. Just like when he punished Deborah.

“I won’t speak until after you have told Luc,” I say after a moment.

Relief floods to her drawn features. “Thank you.”

As the conversation shifts to a dress Cassandra is sewing for a client, I allow Everly’s words to return.

Days ago, I knew Gabriel was keeping secrets from me. I didn’t realize how big they might be.

I stare down at my left wrist, gazing at those lines, those words.

Surely, he only picked the design for the way it looks. It is lovely, and Alf is very talented.

Surely, that is all.

Or maybe I just want it to be all.

CHAPTER
FORTY-ONE

As someone who trained with Kyanite healers, I attended many births. I never allowed a mother to recuperate without checking on her. So, the following day, I wash, dress in a clean surcoat, grab my satchel, and head to Praxis' cottage.

As I turn to the left in the center of the town and head toward the palace, the cottages get larger and more elaborate, and the people get ruder as I walk past. Many don't meet my gaze. A few glare and turn away as I pass them.

I only knock twice on the door of the large stone cottage before it swings open, and Cenric greets me.

"Hello," he says as he sweeps his vibrant blue eyes over me.

Even though the tall, dark-haired man stands casually, I still picture him in that square, executing those Malachites.

My chest squeezes as I resist the overwhelming urge to flee. "I have come to check on Briley and the baby."

"You're Sol."

"You're Cenric." It's the first thing that popped into my thoughts.

A smirk pulls at the edges of his mouth. "Indeed."

"May I see her?" I ask.

Instead of moving or welcoming me inside, he folds his arms. "Praxis told me what you did for him."

My throat turns dry as I think of Gabriel's warning to not speak of the magical healing.

"I am happy he's recovered."

The door pushes open further, and Praxis joins his brother.

"Stop bothering Sol, Cenric."

"I was not bothering her." He steps outside and speaks over his shoulder. "I was simply trying to thank her for saving your life."

Cenric leaves as I enter the cottage Praxis shares with Briley. The home is twice the size as mine, with a bigger main room, a loft, and three doors leading to other bedrooms. Inwardly, I frown as I think of the cramped place where Cassandra and Everly live.

Briley steps from one of the rooms holding the baby in her arms.

Praxis' footfalls echo against the floor as he moves to where his wife stands. "Sol has come to check on Edvard."

An instant frown tugs at Briley's mouth as she speaks in a voice loud enough to carry to me. "I don't want *that* woman here."

My chest squeezes, but I don't react. I just stand, waiting, hoping she'll allow me to check on her and the baby.

"Bri—"

"—no, Praxis." Briley's mouth thins as she turns and disappears back into the room she came from.

The warrior shifts to look at me, regret in his eyes. "I'm sorry."

"It's all right." I muster a smile. "Has she been well? How has the child been?"

"Good. Both are well. The baby eats constantly, and Briley is moving about like she didn't just give birth."

I pull some herbs from my bag and hand them to him. "Make a tea out of these. They will help with healing. She

needs to take it slow as her body adjusts.”

Praxis nods and accepts the loose bundle. “Sol...” His jaw clenches as he looks down for several breaths. “I am very appreciative of everything you did for me. I will never forget it. Please, don’t allow my wife to offend you.”

“She hasn’t offended me.” I offer him a reassuring smile. “Good day, Praxis.”

I exit the cottage and make my way back to the home I share with Gabriel. A part of me knew she wouldn’t allow me to examine her. The other part hoped she might. I needed to know she’s well, and the child is well.

Surely, a baby with the serpent birthmark means nothing. It has to mean nothing. Otherwise, I’m already failing to stop the spread of their darkness.

Frustration grips me as I open the door to my cottage a few moments later. An inviting aroma hits me when I step foot into the front room.

Gabriel turns from his place near the hearth. “I cooked for you.”

“You know how to cook?” Warmth invades my chest and nestles within my heart.

He cooked for me.

“I’m not an expert, but I know how to make soup.” He shrugs, dishes out portions in terracotta bowls, and carries them to the table.

As I sit, I think of the time I spent with the Bloodstone army and how they had women cooking for them. “When did you learn to cook?”

He sits opposite of me. “When I was a boy. My mother died when I was young, and my father wasn’t around. If I wanted to eat, I had to cook for myself.”

“Oh.” Sympathy wells up inside me as I think of him all alone.

I blow on the soup and take a sip. The richness of the flavors astounds me. Whatever he put into the soup complements the venison to perfection.

“It’s amazing. Thank you.”

He nods and eats his soup.

What changed in Gabriel? Usually, he’s not around for dinner.

“Earlier, I tried to visit Briley and check on the baby,” I say. “She wouldn’t let me examine her.”

“I’m not surprised. Kyanites slaughtered her parents when she was a child.”

I take a deep breath and lean back against my chair. “I see.”

Gabriel settles his hands against the table. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be so blunt.”

“You don’t have to apologize. I’m aware of the hatred between our tribes.”

“And yet—” Gabriel plucks up his goblet, “—here we are.” He drinks as if saluting his words.

“Are we fools?” I ask as I think of every moment that has transpired since we first met.

“Definitely.” The lines near his eyes and mouth soften as he smiles.

I think of Kassandra no longer wanting to wed Luc. And I think of the shunning I receive the moment I step from this cottage.

The people here will never accept me.

My chest aches against that reality. That truth. The Bloodstone people hate me.

Most of the Kyanites felt the same. I wasn’t a healer with magic. I lived in a brothel with the undesirables. At least, the elite of Kyanite made them seem undesirable. In truth, the

women who worked at Father's brothel had high-paying clients, and they were well-educated.

Gabriel scoots his chair back and pats his legs. "Sit with me."

"I am."

He pats his thighs for a second time. "Here."

Warmth tingles in my chest and blooms across my cheeks as I think of sitting on Gabriel's lap. I have never sat on a man before.

"You want me to sit on your lap?"

He quirks an eyebrow at me. "Did I not just say that?"

Anticipation grips me as I follow his request and perch on his lap. His hard thighs press against my bottom as he shifts me enough to skim his knuckles across my cheek.

"Your wound healed well."

"The one you stitched?"

He nods and allows his knuckles another light skim. "Over time, the scar will fade more."

"It doesn't bother me." It's not like I see my reflection often.

"I like scars," he says. "They remind us that we can overcome our past."

"That's a beautiful way to look at them."

Gently, he brushes loose strands of hair from my face. "*You* are beautiful."

"My skin is too pale." They're the first words to come to my mind. The first thing I always think when I peer in the looking glass.

He shakes his head. "It brightens your eyes, and they tell your story. Where you're going. Where you have been."

My breath hitches. Surely, they're not that revealing.

Needing a distraction, I reach for his hand and bring it to the light of the torch. “Was this your mother’s?”

His gaze lowers to the gold ring on his pinky. “Yes.”

“Do you miss her?” I ask as I remember my mother, and how, even now as I think of her, my chest aches.

“Every day.”

“Father thought I was too young to mourn my mother, but I was old enough to build memories and to miss her terribly when she was gone.”

“I remember my mother always smelled like lemons,” Gabriel says, his words low, hoarse. “She had five trees near our cottage, and every winter, she’d pick all the ripe ones and make lemon tea.”

“How old were you when she was taken from you?”

“Seven.”

Overwhelmed by compassion, I frame his face in my hands. “We aren’t so different, Gabriel.”

“Yes, we are.” He allows his hand to glide over my bodice. “You’re a woman. I’m a man.”

Tingles ghost against my skin as he does it again—this time allowing his hands to brush my skin.

“That’s not what I meant,” I manage.

“I know.” He reaches for the hem of my surcoat and pulls it to my thighs.

I catch his hand and smile. “Did you ask permission?”

“Do I need permission?” he asks, his voice deep and doing crazy things to my pulse.

No. “Absolutely.”

He adjusts me until I’m wedged sideways across his body and my legs are wide enough to slip his hand between. My pulse throbs in my throat as he slides his fingers upward but jerks them back down before reaching the area between my legs.

“What are you doing?”

“Observing,” he says, his tone even deeper than before.

My skin warms as he allows his gaze to rove over my body. “What are you observing?”

“You.”

“Oh.” I play with the ribbon binding my bodice and keep my attention caught on his handsome face.

“You promised to touch yourself next to me.”

“B-but I...” I inwardly groan at the stammering.

“Show me how you pleasure yourself.”

“Gabriel...”

“Show me.” Boldly, he cups my breast through the fabric of my surcoat. “Do you touch yourself here?”

“Sometimes,” I admit.

“And here?” He slides his free hands along my stomach and to the juncture between my legs.

“Yes,” I say shyly.

He brushes his knuckles over my thighs. “Will you show me?”

“Yes, but I have a stipulation.” As I speak, I widen my thighs and slip my hand between my legs. “You must touch me too.”

Heat smolders behind his eyes as he watches me. “Where?”

“My breasts.” I skim over my burning flesh. “Will you?”

“Here?” He flicks his thumb across my nipple through the surcoat. The material brushes against my skin, rousing more throbbing in my core.

“Yes,” I say in a breathless whisper.

He does it again as I trail over the area that always draws more want. It doesn't take much to start the crawl to my

summit. I slow my movements, knowing I want this moment to last.

With a quick jerk, he yanks at the ribbons binding my bodice until it loosens enough to dip the material lower and free my breasts. Desire surges through my veins as he lowers his mouth and flicks his tongue across my nipple. I arch my back, bringing myself closer to him. To that want, to that need.

The sky above. I need so much more than this. I need him to consummate our marriage. I need to feel his skin beneath my fingers.

I could ask, but I don't want him to stop. I don't want any of this to stop.

I quicken my circles, rubbing that throbbing, that ache. Moans escape me as I climb even higher. He uses his thumb on my right breast and takes the other fully in his mouth. Tingles devour every inch of my body. It drives me straight toward the summit, where I dive willingly over the edge.

When my breathing evens and the moment eases, Gabriel stiffens and pulls my bodice up. I stir enough to feel his hardness beneath me. He groans and grips my hips, holding me against him.

“Gabriel,” I say, my voice low, desperate.

“Don't move,” he breathes.

Everything in me wants to wiggle, to feel him beneath me, to get him to cave. I cannot after everything he gave me. He didn't have to bring me to his lap and encourage any of this. Moving would be unnaturally cruel.

“I could touch you,” I say, my words merely an invitation. Not a lure to get him to bend to my will. Just an offering to give back what he has given to me.

“No.” He lets out a quick exhale, removes me from his lap, and stands. “Not tonight.”

My gaze lifts to his. Taut lines stretch across his brow, and he holds his jaw tight like he grits his teeth.

“Perhaps soon.” I straighten my surcoat as he nods and disappears into our room.

The pleasure ebbs, leaving me with a tightness in my chest. He’ll always throw walls between us, and I’ll never know what it’s like to truly be his wife.

As I turn toward the sofa and sit, a stark truth stabs me in the chest. I don’t deserve more. I never did. Not with what I intend. Maybe Gabriel was right all along to not bed me.

It’s better this way.

CHAPTER
FORTY-TWO

A loud, insistent knocking draws me from my attempts to make bread. Over the last three days, I have attempted it more and more. My loaves never come out like Kassandra's, yet I keep trying. I'm determined to prove to Gabriel that I can cook for him.

I open the door to a pale, trembling Everly. "You must come quickly, Sol. It's Kassandra."

Fear strikes at my chest, my heart. "Has something happened to her? Do I need my herbs?"

"Yes," Kassandra says, her voice frantic. "Please hurry."

The fear strikes harder, more violently against my chest. With trembling legs, I do as she requested, hurrying back inside, grabbing the satchel and returning to the young woman at my doorstep.

I follow her through the city, my feet scurrying to match hers. We jerk around wagons, people, animals. All the while, my heart races faster and faster.

This cannot be good.

I clutch my satchel closer, willing it to not be too late. Willing my herbs to be able to help. Or maybe my magic, the way I was able to heal Praxis.

Surely, it would be all right to test those waters now. For Kassandra, I would cast a thousand spells. I would draw on my kyanite stone, draining its very essence if necessary.

I take a deep breath as we arrive a few moments later. Everly shoves open the front door to the sounds of crying and moaning. My gaze snaps to Everly as the color drains from her cheeks.

My heart slams against my chest. My hands shake as I hurry to Cassandra's room to discover a sobbing Averill and a groaning Darla. The older woman rocks back and forth and moans to the gods, or to whomever she is vengeful against.

Frantically, my attention jerks to the bed, to the pale Cassandra. Her skin bruised and bloodied. Her surcoat nearly torn from her body.

My chest aches as I step closer. She doesn't move. Her chest doesn't move.

No. No. No.

I crumble beside the mattress and press my fingers against her throat.

No throbbing. No beat. No life.

Chills slice down my arms as I rock forward and let out a cry I couldn't contain even if I wanted to.

I'm too late.

She already stares vacantly. Her skin is already ashen.

Oh, why couldn't I have run faster?

Why? Why? Why?

Please.

I check again, pressing my fingers against the area that should show signs of life.

Nothing.

"Please," Everly says, her voice shaky. "Please."

"I'm so sorry," the words fall from my lips in a heartbreaking reality I cannot alter. "I cannot do anything for her."

"You have to. Please."

Tears burn my throat, my nose as I run my fingertips over the young woman's eyes, closing them for a final time.

Olah help me. I never prepared for this. Never prepared to care for someone as much as I cared for Mother. For Aniah.

But I did. I do.

It didn't matter who Cassandra was, or what she was.

She was my friend. My very dear friend.

Everything I prepared for melts away as I beg Olah for a different outcome. Any other outcome but this.

Please, I beg you.

Revive her.

Revive her.

Tears blind me as I look up, wanting to see life, needing to see life.

Nothing.

No!

CHAPTER
FORTY-THREE

The trees stopped swaying two days ago. The flowers stopped growing. The rain stopped regenerating the forest.

My heart stopped with it.

Until Cassandra, I never felt genuine friendship, true acceptance. She was the first person here to befriend me. The first person to accept me as I am. Kyanite. Different.

Now, I must stand next to Gabriel at Cassandra's burial site, surrounded by the very people who may have picked up rocks and thrown them at my friend. People who stand here with their heads downcast, as if their hands aren't stained with her blood.

Oh, how her blood fell.

Oh, how the ground wept when it fell.

Cassandra deserved to live, to thrive, to be Luc's wife. She didn't deserve the Bloodstone people's cruelty.

Mind numbing silence echoes over the square as Luc steps forward and lights Cassandra's funeral pyre on fire. As the flames burst into the air, my heart freezes inside my chest.

I no longer want the Bloodstone people's acceptance. I will find a way to carry out my plan without it.

Nothing else matters. Nothing else can matter.

If I could avenge Mother and Cassandra, stop the Bloodstone from finding their magic again, and have Gabriel, I would.

But I have no way of marrying all three. No way to have him and my destiny.

It's not written in the stars. Cassandra's death made sure of it. I could never stay here with these people and all their prejudices.

Even now, nobody does anything to find out why she was murdered. Nobody even seems to care except Luc.

Poor Luc. He lost the woman he wanted to marry.

He stands in stiff silence, his eyes simmering, his hands clenched into fists, as if he stops himself from destroying the entire city. He probably does.

Alden ordered everyone to attend. Otherwise, nobody would care about the funeral of an outsider. Especially these bitter, hateful, prejudiced people.

My fingers itch to defend her, to slay them all.

The urge dives deep within me, to that place I hide my fire. To that place I stifled when I came here. To that place I almost forgot as I fell for Gabriel.

He doesn't deserve my vengeance, yet it still smolders inside me. It was never going to fade completely. It just needed kindling. The kindling Cassandra's death provided.

Numbness encases me as I follow him away from the funeral. Leaving my friend and her cheerfulness. Her kindness. Her compassion.

She was like nobody else I have ever met. She was better than me. So much better.

Gabriel leads me inside our cottage. I collapse into a chair and stare vacantly at the wall. He pours me a goblet of wine and places it in my hands. I take a drink, allowing the heat to warm my chest. If only it would numb my heart.

Maybe someday soon, the trees will sway again. The flowers will bloom. The rain will return.

It makes no difference to me.

I'll be gone.

CHAPTER
FORTY-FOUR

Four days ago, the earth let out a shuddering breath and halted. During that time, I barely rose for food. I barely cleaned. I barely spoke to Gabriel.

On the fifth day after her death, he joins me in bed earlier than usual. The sun still lumbers on the horizon and throws shadows across our bedchamber walls.

Gabriel's weight dips into the mattress as he rotates and pulls me into his arms. For a beat, I stiffen before melding to his comfort.

"I didn't know you cared this deeply," he says, his words low, guarded, as if he fears saying the wrong thing.

"She was my friend," I admit.

Kassandra taught me about acceptance, rising above adversity, and kindness. She was the one light among the Bloodstone. The one diamond. The one brightness.

Now, she's gone.

Tenderly, he runs his hand against my arm. "I know. I'm sorry."

"Gabriel." I nestle closer to him, needing him more than ever before. His solidness. His strength. His compassion.

He curls his fingers into my hair, cradling me against him, keeping me as tight as I cling to him. "How can I help?"

"You can't," I whisper.

How I wish he could. How I wish he could bring my friend back.

“I’m sorry.” The words hang between us, his admittance that he hadn’t protected Cassandra as he had vowed.

“Why didn’t we leave Astarobane? All we had to do was leave.”

A long exhale escapes him. “I was working on it, but it takes a lot of preparation to move an army.”

“Well, now she’s dead.” The stark reality escapes me in a rush of bitterness.

“It should have never happened.”

“Why did it, Gabriel?” I ask, my words breaking me apart. “Is it because she’s an outsider? Or is there something more? Perhaps, something you haven’t told me?”

“There was a lot of anger aimed toward Luc’s desire to marry Cassandra. Not only because she was an outsider, but because of who her father was.”

“A Kyanite?” I ask bitterly.

“Yes, but not only that. He hurt Cassandra’s mother and used her badly. It put a stain on her entire family.”

I think of Averill. How kind she is. How accepting.

She didn’t deserve someone using her badly.

“And that’s it? Cassandra was an outsider. The daughter of a Kyanite. So, it’s all right to murder her?”

Gabriel takes my hand and places it against his chest, to the even pounding of his heart. Maybe he did it to calm me. “It’s not.”

“Then do something about it.” Anger fuels me as I lash out. “Burn the city.”

His brow lifts. “You want me to burn an entire city?”

“No.” I choke back the torrid of emotions boiling inside me. There are still good people here. Like Everly, Leah, Praxis

and Luc. I could never wish death to innocent people. I just need to see justice. “I need you to avenge Cassandra.”

“And I shall,” Gabriel says with determination.

“How?”

“I will question the woman I believe is responsible. If I discover she’s guilty, she’ll be executed.”

Surprise crashes over me. “You know who’s responsible?”

“I believe the woman was one of Cassandra’s high paying clients. The same one who threw rotten food at her and encouraged her friends to join her.”

“Deborah?” Sourness swells against my tongue as I voice the name. I had followed the woman enough to know how haughty she could be.

But violent? I should have guessed.

“Yes.”

Kassandra was young and kind. She deserved a long, thriving life.

Not this. Not death at the hands of cruel people.

I bury my face against Gabriel’s chest and will the pain to cease.

If only it were that simple. If only life were that simple.

But it’s not.

It’s cruel. Dark. Unforgiving.

And it doesn’t care who it casts its shadow of death on.

Any of us could be next.



Two days later, we’re ordered to the same clearing where the Bloodstones murdered the Kyanites. Luc positions himself

near the front with Alden, Cenric, Aston, Gray, and five more men I don't recognize.

The torches lighting the square cast shadows over Luc's haggard features. Those features I cannot look away from. He looks more haunted than before.

Deborah and two other women stand where the Kyanites stood, their hands bound, their eyes downcast.

Graveness etches Alden's features as he turns and addresses the crowd. "Today, we condemn those who murdered Cassandra."

My heart races as I take in the solemn man next to me. Gabriel stares straight ahead, his eyes locked on the trees swaying in the distance.

He did this.

I know he did.

Alden continues, drawing my attention back to him. "They will die for the murder of Cassandra. May Olah forgive them. For we do not."

One by one, Bloodstone archers strike the condemned women, and they fall to the ground, their bodies riddled with arrows.

I feel no empathy, no tugging at my heart. They knew what they were doing when they took my beloved friend from me.

Their deaths don't ease the pain of her leaving, but I'm happy knowing they cannot do this to anyone else.

CHAPTER
FORTY-FIVE

“Sol.”

I blink through the haze of sleep as the voice comes again.

It’s only been one day since the executions. One day since I watched the condemned fall. It’s not nearly long enough.

“Sol, wake up!”

As I open my eyes, Gabriel yanks on my arm, dragging me from the bed.

“Come quickly.” Worry thrums from his tone as he continues. “Astarobane is under attack.”

“W-what?” My words wobble as I try to gain my bearings.

He shakes me. “You must hide along with the other women.”

Alarm rises thick in my veins as I’m carried to another time. Fire threads the floorboards. The walls, the ceiling. Smoke rises thick in my throat. Screams pierce the air. My people’s screams. Mother’s screams.

Gabriel shakes me again. “Sol, I need you to listen to me.”

“I’m listening.” I swallow through the grit, the fear, the worry.

“Here.” He shoves a cloak around my shoulders and pulls me from the cottage. Fire rises in the distance. Cries pierce the night air.

I quicken my pace to match Gabriel's as he leads me through the city full of panicked people. Most of the women and children scurry toward the palace with fear burning in their wide eyes.

"Gabriel." I tug on his arms. "I don't want to go there. Let me stay with you."

"You can't."

The fires grow closer. The screams draw closer.

I shiver and bring myself against Gabriel.

Gabriel pulls me around a tall building. "Sol, I don't have time to take you the rest of the way. Promise me you'll stay hidden."

"Gabriel." I tighten my fingers around his arm, needing him to stay nearby.

He hunches down beside me and stares into my eyes. "Promise me."

Everything in me wants to object, to stand beside him, to fight until the invaders go away. Something about the desperation glittering in his eyes keeps me from acting on it.

"I promise."

He traces my cheek and nods, as if mentally preparing himself. He stands and joins the crowd of people. I hover behind the building and prepare to do exactly as he ordered.

Worry rises thick in my throat. Worry for Gabriel. For Cassandra's family.

Smoke scorches the air, my lungs. I blink, willing away the watery eyes and the burning nose.

More Malachite invaders, with their blue face paint, pour into Astarobane. Too many to count. Too many to overcome. Surely, the Bloodstone warriors will fall to their might.

I remain where Gabriel left me, crouching behind a building like a coward. It's what he expects of me. It's what they all expect.

I am the Kyanite healer.

Humble. Meek. Quiet.

At least to everyone except Gabriel. With him, I'm far bolder than I am with his people.

Loose strands of hair cling to my cheeks as I crouch lower, desperately attempting to meld into the shadows. If these invaders don't see me, they can't attack. They cannot take me back to that horrifying day.

An arrow soars through the air, landing with a thud near my feet. I jerk my gaze around, expecting an invader to be nearby. Nobody stands there. Nothing moves other than the smoke thickening the air.

I whip back to face the building and sink further on my heels.

The fight draws closer, Bloodstone against Malachite.

Cries split the air. Blood stains the streets.

Over the throng of fighting warriors, I glimpse Gabriel. He wields his broad sword with deadly accuracy, his movements exact and quick like a viper.

"Father. Father." The cry pierces my ears and sends slivers of ice down my back.

Adelaide.

She should be hiding.

"Father," she wails again.

I gasp as I spot her in the opening, not protected. Vulnerable.

Tears trail down her ashen face, mingling with the soot on her cheeks. "Father."

More arrows come from the left of the city, raining across the hot streets. They slam into warriors. Women. Children. Buildings.

Without thought, I rush from my hiding spot and hurry to Adelaide. Her eyes widen, and her breaths come in quick,

jagged puffs as I take her into my arms.

“I want my father,” she says between sobs.

As Olah is my witness, I try to make it back to the spot where Gabriel ordered me to stay at. My legs don't move fast enough. An invader spots me as I hurry across the square, the child clutched in my arms. Hatred glitters in his brown eyes as he lunges toward us, his sword raised.

Automatically, I lower Adelaide to her feet and duck his first swing. He never has time for a second. I kick his legs out from beneath him, connecting in the precise spot the mercenaries taught me. As he lands, his weapon falls from his hands. I grab the hilt, tighten my fingers around the grip, and drive it deep into his stomach. Surprise flashes across his face as he clutches at his sword.

Another Malachite warrior locks gazes with mine. I clutch that borrowed sword tighter, crouch, and prepare. He attacks much like the first man, driving his blade in a quick swing toward my face. I parry his move and don't wait for his next before attacking. He blocks and draws a dagger from his weapon belt.

Heat fills my stomach, my veins, my bones as I concentrate on his movements. Avoiding. Blocking. Striking. His attacks keep coming like blades of death, seeking my blood, my hopes, my life.

I avoid the sword as he rips the smaller blade across my side. I grunt, skirt his next move, and the moment he leaves his midsection open, I attack, right for his gut. With force, I shove the blade into his stomach.

Fire sears my side as I reach for Adelaide. Her whimpers spear my heart as I resume my journey to my hiding spot. The harder I run, the slower I seem to move. More arrows hit the streets. Bodies fall around me like trees in a windstorm. I skirt around them and grit my teeth.

Faster.

Faster.

Hurry!

As the Malachite invaders press closer, Bloodstone people rush from their stone cottages with swords, daggers, and spears. I spot Everly fighting, and my heart shudders.

A scream pierces the air as I make it to the edge of the building. Everly's scream. Tiny prickles of fear race down my back. I don't turn, though. I cannot afford to turn, to look back, to hesitate.

Shadows embrace us as I hunch behind the building and keep Adelaide close. Trembling takes over her body as her cries soften, and silent tears trace her cheeks. Using the end of my surcoat, I wipe them away, wishing things could be different for her, wishing she never had to see death or feel fear.

She already lost her mother. Now this.

As she nestles in my arms, her shaking eases. I keep my left arm around her, sheltering her.

As Olah is my witness, I'll kill anyone that comes near this child.

In this moment, this horrible, horrible moment, nothing else matters. Not my mission. Not my insecurities. Nothing matters but this child and protecting her.

"Addie."

I shift to peer behind me as Luc steps closer. Blood and soot mar his face and clothing, but he's never looked more relieved. Adelaide's eyes light up the moment she spots him. I free her, and she runs into his arms.

"Father," she cries, her joy softening my heart the way nothing has in a very long time.

"Sol." Luc holds out his hand to me, as if offering to take me away from all of this. To protect me the way he'll protect Adelaide.

My gaze shifts to that square.

With so many bodies littering the ground, it's impossible to spot Everly. My heart sinks.

Please, don't let her die too.

Instead of accepting Luc's offer, I lurch to my feet and race back to the crush of bodies.

"Sol!" Luc cries out, but I keep running.

A throbbing pain grips my side, followed by a line of fire tracing over the wound. I ignore it and search for Everly.

Unfamiliar words rise above the chaos, words spoken in a tongue I'm not familiar with. As the man chants louder and louder, the smoke shifts, trailing away as a dark cloud develops over the square and roils around us like a thunderstorm.

Rain pours over the city, targeting the Malachites. One by one, the Malachite warriors fall to the ground, clutching at their throats as their eyes widen and their chests heave. With a quick swing, the Bloodstone warriors end them before they ever catch their breath.

Trembling overtakes me as I jerk my gaze around. That was magic. Someone used magic to overcome the Malachite invaders. I rip my stare over the Bloodstone warriors, trying to put a name to the person. Nobody stands out. They all seem as surprised as I am, yet fierceness burns their eyes. Blood stains their skin.

It wasn't a Bloodstone.

What I saw was water magic, the kind only a Carnelian can cast.

I look again, searching the Bloodstone warriors. Hero stands among them, his eyes burning with ferocity.

It was him.

It had to be.

More Bloodstone people flood the streets, looking over the bodies, tending to their wounded. I stand immobile as the world around me shifts from dark to sunlight. From war to celebration.

"Sol."

That sweet voice echoes, roars, with the pulse thundering in my ears.

Everly.

She moves from the center of the square, avoiding the fallen. Like everyone else, blood stains her clothing and mars her skin.

I run. Right toward her. Right toward that connection to Cassandra. We embrace as more sunlight lumbers over the square.

“I thought...” The words choke out of me. “I feared...”

She draws back and offers me a genuine smile—one of friendship and acceptance. “I know.”

I search for Gabriel next. Stubbornly, I refuse to search among the fallen. Instead, I concentrate on the warriors standing, breathing, living.

Near the building that hid me in her shadows, I spot Gabriel speaking to Luc. He catches my gaze the moment I step close, a look of relief flooding his features. He smiles, closes the space between us, and pulls me into his arms.

In front of everyone, I clutch his surcoat and pull him closer. He dives his fingers into my hair, lifts my face to his, and kisses me.

CHAPTER
FORTY-SIX

Gabriel is kissing me. Willingly. Passionately.

I meld against him, forgetting the people, the battle, the fears. All those things disappear like dew in the early morning sunlight. The only things left are the pressure of his mouth against mine, the pulse throbbing in my ears. My body touching his, his warmth soaking through my surcoat.

No, my blood soaking through my clothes. I stiffen as reality returns, and the throbbing returns with it.

Gabriel pulls away first and drops his stare to my torn surcoat. “You’re injured.”

I clutch the material against my side and offer a tight smile. “It’s nothing.”

“It’s not nothing.”

With a gentleness he didn’t display while fighting, he takes my hand and leads us toward a fat olive tree. Its wide trunk provides protection as he yanks at the ribbons binding my surcoat. I wince as he eases the material over my head. Pain rips through my side as he moves my arm enough to observe the laceration through my ripped chemise.

“It looks worse than it is.”

“Oh,” I say through the throbbing.

“You cannot heal yourself, can you?” he asks.

“No.” I lick my dry lips. “No healer can. At least, not a Kyanite healer.”

“Here.” He grabs the hem of his surcoat, rips the material, and ties it around my body. “This will stop the flow of blood.”

I rest my forehead against his chest, needing this moment, needing him. After earlier, I require calm, peace, life.

“Sol,” he says after a moment. “I told you to stay hidden.”

“I know.”

He guides me to a grassy knoll at the foot of the olive tree. “I need to tend to my men. Then, I’ll return to you, and care for your wound.”

An empty sensation falls over me as he rises and walks away, disappearing into the sea of soldiers. They all wear the same surcoats. The same hissing serpent.

They’re all Bloodstone.

Yet, I cared if they lived or died earlier. I cared if Astarobane burned to the ground. Mostly, because I cared about the life I created here with Gabriel.

I didn’t want to lose that illusion of a different life, a different path—one I could have walked if revenge didn’t burn a flame inside me.

Now, the illusion is all gone.

Most of the cottages are on fire. The streets are lined with bodies. The sky is thick with smoke.

It’s all gone, and there’s absolutely nothing I can do to draw that picture again. To make it real. Vivid. Worth living.

Kassandra’s death was the first sign that I could never stay here.

This is the last.



I sit in the tent Gabriel had raised for us earlier. Gabriel kneels in front of me. Concentration lines deepen across his

brow as he holds a cloth against the cut. Fire explodes through my side as I keep perfectly still. If I thrash or stiffen, it will only make the pain worse.

After several moments, he pulls the material back. “It’s deep, but not too long. You’re lucky.”

“Lucky?” I ask when the throbbing subsides enough to think. “Lucky would have meant not getting injured.”

Gabriel sinks back against his heels. “You are fortunate the injury isn’t worse.”

As he stitches my wound, I try to think of anything other than the searing pain. It refuses to wane or to fade. So, I concentrate on my breathing, and I count the amount of times the torch shudders over the tent. Five hundred and fifty-seven. Or was it five hundred and fifty-eight?

After he finishes, he stands and moves to the washing stand. He cleans his hands, dries them, then turns to where I sit.

“I saw you with Addie.”

I shiver and readjust my position, slumping deeper against the sofa Gabriel dragged into our makeshift home. “When Luc came to get her?”

“No. Before.” He grabs a blanket from the table and places it over me, draping it to warm my body. “I tried to reach her. Then, you were there, grabbing her. Fighting.”

“Oh.” I dig my thumb into my palm and avoid his gaze.

“You were brave.”

“Gabriel, I—”

“—there’s no need to fret, Sol. I’m complimenting you.” He moves to where I sit, kneels, and grabs my hand, stopping my movement. “Don’t hurt yourself.”

“It doesn’t.” I swallow and pin my focus beyond his shoulders. “I don’t even think about it anymore.”

“You should.” He turns my hand over and runs his fingers against my palm. “You need a new outlet, something that will

not cause you injury.” Tenderly, he lifts my hand and presses his mouth against the indentation.

I squeeze my eyes shut. Nobody has ever touched me so caringly before. Nor has anyone ever tried to stop my habit.

“I’ll stop,” I whisper.

“Are you just saying that?”

“No.”

Boldly, I scoot forward enough to brush my mouth against his. He clutches my shoulders and deepens the kiss. I welcome it, the familiarity, threading between us. The warmth that pierces the ice the Malachite’s attack left.

He pulls away and skims my cheek with his knuckles. “Would you like wine?”

I swallow and try to not think about him ending our kiss so soon. “I’m all right.”

His attention lowers to my side and lifts back to me. “Are you certain?”

“I am not a piece of pottery. I will not shatter from a simple wound.”

“There’s nothing simple about your wound,” he says, his words low, guarded with all the things he hides from me.

I note the frown deepening between his brow, the stiffness of his jaw, the tightness of his lips.

“Have I upset you?” I grip the blanket, pulling it closer to my body.

He stares vacantly, his focus caught beyond my shoulder.

“Gabriel,” I say when he still doesn’t speak.

A muscle ticks in his jaw as he meets my gaze. “You fought with skill.”

“I fought with desperation.” There’s truth in my words. Real truth. I was desperate to save Adelaide’s life. There’s nothing fabricated about that.

“Perhaps. But it doesn’t make you any less skilled.”

“I told you,” I begin. “My father taught me how to fight. It was necessary with how often our villages were attacked.”

Gabriel runs a hand across his brow, lowers it, only to raise it and rub it across his forehead again. “What I witnessed was more than learning to defend oneself.”

There’s no way to explain why I joined a mercenary army. Not without revealing my real reason for coming here.

“Gabriel.” I lick my lower lip but find no words. At least nothing that would appease him.

He meets my gaze, his eyes distant, unreadable.

“Thank you for saving Adelaide.” Even though he speaks with gratitude, I detect everything he doesn’t say.

He doesn’t trust me. Again.

Not long ago, he pulled me to his lap, caressed me, adored my body. Now he sits stiffly, as though internally distancing himself from me.

I would never want to take back running into that square and saving Adelaide. Though, I wish Gabriel hadn’t witnessed my fighting.

Everything has changed with Gabriel like the shifting of the seasons. My summer skipped fall, and now winter is darkening everything.

CHAPTER
FORTY-SEVEN

The next morning, golden light wanes over the city as thousands of warriors fill the sandstone streets of Astarobane. I clutch at my surcoat as hope dwindles inside me. Now that the city is filling with more Bloodstone warriors, I doubt my ability to ever find Hector.

People crowd the streets, following the long parade of soldiers and calling out to them. I walk with them, winding through the cluster of people as dread finds a solid place in the center of my chest. It's been there since Cassandra and the attack on Astarobane.

The preparations I made before I came here seem so far away now. Everything I planned seems implausible. Roland is dead, and I have yet to set sight on his successor.

I follow the line of people into the city, lingering near the different shops, trying to catch a hint of what people are saying about the new soldiers. Hector could be among them.

When I spot a round woman dressed in a silk surcoat, I move closer.

She fans her face with her hand as she talks to the short man next to her. "They're calling for the livery collar."

The one Alden said he would only wear if he was the chieftain?

My throat clenches as I jerk my gaze around, but nobody else is listening.

“Then it’s true?” the man asks. “Hector has finally come to Astarobane?”

My heart thunders against my chest at those words. The ones I have longed to hear for weeks.

“Yes.” The woman fans her flushed face some more.

I step closer to the booth full of fresh baked bread and try to calm my thoughts. If Hector is at the palace, I must catch a glimpse.

“Then, it’s true?” the man asks in a shushed voice. “Roland is dead?”

I raise a trembling hand to my throat. Now that everyone knows Roland is dead, Hector will have no choice but to lead his people.

When I set eyes on him wearing that livery collar, I’ll know it’s him.

He will not bring magic back.

I’ll kill him first!

CHAPTER
FORTY-EIGHT

I lie awake for a while, listening to the bullfrogs and the crickets. Gabriel joins me only after the fire dampens.

“Gabriel,” I say into the stillness, hoping he’ll answer. “The soldiers earlier... Are you preparing for war?”

“Yes.”

My chest aches at the implication behind his words. War will take him away from me. Not that I have any intentions of staying after I carry out my mission.

He’s the one I hate to leave.

“Has Hector returned?” The question bursts free before I take time to think it through. I’m glad I asked it, though. I must know.

“Yes.”

I trail my hand down Gabriel’s arm and to his hand. I squeeze my fingers around his, marveling at the warmth. My body doesn’t care he’s Bloodstone.

He rolls over and pulls me until I’m tucked close to him. “Tomorrow, we will move all the women and children further into the mountains. I want you to go with them.”

“Why are you moving everyone?”

He brushes his fingertips along my cheek, tracing over my scar. “This is the way of my people. We scatter. Hide. Conceal. Otherwise, the other five tribes would annihilate us.”

“Is that why you protect Hector?”

“Yes, and why we concealed Roland’s death,” Gabriel says, finally admitting to what I already knew.

It took Malachi to tell me.

Gabriel continues, dragging my attention back to him. “The moment the other tribes learned of Roland’s demise, they would have hunted Hector. We couldn’t afford to lose another leader.”

They would hunt Hector like I am hunting him.

The reality sinks into my bones. The very man my husband protects and conceals, I aim to kill.

“How can Hector lead if he isn’t here?”

“By having a solid foundation of men around him he trusts.”

“Like Alden and Luc?”

“Yes.”

“Do you like Hector? Is he a good leader?” I’m not sure what spawned the questions. Maybe I need to know what kind of foundation my husband has. What does he believe in? *Who* does he believe in?

“Why do you ask me that?” he asks after several moments of silence.

I rise on my elbow, needing to see his face, needing to look into his eyes. “I want to know if you believe in Hector.”

“I believe in his intentions. His integrity. His honor. His devotion to his people.” Sincerity sparks from Gabriel’s words.

“He’s never here.”

Shadows flicker in Gabriel’s eyes. Things impossible for me to put into thoughts.

Maybe I have said too much.

“He’s where he needs to be.” Gently, Gabriel slides his calloused fingertips along my jaw and lifts my chin. “Why do you care?”

“Because he is your leader.”

“Is he *your* leader?”

My breath catches at that question. What is Gabriel’s purpose? Maybe he means to trap me and rip open my secrets.

“I’m in Astarobane, and I’m married to a Bloodstone warrior. So yes, he is my leader.” The words sour against my tongue.

“Am I?” The question comes out low, husky. “Do you believe in me, Sol?”

Is he asking as my husband? Or does he simply want to know if I believe in his goodness?

“Yes,” I whisper.

“Then tell me why you have come here. Tell me everything, so I may believe in you too.”

Tight bands wrap around my chest, my heart, my breath.

“My people...” The lie curdles in my throat as I break eye contact and sink to my back. “I was shunned when I couldn’t cast magic like everyone else. I wanted to belong to a place where I wasn’t an oddity.”

It’s true. I was an outcast. I was banned from the apothecary.

But none of those reasons are why I came here.

“Sol.” Gabriel grabs my chin and turns my face back to his. “Speak the truth to me. Why were you desperate to stay here?”

Something shifts inside me, something determined to connect with Gabriel in a way I have never connected before. Something longing for his trust. Something desperate for forever beyond my mission.

“For Roland,” the truth bursts free and settles around us like a thick, humid morning.

Gabriel drops his hand and stiffens. “You came here for Roland?”

No. No. Please, don't pull away.

Admit that Roland was evil too.

Admit it, so I can believe in you, Gabriel.

“Yes, to avenge my mother. Roland murdered her in front of me.” Vivid memories paint my mind. Mother’s cries. The fires. The flames. The way she fell.

I blink, pushing aside the pain and speak in a raw voice. “He slaughtered her and threw her body into a fire like she was nothing.”

A muscle ticks in Gabriel’s jaw as he clenches his fingers into fists.

“He was evil,” I say, freeing all my anger, my fire.

“I’m aware.”

“Surely, you don’t condone his actions?”

Faster and faster that muscle jerks in Gabriel’s jaw, but he doesn’t answer, doesn’t agree with me.

“Gabriel!”

“What would you have me say, Sol?” he asks, his words empty, low, defeated. “He’s dead. But because of him, people like you won’t leave my people alone.”

My chest aches at his reluctance to agree with me. I need a connection, a tie between my heart and his. He offers me nothing. No threads to weave together a path. No insight into his world.

Bitterness twists Gabriel’s mouth into a deep scowl as he climbs from the bed and speaks in a caustic tone. “You’re no different from anyone else who comes here and tries to kill our leaders.”

“I was heartbroken and vengeful.”

He moves to the table and yanks up his surcoat. “Last summer, the Seer told me I’d marry a woman with a serpent mark on her wrist. She failed to mention she’d be vengeful.”

I swallow through the rawness in my throat. “I cannot help my story, Gabriel. Nor can I change my past. You asked for my truth, and I gave it to you.”

“You asked me why I didn’t bed you.” His lips form a thin line. “This is the reason. I couldn’t trust you, and I cannot bed a woman I don’t trust.”

He has every right to feel that way. Every right to not want to go that far.

I bring my knees up and rest my hands against them. “What does that mean for us?”

He glances at the closed door. “You will not like my answer.”

“Just speak,” I say, my words flat, emotionless.

This isn’t the ending I wanted when I decided to give him honesty. I thought by being truthful, I might garner his trust.

Instead, I lost everything.

His stare lowers to me “You stay here as my prisoner.”

“Your prisoner? Isn’t that a little dramatic?”

Before I comprehend his intentions, he moves closer, leans down, and swoops me from the bed. I land on my feet with a thud and my body tucked close to his.

“You wanted revenge. I want the power of your mark,” he says in the flattest voice I have ever heard.

My breath squeezes from my lungs as I jerk my gaze upward. “What?”

“Your mark will give my people magic again.”

I gasp and try to jerk away. His grip tightens, trapping me like an iron cage to his larger, taller frame.

“How dare you pin such an evil thing on me?”

“Evil?” A scowl forms on Gabriel’s mouth. “Bloodstone magic isn’t evil.”

“It’s dark. The opposite of light.” The words snap out of me.

From the time I could walk, Father implanted that truth in me. “Kyanites,” he’d say, “*are the light. Their magic is light. Bloodstone people are the opposite. They once wielded dark, unthinkable magic. They must never be allowed to call on their gifts again. It’s our duty to make sure they never do.*”

The scowl deepens on Gabriel’s mouth. “It’s not dark. It’s simply different than what a Kyanite can cast.” He grabs my arm and turns my wrist to the torchlight. “The Seer prophesied I’d marry a woman with a serpent mark, and she’d bring back magic to my people.”

“No!” I yank free. “That’s impossible.”

“It’s the truth.” Frustration burns in his eyes. “Why else do you think I agreed to this farce of a marriage?”

I turn away as his words break something inside me, shattering the part of me that cared for him.

Hatefulness and spite grip my tongue, but I cannot speak. Instead, I try to compel kindness.

“Gabriel, let me go.”

“Let you go?” Anger flares from his tone as he continues. “You just confessed to wanting to murder my leader. I would sooner let a lion free in the city.”

“Roland is dead!”

“And you—” he grabs my chin and brings my face toward his, “—aren’t. I can never let you go. You are here to stay and give my people magic.”

“I would sooner rip my heart out.”

It’s an empty threat. Kyanites don’t kill themselves. They believe they will have no afterlife if they do.

But he probably doesn’t know that.

His brow rises at the vehemence behind my statement. “Ah ... there’s the anger I expected from a Kyanite. I must admit, you almost fooled me into believing you were a simple woman. But you’re not. You’re a tiger who tries to act like a cat.”

Breathe.

Relax.

You can think your way out of this.

“How am I to give them magic?”

“In the cave of reflection.”

My breath hitches. I have heard of the cave of reflection and how it can help people obtain their missing powers. But you must have a source to pull your gifts from.

Surely, it's not me.

It cannot be me.

“I won't go with you.” I lift my chin, staring him straight in the eyes, defying him in a way I have never dared to before.

“You will do whatever I say.”

A hoarse laugh escapes me. “You will find me a very unwilling participant.”

“If I tell my people the reason you came here, they will annihilate you. So, if I were you, I would listen to me.”

“Tell them. I prefer death over giving even one Bloodstone magic.”

He jerks me around until my back is facing him and pins my hands together. I wince as he tightens his grip and walks me from the room.

Silence weighs heavy as he guides me into the main room and finds my dagger sitting on the table.

“What are you going to do, stab me?” I ask, my words like ice.

“No.” With one hand, he keeps me pinned. With the other, he yanks at the hilt enough to loosen it and reveal a red stone fused to the edge of the blade.

I gasp. It's bloodstone. The very stone the gods took from them.

“I don’t understand.” Something binds my gaze to that weapon, to that stone, to that horror. “How do you have that, and why did you put it on my dagger?”

“So, you could use magic.”

Ash grips my throat as I shake my head. “Impossible.”

He slips the hilt back on the blade and shoves it into the sheath. “It’s not impossible. You require kyanite *and* bloodstone to heal. That is why you couldn’t heal when you were with your people.”

“No.” It’s not true. None of this is true.

I squeeze my eyes shut, needing this moment to end, needing Gabriel to not be right. With everything in me, I fight his hold, seeking my escape, my freedom.

His grip tightens. “You cannot leave, Sol.”

“I’ll go quietly. *Please.*” I put all my desire into that last word, all my desperation to get away from here.

“No,” he says, his tone final.

I go limp in his arms and allow my eyes to flutter shut.

“Sol.” He shakes me a little. “I know you’re pretending.”

I slow my breathing to shallow breaths and command my body to stay perfectly still.

“Sol.” Concern lingers from his tone as his arms slacken enough for him to turn me. He releases my hands and lifts my chin and trails his fingertips down my jaw. “Just open your eyes.”

It’s now or never.

I react, jerking away from him, and shoving his chest with all my strength. The surprise knocks him off center. He lands with a hard thud against the table.

My heart slams against my ribs as I scramble for my sheathed dagger. My fingers grip the hilt as he reaches me. I rotate with it in hand.

His brow rises as he folds his arms, his body language far too relaxed for someone in his position. “Are you going to *try* to murder me?”

“Not unless you give me a reason to. Let me walk away.”

Clouds swirl in his eyes as he speaks in a pain-filled voice. “I can’t.”

Tightness squeezes around my chest. “I would turn this dagger on myself before I allowed you to use me to bring magic back to your people.”

He steps closer. I jerk back and raise the blade to the center of his chest. His stare lowers to the point inches away from his surcoat.

“Lower the dagger,” he says, his words low, honed with warning.

“Or?” Defiance sparks in every inch of my body as I stand up taller and glare.

“You don’t want to know the answer to that,” he growls. “Lower the dagger.”

My stare shifts between the man with smoldering eyes and the front door. I could stab him and run. Or I could drop the weapon and become his prisoner. If I did, he would try to use me. I’d be bringing death to Tarrobane. I cannot.

Something shifts in his expression, as if he knows the internal war raging inside me. He reacts, his movements fast and overwhelming. He jerks swiftly to the right, avoiding my steel, and smacking my wrist hard enough to break my grip. Ripples of pain shoot up my arm as the dagger plummets to the floor. He steps on the hilt.

“We could have done this easy.” Coldness laces his words and dives into my heart.

The mercenaries taught me how to use both of my hands equally well. I use my left to strike Gabriel in the throat. He gags and stumbles backward. I grab my dagger and scurry away from him as he doubles over, coughing.

I run for the front door and thrust it open. The hot, humid night assaults me as I run wildly away from the cottage and the man I wed myself to.

Run.

Faster.

Soon, Gabriel will catch me.

He'll make me pay for striking him.

CHAPTER
FORTY-NINE

As the moon rises above the mountains, I find a small alley where I conceal myself. Quick, painful breaths escape me as I slouch against the stone wall. Tonight didn't go how I planned. Nothing did.

My gaze lowers to the cursed mark on my wrist. Gabriel wanted to use me.

My chest aches as I ball my fingers into fists. I used him to get closer to Astarobane and his people. He used me because he thinks I can bring magic back.

Olah, help me.

I have never felt more alone. Not even after Mother died.

My arm burns where he struck me. He'll have a bruise on his neck by morning.

We were always supposed to be enemies.

I stare up at the moon glimmering overhead. How it mocks me with its brightness. Its cheerfulness.

I need to escape this place, to run as fast as I can.

But I cannot.

I planned for ten summers, ten long tedious summers of hating Roland and wanting to avenge Mother.

If I kill Hector, the Bloodstone people will turn on me. They will hammer my body with arrows.

The cold, harsh truth impales me with its reality. It's starkness. I know what I must do. I have always known.

I will kill Hector.

Then, I will die too.

CHAPTER
FIFTY

It takes all my training to stay hidden during the night and the following morning.

Soldiers move around the city just like the day before as they prepare to flee. Nobody seems to search for me.

Though, I don't doubt Gabriel is looking. Nobody looks as fierce as he did last night and then willingly gives up. Especially, when they believe that woman will bring magic back to their people.

I bury myself further in my straw tomb. It has left a terrible itch all over my body. I resist the urge to scratch. Instead, I keep still and mentally prepare myself for the next step.

If I hear people talking about Hector again, I'll try to listen.

I stole two throwing knives earlier from one of the weaponsmiths. He never looked up from his anvil when I sneaked into his shop.

The reality of what I must do sinks beneath my skin. The moment I step from my hiding spot and kill Hector, my life here is over. The life I built with Gabriel is over.

Oh, Gabriel.

He used me. Maybe everything he said to me was a lie. I frown. I used him too, and I certainly didn't always speak lies. I was drawn to him. I did want him to bed me.

If I weren't hiding in this pile of straw, I'd stare at my binding tattoo—the one he picked for me. Maybe it was never

supposed to be more than an ornament on my wrist—proof I wed a Bloodstone.

From the cracks in the stables, voices carry to where I sit.

“...Hector is coming.”

“...Hurry! He’ll be here soon.”

I rush from my tomb of straw, dust off the pieces clinging to my surcoat, and straighten my back. If I don’t act soon, I may never have a chance to carry out my mission.

Gabriel will find me. He’ll tie me up, and I’ll never get close to Hector.

Quick breaths escape me as I step from the stables and listen. The sound of horses’ hooves carry to my ears.

Someone is certainly coming. Someone that could be Hector.

I gulp in warm air and try to calm my frantic heart. This is the right thing to do.

It has to be.

I flatten myself against the wall of the stables as a woman and young child scurry by. They don’t pay any attention to me. If they did, they’d see me standing with my hair wild and straw clinging to my surcoat.

Sunlight streaks through the clouds, illuminating me and the rider suddenly in view. I squint against the brightness, needing to see a glimpse of his face, but he rides by so quickly, I only make out a blur of his figure and the glint of the gold livery collar around his neck.

I reach for the throwing knife and draw in more calming breaths. This is the only way.

For Mother.

For Cassandra.

For all Kyanites.

I raise one knife, ready to launch it, and scream as loudly as I can. “Hector!”

The warrior responds to his name and yanks on his horse's reins, jerking the stallion my direction

I release the throwing knife. The weapon rotates through the air and collides with Hector's chest.

My breath stills as the man's familiar eyes widen and lower to the weapon protruding from his chest. Alarm spreads through my veins as the ground wobbles beneath my feet and the trees tilt.

No!

A scream wrenches from my throat as he reels forward, clutches feebly at his horse's reins before losing his grip and plummeting from his mount. Dust kicks into the air as he lands on his side, and his stallion runs away.

Ash claws at my throat as I hurry to where he lies and roll him onto his back.

"Gabriel," I say, his name raw against my throat.

This cannot be.

Please. Someone please.

This cannot be.

Spasms overcome me as I pitifully try to stifle the blood from the wound I inflicted. It pours between my fingers as the sky opens, spilling rain on us.

I chant quickly in the healing tongue of my people. It doesn't work. The words aren't there. The power isn't there.

"Gabriel!" I scream into the wind.

The wind doesn't answer. Nothing answers.

Silence throbs heavy between us.

He's so still.

Too still.

Olah, have mercy.

I killed the wrong man!

CHAPTER
FIFTY-ONE

I scream over and over again, but the wind still doesn't answer. Gabriel doesn't answer.

This isn't what I planned. None of this is what I planned.

Shouts pierce the air, vibrating through my body. I rock forward, clutching the man in my arms tighter against me and will my strength into him, my life.

Gabriel can have it. I don't need it anymore.

Those shouts keep carrying closer. Someone screaming my name.

“Sol!”

I shudder as the rider breaks through the line of buildings and encourages his gelding to where I kneel. Luc bounds from the horse's back before it even stops and shoves me away from Gabriel.

“What have you done?”

I stare down at my hands, seeing Gabriel's blood, seeing the proof I caused this.

No. No. No!

Please wake up.

Wake up!

Luc presses his fingers to Gabriel's neck and darts his wild eyes to me.

“If he dies, I'll kill you myself.”

Fire scorches my throat, my lungs, my heart.

Gabriel cannot die.

“He...” I swallow the fire scorching my throat. “...I thought he was Hector.”

Luc rips open Gabriel’s surcoat and exhales at the sight of the throwing knife lodged deep within his chest. “He is.”

Trembling overtakes me as I move closer, needing to see life, needing to know there’s hope.

Luc’s words pierce through the fog and ricochet through my body. “*He is.*”

No. Luc didn’t say that.

He couldn’t have said that.

I gasp as Luc grabs my hands and shoves them against Gabriel’s chest.

“Heal him.”

Jagged breaths escape me as I rip my gaze over Gabriel’s face, needing to see proof he is Roland’s son. He may have the same-colored hair, and his eyes may be blue, but they are vibrant, kind, caring.

Roland’s were dead.

I inhale sharply as Luc stares at me with enough fury to murder me where I sit.

“Heal him, Kyanite. Or I will slice your throat.”

Heal Hector?

My heart shudders at the reality, the truth. I can never give Mother the peace she deserves now.

I’m too weak. Too vulnerable. Too drawn to the man lying in the grass.

Before, Hector was an enigma. A shadow. A target.

He wasn’t the man in front of me. He wasn’t Gabriel.

Forgive me, Mother.

I dig deeper into the world of Kyanite magic. Drawing from a different ancient verse—one capable of more powerful healing. The Kyanite healers, who trained me, rarely used it since it always took so much from them.

The words slip from my lips, the utterance a plea to Olah. To the ground beneath us. To the trees wavering. To my heart, pounding against my chest.

I chant them over and over again, begging Olah for a reprieve from my folly. I don't deserve his grace, his redemption. I plead for it anyway.

For Gabriel.

No, for Hector.

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Thank you

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