

Chapter 20

2 Month of Spring

Cass

It took three things for Kayla to convince me to give her my scrollspeaker: a request—laced with honey, a look—complete with long eyelashes fluttering, obliterating any protests I might have had, and the fact that now that she has it, she looks content for perhaps the first time since I met her.

I wince as I glance up from the book in my lap, a quick crack and the brief ache in my joints serving as a painful reminder from my body to work on developing better posture. I close the book with more respect than I have for myself, apparently. I'm careful to find a space for it in my bag where it won't collect wear.

Kayla's vibrant azure eyes are closed, her face a facsimile of serenity framed by dark curls. The corners of her mouth are turned up in a smile, induced by either good dreams or a good song. I hold my breath as I lean as close to the headphones clasped over her ears as I dare, pleased to hear the faint vocals of the latter just before the wiry strands of my hair can brush hers. Elena Crowne—the girl may be prim as fuck, but at least she has lovely taste.

She stirs in her sleep, a shift that nearly brings her cheek flush against my shoulder if I didn't duck away. It's likely that's the only reason I see them coming—one of the Knights who was punching tickets and an Arctechnician of Hemera, roaming down the aisle, carefully scrutinizing each passenger as they pass.

My heart skips a beat, keeping an abnormal tempo when it remembers its task. I slowly duck my head. There's no way to do the same for Kayla without drawing attention, dozing as she is, so I settle for digging my nails into her wrist.

Because, honestly, this whole inspection reeks of a search for us. The clocks mounted at each end of the car tick ever closer to midnight, and the sedulous patter of the intensifying thunderstorm hammers a hypnotic drumbeat on the roof. Even the guards and techs should be in bed, save for a skeleton crew. As the godlings approach our end of the car, I quickly clutch Kayla's shoulder, hiding her sigil from sight.

Kayla stirs awake at my touch, her deep, tempered breaths fading into silence. She blearily glares at me, and I fire my own pointed glare right back, my eyes flickering between her and the godlings. She follows my gaze and stiffens, eyes widening the moment they settle upon

the Knight of Tyrus. Those soft breaths quicken, and although I want to snap that she needs to calm down or our ruse is up, they're much too close by now and... I get it. Triton's godlings still incite that deep-rooted panic in me. I can only imagine what it feels like when the memory's a thousand times fresher.

I plaster a smile across my face that feels more like a grimace and squeeze Kayla's shoulder, imploring her to do the same. She doesn't manage it. Her heart pounds a furious tempo that bleeds through her ribs, almost a perfect mirror for mine.

"Evening," she says to the godlings, her voice still heavy with drowsiness. My teeth dig into my lower lip to keep from berating her for addressing them first, because now their attention is wholly on us.

"Good evening," the Arctechnician says with a curt nod. Her emerald Hallowed eyes settle on Kayla's shoulder, where my fingers awkwardly splay across her sigil. Her eyes narrow. I mentally spit a slew of profanities at her and Kayla.

The Arctechnician takes an uncomfortable step closer, the tension in the air thickening with the impact. "May we see your tickets, please?" she asks, her voice neither warm nor cold. The subtle threat instead comes from the Knight standing a pace behind her, fingers drumming cagily against the pommel of his sword.

I hesitate before reaching into my bag for them. Kayla's ticket won't hold up under inspection, but what else can I do? All it takes is for one of them to ask me to move my hand.

I quickly scan the rest of the car past the godlings—noting the exits—one on each end, and perhaps more importantly, the rat who must have reported Kayla's sigil, his dull eyes excitedly enraptured with the spectacle. My gut plummets as I realize there's no way out of this without a fight.

"Cass," Kayla hisses, "the tickets, please?" I sigh. Shouldn't she be able to figure out I have no intention of complying?

I roll my neck as I rise. A series of satisfying *cicks* fill the restless silence as I step over Kayla. My fingers slip from her sigil as I ball my hands into fists. There's a sharp intake of breath coming from the Knight at the disclosure.

I infuse my glare with all the wrath I cage deep within my soul, turning it on the Arctechnician, who's unfortunate enough to be the closest. "No," I say, relishing the minute note of fear that fractures those perfect emerald eyes.

Kayla's fingers claw at my wrist in a futile attempt to restrain me, frantically saying something I can't hear over the rush of blood in my ears. I wrench my arm out of her grasp as I

stomp on the Arctechnician's foot, slugging her in the stomach in the same motion. The Knight draws his sword, and pandemonium erupts in the train car.

Contrary to what Kayla might think, I'm not suicidal. I'm not Hallowed; these pricks are, and there's no remedy for that. So, rule number one when you're fighting a caster—go for the hands. As the Arctechnician doubles over, I grab her hands, my fingers wrapped tight around the palm lines worn into her skin, preventing her from casting any spells.

Rule number two—keep them disoriented. All Order members receive some combat training, but most of them never see a real fight. Put any sort of pressure on them, and they start to flounder, futilely attempting to recall training from long ago.

I wrench the Arctechnician to the left, then the right, holding her firmly as she stumbles. Finally, I throw her into an aisle occupied by two dozing teenagers. They jerk awake as she sprawls awkwardly across their laps, devolving into a tangle of limbs as she claws for any purchase she can find to clamber back into the fray.

I turn my ire on the Knight, flashing him a feral grin as I square off with him. The poor sod clearly has no idea what he's doing with that sword of his. In the cramped train car, he can't find the space for a comfortable stance, let alone wield it effectively. If he was smart, he'd free up his hands and switch to magic, but clearly, he's quite the opposite.

He takes a step forward, one that I would mirror if it wasn't for the rat grabbing my wrist. I whirl and snarl. The man just about pisses himself as he releases me, but the damage is done. I half expect to be skewered in the next heartbeat, but instead Kayla stands between us in a perfect orthodox stance.

I can feel the ire radiating off of her like heat from a raging inferno and nearly flinch, knowing just as much of it is for me as for the Knight before her but gods, am I glad it's turned on him right now. She shoves me back without so much as a glance, rolling under the Knight's first measured swing, letting the edge embed itself in the seat she was in a moment earlier.

It's a little funny, actually. Acolytes are allowed to choose what weapon they want to specialize in, and it seems Kayla chose *herself*. Getting up close and personal isn't what I would have expected from her, but she fights flawlessly, her techniques reminiscent of the dozens of fight clubs I've found myself in.

The Knight realizes too late that his sword is dead weight in the close-quarters space, but Kayla's in her element. Golden magic flares to life in his open palms, but Kayla's chin dips with the motion, throwing a quick jab that redirects the blast, piercing a hole through the ceiling, followed by a haymaker that flattens him out.

She spares me a quick glance over her shoulder as he picks himself back up. “The other one, Cassandra?” she shouts over the din of panicked voices.

I flash her a smirk and turn on my heel, forcibly dragging my attention away from her fight to the Arctechnician, who... hasn’t gotten up yet?

Instead, her arm stretches toward the window, or rather, toward the handle dangling from the alarm mounted above it. I lunge for her collar, dragging her back into the aisle, but even as sputtering gags flare up from her throat, her fingertips find just enough purchase to drag the cord with her. I curse as the rattling bells ring throughout the entire train, alerting every guard onboard to our brawl.

A furious wind smashes through the window as she casts her cerulean air magic, carrying a torrent of glass shards in its wake. I drop her, shielding my face with my forearms, the edges slicing into any exposed skin left to mar.

Crimson drips from a dozen tiny cuts as I lower my guard, slamming my elbow into the bridge of her nose. The cartilage crackles under the weight of the blow, her blood spurting from her nostrils to mingle with the cuts on my hands. I grab her shoulders, hurling her from the laps of the panicked teens onto the floor, where with one deft kick to the skull, she goes limp.

“You guys wanna clear the fuck out?” I holler over the din of the alarms. It’s either the blood dripping from my hands or the snarl I bear with measured lethality that persuades them to hustle out of the chairs and into the next car.

I wrench the alarm cleanly off of its mount, hoping that by some miracle, they’re all connected to the source, but while the one in my hands falls silent, the rest continue their belligerent orchestra. Frustrated, I hurl it at the Knight battling Kayla. It collides with his shoulder, disrupting his spell midcast, giving Kayla the opening she needs to deliver the knockout blow.

It’s powerful, flawless form, laying the Knight out with no possibility of him getting back up. For the briefest of moments, there’s nothing to be done but be entranced by her spell, cutting a striking figure from behind as she shakes out her bloody knuckles.

The illusion of sanctity is shattered when she turns, fixing me with a glare that could make a god obey. “Well?” she shouts, “What’s your plan now, Ranger?!”

“Right,” I murmur, lost in the cacophony of chaos. Then, louder: “Listen up, everyone!” I scream for the benefit of the bystanders, now all awake and drowning in the early stages of panic. “Stay seated, and you’ll be fine, but if you think you’re a hero...”

I fix my glare upon the rat. “Then try us and see what happens!” I snap. He seems to wither under my furious gaze, a paper shriveling in on itself in the depths of a bonfire.

"Now," I say, addressing Kayla, "get your things. We're grabbing my weapons and getting off this rig."

The look she gives me is as frigid as the ocean floor. Those deadly caster eyes seem to search me, for what, I don't know, but they seem to find something acceptable. Kayla huffs as she marches past me to our seats, shouldering her backpack first, then handing me my bag and scrollspeaker.

I hurriedly stuff the latter into the former. "Cargo's a couple of cars down," I say as we fall into step down the aisle, the trepidatious stares and whispers from the passengers following us between cars. "We get my shit, then we jump, clear?"

"Why not jump now?" Kayla asks as I throw open the door, briefly exposing us to the elements as we pass between cars. "Are your weapons truly necessary?"

Scalding, familiar fury bubbles up in my chest at her words, tempered just as quickly by cold, logical thought. "If you like breathing, godling, then yeah, they're *necessary*," I snap. "Now, come on!"

She trails me through the next car in silence, stuffy anger at my back and apprehensive passengers at my sides. I wrench open the next set of doors, marching into the cargo car without so much as a glance over my shoulder.

This car is cluttered with crates piled atop pallets, the only floor space spared that which is absolutely necessary for mortals to navigate through the space and the area just before the loading bay door. It's like they've crammed more in here than the car can fit, which is why it takes me a moment to notice the lockers lining the walls.

Painfully aware of the precious seconds we have to spare before the rest of the guards converge on us, I skim the first wall, then the second, hoping that Kayla's doing the same and that I haven't passed my things by mistake. It's toward the end of the second wall that I find them—my weapons, a locker dedicated entirely to them. I let out a breath I didn't know I was holding as I drop to one knee, digging my set of lockpicks out of my bag to deal with the third-rate lock standing between me and what's mine.

"Cass," Kayla calls from across the room, "I found my bag!"

"Give me a minute, godling," I say, not taking my attention off the lock. "Watch the doors and I'll get it when I'm done!"

I imagine I can hear her overdramatic sigh layered under the clamor as she does what I ask. To her credit, I don't like the situation much either. My hands are slick with blood and sweat,

an awful concoction that makes my open wounds burn. I wonder briefly if Kayla would cast a healing spell on them, or if she'll simply let me suffer for dragging her into this mad escape.

Finally, after a long, tense minute, the lock *clicks* as my picks find purchase, slipping off the latch. I grin as I strap my sword on one hip and my pistol holster on the other, the familiar weight on each comforting. I take a moment to rummage through my bag, loading my pistol not with regular bullets, but with my *break-glass-in-case-of-emergency* enchanted bullets.

I holster my gun, scooping my lockpicks off the floor as I head for Kayla's locker, but because the gods hate me, both conventional exits to the cargo car fly open at the same time, four Knights stomping into the room. Kayla and I freeze as they approach, weapons drawn, shouting orders that mingle together but still "Drop your weapons and put your hands where we can see them."

I count three different Orders among them, Tyrus, Sylvia, and, *ugh*, Triton. Kayla does what they ask, but then, I never did tell her I had a plan for this, did I? I lean close, whispering in her ear, "When I start shooting, open the bay door."

She whispers something back that might have been an "are you crazy?"—but I'm already moving. I draw my weapons in one deft motion, firing at the first pair of Knights, nailing one with a cerulean shock bullet that sends him crumpling before the rest can erect shields of aether in their respective colors.

Behind me, the cargo bay door used for loading screeches open with an awful, rusty scream, and Kayla whirls, throwing up her own shield around us as the Knights throw spell after spell at us. "Now what, Ranger?!" Kayla screams, panicked, and I can't help but flash an adrenaline-fueled grin as I grab her hand and hurl us into the storm.