

Chapter 22

3 Month of Spring

Cass

Five minutes earlier...

Kayla's aether light shrivels as I draw farther away. I cling to the wall of the overhang, searching the ground for the rare tree branches that have fallen under its shelter from the storm. There's a small bundle of kindling tucked under my arm already, but I let myself wander even farther, my head a tempest to match the one overhead.

The notion of leaving this abyssal job isn't new—though Kayla slapping me certainly didn't help. The faint bruise on my cheek throbs in nauseating time with the surplus of others scattered across my body.

The rational part of my mind screams that no amount of money is worth this much risk, but the irrational part always counters that *a*, it's a *shitload* of money, and *b*, I see too much of myself echoed in Kayla's icy temperament. There are echoes of Pyrrha everywhere I look in this mess, and maybe I want to be the one who saves her, like Archon saved me, all those years ago. It'd certainly be easier, though, if the daft girl could see past her precious Order long enough to realize there are far more questions than answers in this shitshow.

So I finish gathering and march back to our makeshift campsite, any thoughts of abandonment banished, at least for the night.

Kayla huddles close to her light, as if it radiates the warmth her body must surely crave. She never once complained about the cold while we walked, and now, I'm kicking myself for not checking on her. She shivers in clothes that must be freezing, her full lips tinged toward a sickly blue.

"You look like shit," I blurt. She surprises me with her laugh, a sound that must be musical ordinarily, now stretched thin and muted.

I wince as I drop to my knees, working quickly to build the fire. *Gods*, she looks miserable, and I hate knowing I'm partly the cause. As soon as the fire flares to life, she scrambles closer to it, palms outstretched toward the nurturing heat.

I give her a moment of blissful solitude before I ruin it. "You need to change," I say softly, her expression lost in the smoke.

Somehow, she manages to convey the chill of her glare through the smoke. "All of my clothes," she says with slurred words, "were in my suitcase."

I wince. Can't she tell that I would've grabbed her things too if I could have? "I know," I say, struggling to keep my temper from manifesting in my voice. "You can wear mine."

The smoke parts just enough for me to see the look of utter shock on her face. "Absolutely not!" she snaps as I snicker. "Stop laughing! I'm perfectly comfortable!"

I force myself to sober, leaning around the campfire so she can see just how serious I am. "You're freezing," I say plainly, "and I don't think you'll be *perfectly comfortable* once the hypothermia sets in. Go change."

She grumbles a bit more, but she takes the spare clothes I offer her and disappears into the forest, her light bobbing along with her as her silhouette disappears behind a suitably thick trunk.

It's clear that Kayla's feeling better when she returns, stopping to drape her wet clothes over a low-hanging branch, and I almost miss an elusive *thank you* as she sits behind me. It's the spare outfit I use while I'm cleaning my hunting gear, plain jeans and a comfortable sweater the color of autumn leaves that are just a touch too small for her. Her toned arms fill out the sleeves nicely, and she self-consciously tugs down the hem as she sits beside me.

She gives me a rare smirk that sends shivers down my spine. "Cass?" she prompts me, and I register what she said.

"Yeah, *uh...* you're welcome," I say lamely, earning another rare laugh, this one far more clear.

Kayla extends her palms toward the fire again. For a fleeting second, I have the sudden urge to offer her my gloves too. She must be psychic, because she shoots me a glare that says "*don't even think about it,*" but the ghostly pallor of her face persuades me otherwise.

I tentatively shift my cloak on my shoulders, offering half of its protective cover to her. "Here," I mutter, tipping my chin to avoid showing the warmth blossoming on my cheeks. She cocks an eyebrow, and I feel compelled to elaborate, flustered, "It's just body heat, godling. Don't make a thing of it."

She hesitates, something undecipherable flickering through those brilliant azure eyes. She must decide that touching me is better than

being cold any longer, because she scoots under my cloak, nestling against my side.

“I swear to the gods, Kayla,” I mutter eventually, just to fill the awkward silence and focus on *anything* but her pulse bleeding into my chest, “you should have said something earlier.”

“Oh?” Kayla murmurs, exhaustion laced through her voice, “And what would you have done, if I had?”

I pause, considering a multitude of *what ifs*—some that might elicit a blush, others, another slap. “I would have offered you my cloak,” I say finally. She lets out that short, precious laugh once again, clearly able to see through my bullshit, but she doesn’t pressure me further.

Instead, her next words take me by surprise. “Cass?” she ventures. “Why are you being so nice to me?”

I blink. “I’m just keeping you alive, Kayla,” I say. “Unfortunately, I like money a lot more than I like you.” That’s a lie, though, and we both know it.

Kayla huffs, her breath escaping in dense fog that brushes against my cheek. “No,” she says, “you don’t. You’re an impulsive wretch of a woman, but you keep trying to *protect* me. Any other Faithless would have abandoned me in Talana.”

“Is that what you think?” I ask softly. “That I was going to leave because I’m *Faithless*?” Her words aren’t unfamiliar, a sentiment echoed by thousands of godlings around Theodyn, but *fuck* if they don’t sting any less the more I hear them.

The fires rifting Theodyn proper and its scattered handfuls of Faithless would be easier to extinguish if the gods pulling the strings

didn't keep stoking them. I've been lucky enough to meet godlings like Jazz—Unhallowed who don't resign themselves to despising me upon hearing my accent—but Order members like Kayla are so resolute in their beliefs that it's not worth attempting to dissuade them.

Except Kayla tenses at my harsh remark, or maybe just the years of animosity caged in my tone. "Yes," she says. "No. I don't know. But Cass... wouldn't it be easier to hate me?"

Ah. That's where the conflict within her lies. What *does* one do, I wonder, when they're faced with an enemy who treats them considerately? "Not in the slightest," I murmur. "You would think it would, but... no."

I stare into the fire, knowing damn well the bedlam of emotions that could be playing across Kayla's face. I wouldn't blame her for loathing me. *Gods*, it's what she was raised to do, and I haven't exactly made a case for myself with how I've manhandled her. I deserved that slap, and I deserved every harsh word that's come out of her mouth since. If she would just stop being so *abyssal*—

Tentatively, as if she's expecting me to lunge at any moment, her hand finds mine atop my thigh. My breath snags in my throat as she casts healing magic, and the cuts and bruises I had resigned myself to weathering pale and fade. I risk a quick glance at her face, and she smiles tentatively back.

"You could've done that the whole time?!" I blurt, because why not dig a deeper grave for myself? My hopelessness is rewarded with another rare laugh, and this one makes me wonder if they're really all that rare, or if she's decided I'm worthy of them.

“I’m sorry,” she says, and it could be an apology for any number of things: the slap, our arguments, not healing me earlier, but I don’t care which. What matters is that it’s a genuine apology, an olive branch *she’s* extending, and one I’m more than willing to accept.

“Thanks, godli—*Kayla*,” I say. She squeezes my hand in lieu of a verbal reply, and I find myself turning my palm up, weaving my fingers between hers when she doesn’t pull away.

Under the grime and dried blood, both of the casting and the mortal sort, her hands are smooth, soft, except for the callouses hardening her knuckles. I let my thumb meander along them, and she clears her throat.

“Where are we, exactly?” she asks, and I bark out a quick laugh. “That’s the kind of question you should have asked hours ago,” I tease her. She scowls.

“Right,” I amend, “we’re in the outskirts of the Vastwoods. I’m not sure where, exactly, but we should be able to orient ourselves at an arctrain switching station. The tracks tend to be pretty clear, so we shouldn’t have a monster problem.”

“A monster problem?” Kayla echoes, a note of concern flickering through her eyes.

“Oh, yeah,” I say, suppressing a laugh. “Who knows? We might run into big monsters, small monsters, terrifying monsters, maybe even some adorable monsters.”

The corner of her mouth turns up, and my heart soars. “You’re messing with me,” she says dryly. “Will we or will we not have to fight a monster?”

“Most likely not,” I say. “Manifestations like to stick to the wilds and the old roads. They’re animals, really, and they know not to go where predators prowl. Knights keep them out of settled areas, and Rangers keep them from overrunning the rest of Theodyn.”

Kayla doesn’t seem satisfied with my answer. Her lips purse as she casts her solemn gaze into the fire, and I can’t help myself. “Why? Do you not think you can handle a monster, Kayla?”

Her frost-dusted eyes drift from the fire and settle on me, something within them faintly thawed. “Why yes, Cassandra,” she says, “I do believe I can.” A shiver creeps down my spine. I already know—this girl is going to be the death of me.