

Chapter 21

2 Month of Spring

Kayla

I can count on one hand the number of people I truly loathe, and Cassandra Reid just made that list.

The five seconds we're airborne feel simultaneously like a heartbeat and an eternity. Cass presses herself as close to me as she can, her embrace constricting around my ribs. I realize with some annoyance it's because she expects me to break our fall—which, of course, I am.

I rapidly cast a new *shield* spell under us and brace for impact. The breath rushes from my lungs as we crash into the ground at breakneck speed, new bruises blossoming along my torso as we slide. Mud sprays in every direction, the earthy scent overwhelming my senses. Someone's blood is in my mouth.

Finally, with one last shuddering thud into a tree trunk, the dreadful rollercoaster of a sled halts, and I let the magic go. I sink into the mud swallowing its roots, and Cass sinks on top of me, her body flush against mine.

We lie there in a filthy tangle for a moment, hearts pounding, catching our breath and processing what just happened. Then, she makes the mistake of flashing her horrific smile-snarl at me. I shove her off of me, clawing my way to my feet, and when she makes the mistake of rising to join me, I strike her across the face.

I might have even done it again if she didn't catch my wrist. Her smile fades as she fixes me with those eyes like blades, her voice low and menacing. "The fuck was that, godling?" she snarls, a red mark already blooming on her cheek beneath her scar.

"I could say the same to you," I say, my tone matching hers. "You're either the most idiotic woman I've ever had the misfortune of meeting, or the most suicidal. Do you pick fights with Hallowed because you dislike them, or breathing, *Faithless*?"

Her eyes narrow. "Listen, *godling*," she spits, venom flooding her voice with that word she articulates like a slur, "I wasn't hired to pander to a pampered Disciple! I'm getting you to Spiretop, and we're doing it *my way*, got it?"

"*Your way?*" I laugh incredulously. "I could have talked—"

She cuts me off like she's trying to provoke another slap. "Oh, brilliant! You could have talked! Think for yourself, godling!"

Cass' hands bunch around my collar as she advances until I'm flush against the tree, her cheeks flushed under the grime. Any protests I might have had are lost under her fiery temper, her bloody knuckles staining my throat.

"Let's do some math, shall we? I counted godlings from four different Orders gunning for your head on a pike, *including* Tyrus'. Doesn't really mesh with your 'Tyrus went mad' bullshit, does it? The question doesn't seem to be 'why does Tyrus want us dead.' Nah, the question sounds more like 'what did Odyessa do to piss off the rest of the Orders?'"

I have nothing to say to her. The cold anger hammering in my chest that she would *dare* insinuate anything detrimental about Odyessa is untranslatable into words. She looms over me, reduced to a dark wraith in the midnight torrent, but the fire in me only flourishes under her stranglehold.

"Get her name out of your filthy mouth," I say once I rediscover my voice.

She bares her teeth in that awful sneer. "Or what?" she taunts me. "I'm telling you, there's something rotten about all of this. Why send a Disciple to do a Knight's job? Why send an attack that could be turned away so easily?"

Easily. As if Sara didn't die in that fight. "You don't know anything," I say coldly, taking her wrists and wrenching them off of me. I take a defiant step forward, and she doesn't back down, glaring up into my eyes, frost clashing with steel.

"There's a lot I don't know," Cass admits, "but you need to listen to me, Kayla, for your own sake."

She sighs when I move to stomp away toward anywhere she isn't. "And where do you think you're going?" she calls after me. I don't bother with a retort.

She raises her voice in response. "You don't know where you're going!" I pause, weighing each abyssal word as she utters it. "You're in the wilds, now, godling, and you're wanted by seven different Orders!"

I throw a quick glance over my shoulder that winds up being my undoing. Cass hasn't moved to chase after me, rather, she leans against the tree. "If you want to survive out here," she says, "then you'd best listen to the expert."

"And that would be you, I presume?" I say, begrudgingly making my way back to her. I give her a cruel little smile and color rushes into her face, but she doesn't back down. I suppose we're both stubborn that way.

"That would be me," she confirms with a smug little smirk that proves something is deeply unsound about her sense of self preservation.

"Oh," I breathe, taking another step, her flush only deepening now that *I'm* the one keeping her pinned against the trunk. "I never would have guessed, seeing as your *expertise* has landed us in the middle of nowhere, cold and alone, with my things lost on the train." Thank the gods Odyessa's instructions were in my backpack, along with my manablood and runebook, though what state they're in after the fall is anyone's guess.

Warm fingers slick with blood wind around my palms. Cass holds me fast as I attempt to wrench my hands out of her grasp, her grip cutting off my magic. "Here's how this is going to work," she says softly, the threat in her voice mingling with an ember of something else entirely. "I'm going to make camp for the night, and in the morning, I'm going to follow those tracks until I find a switching station to orient myself. You're welcome to follow me, or not, whatever the fuck you want, I guess. But if you come, you're going to convince the pricks you call friends to pay me *double* for putting up with you."

"And if I refuse?" I murmur, suddenly aware of just how cold it is, except for the heat radiating from everywhere Cass and I meet.

She shrugs. "I'm sure I'll figure something out," she breathes, the words drifting from her lips in a plume of mist.

She knows I've already made up my mind. Go with a Ranger or waste time wandering through the Vastwoods- really, it's no choice at all. "Very well," I say. "Lead on, Faithless."

"Not so fast. I have ground rules, *godling*," she says softly. "First, call me Cass, or Ranger, if you really can't stand the sound of my name, but not *Cassie*, and certainly not *Faithless*."

Cass waits for me to spare her a curt nod before she continues. "Second, no more of this *holier-than-thou* bullshit while we're out here. You do what I say without question—like keeping that mouth of yours busy with something *useful* for once."

For a heartbeat, just brief enough that I almost miss it, her bitter smile morphs into something sweeter, more akin to what a smile should be. *She's teasing me*, I realize, and the fact that she can even consider that after our bickering is almost appalling.

"Are there any more rules I should know about?" I ask, unwilling to give her the satisfaction of reacting.

She makes a show of contemplating, that sweet smile almost returning. "No, I don't think so," she finally says. "Now, c'mon. I need some fucking sleep."

Cass lets go of my hands, her blood running slick down my palms the only trace that she ever held them. She storms past me, not waiting for me to move, her shoulder knocking against mine as she passes. I take a deep, calming breath, the sort that's going to be necessary quite often in the coming days, and follow her into the abyss.

I cradle an orb of mystic light between hands too numb to do much else. The thunderstorm has finally begun to let up, but it's too little, too late. We've already found dry shelter under a stony overhang, which doesn't remedy my clothes being soaked through. The late-winter night chill cuts through my flesh to the very core of my bones. Uncontrollable shivering racks my shoulders, and my heart pounds between my ears.

In the distance, I can see the soft glow of Cass' torch, dipping occasionally as she collects firewood. The rain glissades down her heavy leather cloak, shielding her from the worst of it, so she does the collecting. I'm left to pray that she returns before the creeping chill freezes my heart.

For now though, there's little to be done. My hands are unresponsive—even if I had a spell inscribed to warm me up—so all that I'm left with is time to reflect. Cass' accusations tumble through my head like a hurricane, dark and destructive, and loathe as I am to admit it... she's not completely wrong. None of the puzzle pieces seem to fit together in anything other than a sketchy jumble.

My glacial thoughts do occasionally turn up theories, all of which point to a missing piece. If this truly is a war Odyessa and I seek to prevent, then a victory for Tyrus already seems decided. I'm still inexperienced compared to her older Knights, and Tyrus seems to have every other Order on his side. She's not suicidal by any measure; she must still be holding a card close to her chest. I resolve to ask her about it—assuming I survive the night.

Footsteps crunching through undergrowth alert me to Cass' return, firewood bundled in her arms. "You," she declares, "look like shit."

It must be the oncoming hypothermia that coaxes a brief, slurred laugh from deep within my chest. A flicker of what would be guilt on anyone but a Faithless flashes across her expression as she gets down on her knees, building the fire with practiced efficiency. She strikes a match and the structure crackles to divine, nurturing life. I practically trip over myself to get closer to it, settling as close as I dare to it as the flames climb higher.